Kenneth Koch's Postmodern Comedy Revisited

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DEDICATION

To my wife, Rachael, for all your love and encouragement, and to Dan, who always pushed me to strive for the meaning of literature and taught me to always dig a little deeper and ask the questions others are afraid to.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis describes and analyzes the postmodern comedy of New York School poet, Kenneth Koch and discusses the changes this comedy underwent throughout his lengthy career. The thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter I explains the aesthetic of the New York School of poets as contrasted to the dominant New Critical compositional aesthetic embodied by poets such as Robert Lowell in the mid-century United States. Chapter II develops Koch's comedy as expressing an emergent postmodernism. Chapter III discusses the various aspects of Koch's comedy, sampling poems from across his career. Chapter IV traces the development and maturity of Koch's comedy from the 1960s until his death in 2002.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I Kenneth Koch and the New York School Aesthetic 1
CHAPTER II Koch's Postmodernism: Excess and Relaxation 15
CHAPTER III Kenneth Koch's Postmodern Comedy.. 30
CHAPTER IV Kenneth Koch's Maturing Comic Arc 87
LIST OF REFERENCES.. 114
VITA 118

CHAPTER I
KENNETH KOCH AND THE NEW YORK SCHOOL AESTHETIC

Kenneth Koch was the first of the New York School poets to achieve national recognition. He remained an immensely popular professor at Columbia University, where he taught for more than forty years and mentored poets as various as Ron Padgett, David Lehman, and David Shapiro. Yet Kenneth Koch remains conspicuously absent in critical discussions of the New York School. Literary historians, such as David Perkins, only briefly mention Koch and tend to reduce his poetry to two primary features: his "seriocomic essayistic poem[s]" and his "light Surrealist verses," which Perkins associates with the "weaker side" of New York School poetry (531-2). Lehman, in *The Last Avant-Garde*, attributes the underestimation of Koch's poetry to his penchant for both comedy and, oddly enough, long, epic and narrative poems, arguing that "in academic America, the bias against humor in poetry is matched only by the bias in favor of the short, sincere, autobiographical anecdote" (204). Because something is funny, Lehman suggests, readers assume that it cannot also be serious.

This assumption perhaps stems from the difficulties critics encounter when trying to talk and write about comedy. As David Chinitz notes, neglect of Koch "originates somehow in a failure to accommodate his insistent humor—a resistance that betrays a certain weakness in our critical apparatus, or perhaps in our expectations of poetry" (312). Patrick D. Murphy also claims that critics "leave Koch laughing along with his readers" when they are unable to "find dread, uncertainty, or dissolution" in his poems (43, cited in Chinitz). Chinitz goes on to observe that more recent anthologies tend to overlook Koch (some that once included him have now dropped him) and remarks

ironically that, "[t]o this day the Poem Society will not have Koch" (325). Seemingly unwilling to struggle with poems that at first glance seem light, critics have tended to ignore Koch's postmodern comedy entirely.

To be sure, comedy can be stifled by extended technical discussions about how it works or why it has the effect that it has. Critics may also feel uncertain about where comedy fits into the larger literary canon, or about how to interpret specific comedic gestures. Yet none of these observations quite explain why comic poems are so often dismissed or ignored. As Charles Simic argues: "Comedy says as much about the world as tragedy. In fact, if you seek true seriousness, you must make room for both comic and tragic vision" (40). The comic and the tragic are both found in extra-literary life, and if artists wish to operate and create with the understanding that art imitates life, then they must make room for all its facets. The both/and logic of Koch's comedy significantly breaks down the either/or binary ingrained in mainstream academic thought.

I want to build on Chinitz's, Lehman's and Simic's insights about comic inclusivity in order to develop a richer understanding of postmodern poetry, beginning with Kenneth Koch's exuberant poetics of the 1950s and 1960s. Comedy, I will argue, remains an artistically and socially important genre, even if it has too often been overlooked. If we take comedy seriously (so to speak), we highlight the genre's unique capacities to combine comic and tragic elements to original effect. The inclusivity that Koch's comic project embodies is meant to achieve a "true seriousness" that more closely resembles our everyday experiences. Not content with merely *including* the tragic with the comic, Koch interweaves them through surrealist juxtaposition or alternates constantly between them.

Through this reconciliation of the comic and the serious, Koch asserts that the two are neither mutually exclusive nor so different as they would at first appear. Koch thus makes his case against what Lehman has called the "solemn or sentimental or old hat" (74) and what Koch humorously termed the "kiss-me-I'm-poetical junk" (*Collected Poems* 205). In doing so, Koch did as much as any of the New York School poets to "promulgate [its] group aesthetic" and to combat the New Critical, academic "poésie" (Lehman 74) that he and his friends so disliked.

In *Beautiful Enemies*, Andrew Epstein argues that New York School poetry, like the work of other avant-garde movements, was predicated on a tension between "friendship and nonconformity" and that "at the heart of experimental American poetry pulses a commitment to both radical individualism and dynamic movement that is sharply at odds with an equally profound devotion to avant-garde collaboration and community" (3-4). His assertion privileges the social dimension of poetry and, more specifically, the idea that the New York School was first and foremost a group of friends and rivals. In the midst of friendship, of coming together as a "school," each poet expressed the desire to break away from the group and discover his own individual style. Experimentation thus facilitated the process of cohesion as a group and of individuation as separate poets. The New York School poets did collaborate, and they worked collectively on small journals like *Locus Solus*; however, in their mutual desires to help their friends improve their poetic discipline and practice, each poet strove to establish a distinctive style. A brief glance at the poetry of Koch, Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and James Schuyler makes obvious to readers that their individual styles were markedly different in both poetic construction and linguistic usage. Still, their styles were unified by their emphasis on the

social aspects of their poetry, which contradicted what Epstein calls the dominant image in the 1950s of the poet as "*isolato* or Adamic namer" (26).

In mid-century America, the poet was most often represented in isolation from society. Paul Goodman identifies this literary climate as "tepid, academic," and a "literary culture in which writers are estranged both from society and from each other" (371, as quoted in Epstein). The poet, then, is a writer without an audience; he or she attempts to write in a vacuum, distant from his immediate cultural and historical context. This conception of the poet is deeply connected to a kind of New Critical a-historicism, one that stipulates a poem needs to be refined to perfection, separate and above the messy process of living and writing in a social sphere. New York School aesthetics, on the contrary, emphasized an understanding of poetry and poetic composition inseparable from its situatedness in time and concrete place. Their poetry was distinctly tied to New York, which functioned as both the place they lived and as their canvas and muse. O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*, which he wrote during his lunch hours as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, evidence this love affair with New York and chronicle his moving about New York and his impressions of being in the city and interacting with his friends.

The New Critical aesthetic, against which the New York School and other avant-garde movements like the Beats and the Black Mountain Poets fought, prided themselves on what Alan Golding calls "poetic impersonality and the power of tradition" (60). Golding argues that New Critical philosophy and critical instruction shaped "contemporary poetic production and publishing" through their stranglehold on poetry in the university and through their repeated insistence on "ambiguity, paradox, tension,

irony, symbolism, structure, unity, allusion" (60) and other formal features of poetic composition. This lead to poem after poem that reflected New Critical interpretive values.

Robert Lowell's poetry provides a famous example of New Critical influence. Lowell trained under John Crowe Ransom and quickly became the "poster boy" for the New Critics (Perkins 159). Significant to the development of his aesthetic was Lowell's conversion to Catholicism, and the poems he wrote as a result of both his literary training and religious conversion were popularly praised for their "intensity and provocative complexity" (160). Poems like "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" and "Colloquy at Black Rock" were exemplary of his highly rigid, formal, academic style. The content of such poems was often bloody, and their tone was solemn, as in the following section of "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket":

The bones cry for the blood of the white whale,
The fat flukes arch and whack about its ears,
The death-lance churns into the sanctuary, tears
The gun-blue swingle, heaving like a flail,
And hacks the coiling life out: it works and drags
And rips the sperm whale's midriff into rags,
Gobbets of blubber spill to wind and weather… (Lowell 930)

The rhyme in these lines is ponderous and often tortures the syntax, forcing the poet out of the language of conversation and into what the New York School would perceive as a pompous and self-aggrandizing tone, as in lines two and three. Further, this kind of poetry emphasizes concrete and death-related imagery and metaphor ("heaving like a flail") that smacks of a highly formal and hyper-educated approach to poetry.

Lowell's approach to poetry in poems like these and others from his early collections (such as *Lord Weary's Castle*) is one of what Perkins in his *A History of Modern Poetry* calls "Style as 'Hardship'" (407). Perkins argues that Lowell during this period saw himself as a strict formalist and wanted his "formal patterns to seem a hardship" (407); his poems emphasized "shapely plot," "logical statement," and "strict meter and rhyme" and presented themselves to readers as "compressed, complex, and ironic" (407). As in "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," Lowell speaks in an elevated tone about a world tortured by blood, the violent mutilation of the whale, and the insatiable drive of man to destroy his natural environment. Perkins describes Lowell's imaginary world as "visionary and damned" and emphasizes its willed distance from everyday life and culture. The speaker of Lowell's poem is a "persona" and not the poet himself (408). Of course, as Perkins notes, Lowell's style shifted, considerably for him, in the late 1950s with the publication of *Life Studies* in 1959. This new phase of Lowell's career helped solidify the popularity of Confessional poetry, which was "widely influential" on other poets and indicated a "poetry in which the expression is personal…and reveals experiences or emotions that are more or less shocking—hatred of one's parents, children, spouse, or self, lust voyeurism, suicidal fantasies, madness" (410). In addition to this new personal style, Lowell's strict formalism relaxed—quite a bit in his perception. He began to write in free verse to make his poems more readable because he did not want to "ruin the honesty of sentiment" which turned the poem into a rhetorical statement that screamed, "I'm a poem" (411). This relaxation for Lowell came at the realization that New Critical poetry had become academic and had turned into merely a craft "divorced from culture" that could not "handle much experience" (412).

Despite this turn, which for Lowell was an attempt to loosen form and engage contemporary culture more directly, the New York School poets still hated Lowell's confessional poems because of the too intense focus on dreary autobiography and the kinds of emotions, still mostly negative in nature, confessional poetry sought to express.

New York School poets like Koch, Ashbery, O'Hara, and Barbara Guest "deplored the teachings of the New Critics and the formally closed poem" as well as this new Confessional style (Perkins 529). Their poetic, instead developed in close connection to the Abstract Expressionists and their descendants in the New York School of Painters—people like Fairfield Porter, Jane Freilicher, Alex Katz, and Larry Rivers. They gravitated towards collage and collaboration, as exemplified by Koch's early experimental work, *When the Sun Tries to Go On*, in which he experiments with word pictures and attempts to do with language something like what Abstract Expressionists had already done with painting. The first few lines read as follows:

> And, with a shout, collecting coat hangers
>
> Dour rebus, conch, hip,
>
> Ham, the autumn day, oh how genuine!
>
> Literary frog, catch-all boxer, O
>
> Real! The magistrate, say "group," bower, undies
>
> Disk, poop, *Timon of Athens*. (*Collected Long Poems* 1)

Here, the listed items suggest not so much a depth or a unity, but a collage of different items thrown together in search of new connections and aesthetic energies. A poem that joins "poop" and *Timon of Athens* eschews New Critical standards; like other New York School works, it functions in opposition to then dominant academic tastes. The contrast

between Lowell and Koch in these lines is clear: there is no metaphor here, no reigning or unifying meter, and no rhyme. Further, Koch's poetry relaxed the intensity of the New Critical aesthetic, transforming it into a zany poem and tone that remains intense only in its unrelenting commitment to puzzlement and defeating the reader's attempts to find some solitary meaning behind the language on the page.

Beyond this relaxation, Koch countered the dreary, self-important poetry of the New Critical aesthetic through a lively and expansive comedy that means to communicate to readers, rather than dread and despair, joy and pleasure in the experience of living life. "The Pleasures of Peace," from his 1969 collection of the same name, emblemizes not only his comedy but also his implicit challenge to the formal aesthetics of the kind of mid-century poetry Koch and the New York School rejected. Koch establishes in the beginning of the poem a competition between two poets who are trying to write a poem about the pleasures of peace. The first bit of humor in the poem is that the poet, Giorgio Finogle, whom Koch presents as a rival to himself, is entirely fictional. The poem opens with a joke at Finogle's expense:

> Another ribald tale of the good times at Madame Lipsky's.
> Giorgio Finogle had come in with an imitation of the latest Russian poet,
> The one who wrote the great "Complaint About the Peanut Farm" which I read to
>   you last year at Mrs. Riley's,
> Do you remember? and then of course Giorgio had written this imitation
> So he came in with it….Where was I and what was I saying? (*Collected Poems*
>   228)

Immediately, the first line lets the reader know that this poem will not be any kind of

extended meditation on a conventional theme; "ribald tale of the good times" suggests something apart from the academy, something of the more common order and not refined to perfection or obsessed with death. At the outset, Koch jokingly belittles Finogle, before getting distracted from his initial purpose. What makes these lines funny is Koch's use of comic deferral—in one turn, he displaces the reader's expectations for a unified and cohesive poem and admits to the speaker's own tendency for distraction. The poet feels no obligation to rigorously control every aspect of his poem; he lets into the poem whatever he thinks of first. This free association can be disorienting (and often is in Koch's work) and prevents the reader from following conventional paths through the poem. Koch's concern is with its surface: the meaning he wants the reader to glean from the poem dances along the page.

All these features make Koch's poem funny, subversive, and contrary not only to the academy poetic but also to the protest poetry of the Beats and to other political poems written during the Vietnam War. Koch writes, "So now I must devote myself to The Pleasures of Peace— / To my contemporaries I'll leave the Horrors of War, / They can do better than I" (229). Koch implicitly invokes an alternative position to those who write about war. Koch's poem shifts the emphasis of antiwar poems to the joy of living rather than the horrors of war. "The Pleasures of Peace" attempts to find a new tone with a more surprising and effective rhetorical position in countering United States involvement in Vietnam. War for Koch simply gets in the way of living. When Koch equates through capitalization war and peace as possibilities for poetic subjects, he elevates the territory of peace as his "temporal and permanent claim" and proceeds to claim that in his poem "are listed all the Pleasures of Peace that there could possibly be" (229-230). To think

that Koch has collected in one, nine-page poem all of the diverse pleasures of peace is an absurd claim; however, Koch's narrative voice is entirely aware of the ridiculousness of the claim. In this moment, Koch subverts his own poetic project. His poem chronicles "pleasures" as diverse as "Memory," "autonomy," "agoraphobia," "of planning a deranged comic strip," "Norman Robinson," and a "cobra community in a dilapidated skin country / Without clops, and therefore every pleasure is also included" (230). This absurd list generates laughter through both its randomness and its insistence on inclusivity. Upon closer inspection, the reader sees Koch's process of not barring anything from entrance in the poem, which leaves the reader with the impression that Koch prefers anything to war, and that most things can communicate pleasure.

From this catalogue, Koch transitions to a stanza about robots and chairs shaped like pirates and a magical "silverware hazelnut / With which you can escape from time" (231). Koch then turns back to Finogle and appears to have accidentally fallen into competition with him: "It turns out that we're competing for the Peace Award, / Giorgio Finogle and I. We go into the hair parlor, the barber— / We go talking about war and about peace" (231). The elements of chance Koch emphasizes here add to the comic effect of the poem; the fact that he seems to have accidentally found himself in competition with Finogle, for example, heightens the poem's absurdity and further subverts the reader's expectations about Koch's project in the poem.

Toward the end of the poem, readers get a sample of the praise that Koch and Finogle's poems have enjoyed. The reader is thus left with the pleasure that "others" take in these fictional poems. Readers are never given Koch's poem to read, and "The Pleasures of Peace" remains a poem that never gets around to its own purported subject.

Rather, it is a chronicle of its own creation, a second-level discussion of a poem that solicits the following remarks from reviewers:

> "A Wonder!" "A rout!" "No need now for any further poems!" "A Banzai for
> peace!" He can speak to us all!"
> And "Great, man!" "Impressive!" "Something new for you, Ken!" "Astounding!"
> "A real
> Epic!" "The worst poem I have ever read!" "Abominably tasteless!" "Too funny!"
> "Dead man!..." (236)

These claims from the fictional reviews of a poem readers never get to read are meant to sound hilarious. The claim that there is no more need for any more poems is, of course, bombastic, and by placing the claim in quotes Koch indicates that he knows this to be the case. Juxtaposing reviews full of praise with incredibly harsh negative criticism only adds to the humor, as does the use of exclamation points, which tricks the reader into reading the sentiments in the same exuberant way without realizing upon a first reading that they express opposite sentiments. Moving the poem towards its conclusion with a self-conscious reflexive review of his own poem only reaffirms Koch's playful, sophisticated project. He pushes against the limits of the poem as a closed-off proclamation about the state of the world and attempts to open its form to humorous, fragmented rambling and continues as a way of deferring the subject of the poem until the very end. Throughout, a note of "Where was I and what was I saying?" resounds, and that readers never get to read the actual poem Koch talks about writing suggests that the poem never arrives. Instead, the poem becomes, as Perkins notes in reference to O'Hara, "the poem as the chronicle of the creative act that produces it," in which chance elements combine to

produce an alternatively "beautiful and cogent" work, suggesting that anything can come of the poetic process (530). Cogency for the New York School and Koch became not so much concerned with a unified whole but rather with a new kind of poetic relationship with the surface of the poem that stretched and pushed what poetry could do.

As I have argued so far, Koch was a poet who put an intense pressure on the boundaries and definitions of poetry. As a primary member of the New York School, he discarded the "accepted" forms of U.S. poetry after World War II, even reaching back to Ariosto to find alternative forms or, as he did in *Ko, or A Season on Earth*, his epic poem about a Japanese baseball player and other subjects, the Byronic ottava rima. In the post-Eliot academy of the 1950s and 1960s, poetry was exceptionally serious. Koch challenged this atmosphere of seriousness, often with a highly delightful comic flourish, just as he challenged readers' perspectives about what was acceptable content for a poem.

It is ironic, then, that so many critics of contemporary or postmodern poetry ignore Koch. It is ironic precisely because Koch's poetry is so insistently post-modern: it writes against the solemnity of the post-Eliot academy, and like the work of great postmodern novelists like Thomas Pynchon and Kurt Vonnegut, it plunges readers into an energetic field of parody, social satire, self-reflexive humor, and celebration of the joy of being alive. This irony extends further, however, because even as postmodern critics and poets were keen to throw off what they perceived as the oppressive gravitas of the academy, they still made little room for the comic in poetry. Even for critics of experimental poetry, poetry tended to exist in the realm of the epiphanic revelation. Novels like *Gravity's Rainbow*, *Catch-22*, and *Slaughterhouse Five* are deeply and often morbidly funny and are central to the postmodern canon, while among Koch's contemporaries, it

would seem that even with the pressures put on accepted content and form by poets such as Ashbery, O'Hara, and those they inspired, the comic was too often excluded. Perhaps Koch's work has been underappreciated, as I will go on to argue, because his poetic approach is neither solely comic (as is often claimed) nor exclusively serious and tragic (as David Spurr has argued in his essay "Kenneth Koch's Serious Moment"). Critics are unsure of what to do with him, and so they label him a comic poet. Yet Koch's poetic is too complex to be captured by any one label.

Most of Koch's poems do indeed privilege comic elements—turns of phrase, misapprehensions, phrases that are almost but not quite correct. What is less widely recognized in Koch's oeuvre, however, is its nostalgic and even elegiac aspects: backward-looking tendencies that are finely balanced with a riotous comic sensibility; what I will call "deceptive seriousness." This poetic approach imagines nothing less than the fusion of the tragic (full of nostalgia, melancholy, and a sense of loss) and the comic (with its self-reflexive mockery, its parody of the mainstream, its bursts of social and literary satire) into an energetic realism, punctuated by surrealist modes and imagery. Koch celebrates life as it is, often in a retrospective mood, and our progression through a series of complex personal relationships and social encounters. This kind of seriousness does, indeed, "give our spirits what they can rest upon," (Spurr 345), even as the comic and playfully linguistic elements of Koch's poems keep us guessing.

This paper seeks to establish Koch's complexity as a mid-century American poet and his importance in the early postmodern period as more than just a comic poet. To demonstrate Koch's complexity, in Chapter II, I outline a definition of postmodernism, primarily using Koch's poem "The Boiling Water" to emphasize the postmodern as it

appears in his work. In Chapter III, I continue with a discussion of theories of the comic as they relate to Koch, using a large sampling of his poetry from his early career to his later career and his book-length epic poems. In Chapter IV, I focus on the development of Koch's comedy as it moves from distortion to reflection, sampling poems from different parts of his career in order to demonstrate this arc. Throughout, I try to capture some of the breadth and depth of Koch's oeuvre, discussing poems from *Ko, or A Season on Earth* (1960), *When the Sun Tries to Go On* (1969), *Thank You and Other Poems* (1962), *The Pleasures of* Peace (1969), *The Art of Love* (1975), *The Burning Mystery of Anna in 1951* (1979), *Days and Nights* (1982), *Seasons On Earth* (1987), *One Train* (1994), and *New Addresses* (2000). Through these books, one watches as Koch discovers a range of alternatives to the depressed solemnity of the academic poems he first reacted against in the 1950s. He exalts life both past and present, both comic and serious, and insists throughout his career that the one could not be fully understood without the other. His poetry is not solely comic or solely tragic; it is an oscillation between the tragic and the comic, which readily mimics the movement of life.

CHAPTER II
KOCH'S POSTMODERNISM: EXCESS AND RELAXATION

If comic poetry found it difficult to be taken seriously in the 1950s and 1960s, comedy nonetheless held a vital position in the development of postmodern literature as a whole. The explosion after World War I of modernist innovation in form and acceptable content within the literary work slowly gave way to rigid formalism and poetic creation through constant and careful revision. The breakdown of traditional form and surge of ecstatic poetic energy in Joyce's *Ulysses* and the cubist experimentation and spatial relationality in Stein's work yielded to the dominance of, as Koch so eloquently puts it, "Yeats of the baleful influence, Auden of the baleful influence, Eliot of the baleful influence" (*Collected Poems* 123). Solemnity and the expectation that one should revise to perfection took sway as the means to create good and acceptable poetry. Imitators of Eliot, Stevens, and Pound institutionalized the radical experimentations of the aforementioned poets and turned their practice into a convention followed to the point of drivel and inanity. Those who tried to follow Eliot's example, like Lowell, did so amid the rise of the New Criticism, and the poem became for them what Cleanth Brooks refered to as "the well-wrought urn." Lowell himself, as he began to change his aesthetic, recognized the distinction between two competing poetries—"a cooked and a raw"—describing the cooked as "marvelously expert" and the raw as consisting of "unseasoned experience" (as quoted in Stanley Kunitz's essay "The New Books").

This distinction between the cooked and the raw carried over into Donald Allen's *New American Poetry*, which included mid-century groups like the New York School, the Beats, and the San Francisco Renaissance poets among those reacting against pedantic

formalism and rejecting “all those qualities typical of academic verse” (Allen *xi*). James Schuyler went so far as to call it a “blinders-on regression” exemplified by “the campus dry-heads who wishfully descend tum-ti-tumming from Yeats out of Graves with a big kiss for Mother England” (Schuyler 418). Koch especially found this kind of stilted, self-aggrandizing writing to be pompous and artificial. In “Fresh Air,” he laughs at this attitude, asking,

> Where are young poets in America, they are trembling in publishing houses and universities
>
> Above all they are trembling in universities, they are bathing the library steps with their spit,
>
> They are gargling out innocuous (to whom?) poems about maple trees and their children…
>
> Oh what worms they are! they wish to perfect their form! (*Collected Poems* 123-124)

Koch ends this rather bitter retort of the Academy poetic—the rarified, supposedly culturally significant poem—with a famous question, one which seems to embody Koch’s postmodern poetic: “Is there no voice to cry from the wind and say what it is like to be the wind… / Is there no one who feels like a pair of pants?” (*Collected Poems* 124). Koch here suggests that the aim of the young poet in America should be to cry *from* the wind rather than *as* the wind, to step away from what Koch perceived as the self-aggrandizing, fabricated depth of academic poetry and get closer to actual experience by describing in minute detail the objects and experiences of life.

Additionally, postmodernism served as a commentary on and reinvestigation of modernism. It should be noted that this turn back to modernism, as Linda Hutcheon has argued, is “not a nostalgic return; it is a critical revisioning, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and society” (4). Rather than justify itself as an attempt to recapture some mythical golden age of the past, postmodernism sought through critical distance to rework modernism by picking up on movements and techniques overlooked or ignored in the shadow of Eliot and Yeats—movements like surrealism and Dadaism and techniques of the French writers like Breton, Reverdy, Prévert, and others. For critics like Hutcheon and Frederic Jameson, postmodernism was a conceptual tool used to signify a political investment in cultural progression and a critique of mass culture and production. My interests in postmodernism lie not so much in the word as a periodizing term but as an aesthetic term to describe Koch’s excessive inclusivity, his embrace of multiple voices and tones, his concern with an infinity of surfaces, and his relaxation of conventional standards. I hope to privilege these elements as they appear in Koch’s work and use them as guiding techniques for a discussion of “The Boiling Water.”

Postmodernism has been variously described, and critics have attempted to define the characteristics of *what* exactly the postmodern is without reaching clear consensus. To that end, Hutcheon calls postmodernism a “contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (3). Postmodernism seeks to “assert difference, not homogenous identity,” and these differences “are always multiple and provisional” (6). It is easy to see how, from Hutcheon’s broad theorizing about the “cultural dominant” of postmodernism, the term has eluded concrete classification and definition. Like modernism, the postmodern is a

slippery term. As Matei Calinescu outlines when speaking of the etymology of postmodernism: "[I]f modern comes from 'modo,' which in Latin means 'just now' or 'today,' what sense does it make to say that a thing of today is not really of today, nor even of tomorrow, but, quite oddly, of 'after today'?" (278). Quite *literally*, postmodernism is a term that makes little sense.

Postmodernism, then, functions less as a thing and more as a useful aesthetic term to describe the mid-century period of art as a re-opening of the question of modernism and the aesthetic principles overshadowed by enormous figures like Yeats and Eliot. Jean-Francois Lyotard even goes as a far as describing the postmodern as a "working through...operated by modernism on itself" (1468), which is to say that Lyotard's vision of postmodernism seems to be a post-traumatic extension and reading of modernism: the trauma of Auschwitz renders a "sorrow in the Zeitgeist" (1467) that must be overcome and processed in order to merely *continue on* with art. In addition to this processing of trauma, groups like the New York school turned to the more unusual groups like the Dadaists, expressionists, and especially the surrealists in their new exploration and revitalizing of modernism.

In light of this post-war fragmentation of the modernist vision of "universal emancipation" Fredric Jameson has, notably, referred not to postmodernism in the singular but to a multiplicity of postmodernisms.[1] Hutcheon has argued that postmodern

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[1] In *Postmodernism*, Jameson highlights the fragmentary nature of postmodernism as a set of movements with different concerns and conventions of creation. Additionally, he does not limit postmodernism to the literary field but includes a discussion of postmodernism in terms of architecture and other facets of mass culture that gets intersected by media. The plurality in Jameson suggests a social and political master

differences are "always multiple and provisional," (6) suggesting that within the postmodern mood, any sort of difference, whether it be aesthetic or metaphysical, results in a splintering that allows for different movements to emerge and prosper. These movements are provisional in the sense that each needs the others to help define itself as something different than what came before or what is developing contemporaneously. The simple pluralization of the term creates not only a necessary fragmentation of the "after-modern" literary movement(s); it also provides for a discussion of possibility as a distinct characteristic of *all* iterations of postmodernism. That there can be more than one method of "working through" the trauma unveils exciting vistas of innovative production within the literary arts, and defers the critic's ability to provide a unifying definition for "postmodernism".

The indefinable nature of this term allows different practitioners of the postmodern art(s) to appeal to an idea of "excess" present in various postmodernisms. Indeed, the very fact that various postmodernisms exist speaks directly to the excess inherent within the system. As in the Latin, "excess"—in addition to retaining its English denotations and connotations—here means departure beyond the bounds of reason and beyond the subject. In this sense, "excess" does not mean "unnecessary."

Often, as is the case with the New York School poets, this excess follows the pattern established by the abstract expressionists and surrealists. Namely, this pattern is one of inclusivity governed by an imperative toward excess. Nothing is off-limits, and, more importantly, all things are potential candidates for a transformation into art. Further,

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narrative I am rejecting in my discussion of Koch's postmodern comedy. For further information see *Postmodernism*, Chapter 1: "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism."

the distinction between inside and outside a text collapses. Meaning is referential and asks the reader or viewer to think spatially when the question of meaning arises. Additionally, this excess of inclusivity carries with it a conversational aspect in terms of tone, line length, and diction. We think of Kenneth Burke's metaphor of the guest arriving late to a party seeking to join a conversation already in progress. However, for this vein of excess/inclusivity, the conversations become less and less distinct from each other and the guest chooses to join all/none (imperative toward excess) of the conversations, selecting from each the materials for his artistic project. Indeed, within the poetics of excess, a certain ecstasy emerges from the sheer amount of material available to the artist for transformation and selection: the imperative dictates that the poet cram as much into a poem as he can, which for Koch results in joy.

This joy in the amount of material and its selection for art is part of where Koch's comedy comes from in "The Boiling Water" in the form of long digression from and back to the subject of his poem, all done in an easy, conversational tone that matched Koch's own soft-spoken, personable manner: the serious nature of the moment that water boils. Koch immediately moves from this serious moment for the water to the uses of water, then to who might notice the momentous occasion of boiling including "*maybe* a saint, / *maybe* a poet, *maybe* a crazy man, or just someone temporarily disturbed (*Collected Poems* 330, emphasis mine). Koch is not even entirely certain about who his subject matter in this instance should be, which suggests that he is more concerned with simply fitting into the poem as much as he can to the point that he cannot afford minute, excruciating specificity on every point. To him, it does not really matter who notices the importance of this moment for the water; he is content to give a list of possible

candidates. He quickly moves back to the water boiling but only a few lines later digresses again into talking about trees, hidden meanings, sexual attraction, and beef consommé continually expanding outward to include all of life, by the end, as the subject of his poem:

Serious, all our life is serious, and we see around us

Seriousness for other things, that touches us and seems as if it might be giving clues.

The seriousness of the house when it is being built

And is almost completed, and then the moment when it is completed.

The seriousness of the bee when it stings. (*Collected Poems* 332-333)

His focus on the miniscule (the fly and the bee) and the grand (human life and consciousness) alongside one another and given equal weight brings into sharp focus Koch's commitment to excess and inclusivity within his poetry as a both a critique of and counterpoint to what he and the other New York School poets perceived as the pompous, false depth and sincerity of Academy poets like Lowell.

The comedy in this poem, as has been stated above, is less intended to make readers laugh themselves to tears, like many of the poems from his middle period; rather, it is meant to celebrate life and present as serious everyday occurrences and moments—that each thing has a reason for which it exists and should be given serious treatment. Even so, when readers observe the different subjects Koch selects, it becomes clear that Koch did intend his readers to laugh at the humorous notion that Koch would devote an entire poem to the miniscule moments of everyday life while at the same time suggesting, "A tree will not boil, nor will the wind. Think of the dinners / We could have, and the

lunches, and the dreams, if only they did" (331). Koch quickly backs off this idea and digresses again to using the humorous metaphor of a ship sinking but coming back up "as coffee, chocolate, or tea" (331). In addition to disorienting the casual reader with lines like "And finally, at last, who answer, my wing, my past, my / Angel, my flume, and my de-control, my orange and my good-bye kiss" (332), this series of quick digressions is clearly meant to make the reader laugh at the oddity of his metaphor and suggests that since Koch does not seem to take his subject matter seriously, neither should the reader.

Koch's selection of thematic material and composition techniques from a variety of discourse communities (like ducks, bees, doctors, Cordillera, and varying line lengths) remains essential to the postmodernism of excess as evidenced by Koch's poetry. The relationship of the artist to his subject matter becomes metonymic, and this relationship is the point at which postmodern poets like the New York School diverge from their surrealist and abstract expressionist forebears: rather than attempting to lodge unconscious thought and feeling in exterior objects—thereby transforming those objects into artistic projects—the postmodern poet seeks to represent (or re-present) the poetic object in relation to other objects.

Koch, in "The Boiling Water" forces the reader to examine the relationship each of the subjects he includes in the poem have to each other. He seems to ask: what does the importance of the boiling moment of the water have to do with a bee stinging or a duck swimming or a match burning? For a poet like Koch, then, a tree image by itself is no longer good enough for the poem; it must be a tree image *alongside* a Daffy Duck image *alongside* a beef consommé image. Perhaps the most extreme and obvious example of Koch's excessive selection comes in *When the Sun Tries to Go On*, one of Koch's earliest

poems, and one which anticipates many of the techniques he would use and refine throughout his career. Koch takes this metonymic relationality and excessive inclusivity so far in the poem that individual words are forced into metonymic relationships with other words:

> O matadors! defying and "oh," levels of sweetness's
>
> Cheese. Blah. They are Harry, Susan, Lynn
>
> Blotter. "Major" Blotter, with film of "Gordon"
>
> Cuckoo clocks, the passageway to Easter. Motto:
>
> "Cosine the defeated hips." (*Collected Long Poems* 12-13)

Readers, in an attempt to make sense or find meaning in the poem, must take each word and think of them *in relation* to the rest of the words. The meaning or valence of "O matadors!" alters when placed next to "defying" and "'oh'" and "cheese." What Koch engages in here is Eliot's "perpetual, slight alteration of language, words perpetually juxtaposed in new and sudden combinations," (128) the result of which is a poem concerned with a sort of spatial relationality that generates a new, different kind of depth and a "relaxation" indicative of another essential characteristic of the postmodern vein most useful to this discussion.

Alongside excess/inclusivity is the concern with surfaces and a different kind of depth than Lowell and the other Academic poets of the mid-century contained within the metonymic postmodern project. This new kind of depth, though concerned with the play of surfaces, does not indicate a lack of meaning. Rather, it should indicate two concepts central to Koch's project: a turn towards breadth—a horizontal relationship of the poet to his environment—and a more authentic and true depth that makes no grand claims about

the poet’s importance to his cultural moment. This relationship between surface and depth is one marked by a Saussurean value system—whereby the sign receives its value only by its position near other signs that are *not* it. Thus the relationship is apophatic in the sense that we understand “matador” because its signification is not present in “‘Major’ Blotter.” This horizontal relationship, entwined with excess/inclusivity, is predicated on the social aspect of the artist. Koch’s early poetry excelled in representing his interaction with and alteration of mass culture through a focus on repetitive re-presentation and, by extension, the eventual defamiliarization of the object chosen for transformation into a postmodern art like the cheese or cuckoo clocks of *When the Sun Tries to Go On.*

His later poetry focused less on the play of surfaces and more on the relational, social aspect of his art; it still emphasized a horizontal relationship with the disparate elements in the poems as in “The Boiling Water” where Koch moves from the water and other inanimate and natural objects—including telephones, matches, and bees—to reflecting on the communal aspect of the boiling water:

> How many people have I drunk tea or coffee with
> And thought about the boiling water hardly at all, just waiting for it to boil
> So there could be coffee or chocolate or tea. And then what?
> The body stimulated, the brain alarmed, grounds in the pot,
> The tree waving, out the window, perhaps with a little more élan
> Because we saw it that way, because the water boiled, because we drank tea.
>
> (*Collected Poems* 331)

The group of people collects around the water so that there can be coffee. The water, then assumes a direct causal relationship with the people: its boiling makes the communion with tea and coffee possible, and those people would only know of this relationship if they examine themselves in relationship with and connected to the water. By including these meditations along with bees, matches, telephones, and doctors in the poem, Koch asks the reader to consider what the relationship between them is: what do the water, the bee, the tree, the telephone, and the doctor all share with one another? Koch's answer here seems to be that they all share a seriousness, a purpose or potentiality for which they were made and exist and that "something may be happening, always, today," which is too important for those involved to ignore (*Collected Poems* 334). This awareness of the complexity and importance of the miniscule is, for Koch, that which has the potential to bring people together into friendship and community.

The social aspect of his postmodern poetry as a reflection of this "different depth" is made possible by a peculiar "relaxation" found in the New York School's poetry, especially Koch's. Rather than reiterate Calinescu's argument that postmodernism is the result of modernism wearing itself out due to high aesthetic standards, I want to emphasize a relaxation resulting *from* emphasis on excess. There should be no doubt that the high aesthetic standards of the great modern poets did indeed relax, whether it was from having done "everything" there was to do in terms of formal experimentation or because of the trauma of World War II remains indeterminate. This relaxation in the postmodern poetry is not so much one of material as it is one of expectations on the part of the poet. Koch and his band refute and thrash New Critical commitment to the poem as artifact. For them, the poem is no longer a well-wrought urn carefully crafted and

preserved for later study. Too, the poet is no longer required to confess, in the tradition of Lowell, about intense moments of “the personal”—moments of trauma, individual experience, and meditations on the psyche and sexuality.

Rather than the poet being “front-and-center” in the poem, it is now the scene, the experimentation, and the excess that becomes the focus of the poetic project. The poet’s subject is his environment and the pleasure of observing and immersing himself in it. This shift in attitude from the poet pontificating to the poet observing and considering deeply his environment through a relaxed, inclusive, fluid compositional practice was an important aesthetic for other poets in Koch’s coterie, especially O’Hara and Schuyler. To illustrate this attitude, I want to look again at “The Boiling Water” in which Koch allows images to bleed into one another without formal transitions:

Saving of money,

It’s well known, can result from an aesthetic attitude, since a rock

Picked up in the street contains all the shape and hardness of the world.

One sidewalk leads everywhere. You don’t have to be in Estapan. (*Collected Poems* 331)

The saving of money bleeds into the rock, which contains all the shape and hardness of the world, through the inclusion of a comma and a conjunction rather than a period suggesting that somehow the two are connected. Through this bleeding process, Koch is

able to show, here as in *When the Sun Tries to Go On*, an aesthetic relaxation bound together with a horizontal relationality between subject, scene, and object.[2]

This same aesthetic principle of bleeding is true of both O'Hara and Schuyler. O'Hara's "I do this, I do that" poems are exemplary of this kind of intense, almost painterly focus on the everyday and in particular, his everyday experiences of walking around New York City. In poems such as "Khrushchev is coming on the right day," readers easily see the bleeding and blending of different images. After getting into a cab in which a Puerto Rican complains about the United States having everything except "politesse," the speaker looks out the window

> and five different girls I see
>
> look like Piedie Gimbel
>
> with her blonde hair tossing too,
>
> as she looked when I pushed
>
> her little daughter on the swing on the lawn it was also windy (*Selected Poems* 175)

The poem contains not a single period and moves fluidly, however disjointed these movements seem, from politesse to Piedie Gimbel to the weather being windy outside. Not only is O'Hara, like Koch, concerned with an intense focus on everyday

[2] This relationality suggests the painterly influences of the New York Painters such as Grace Hartigan, Fairfield Porter, Jane Freilicher, and others. For further discussion of the painterly influences on the New York School, especially on Frank O'Hara, see Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*, especially, Ch. 3.

observations, he also practices the intense relaxation of aesthetic standards. His poems certainly are not artifacts meant for preservation and study.[3]

Schuyler, too, exemplifies this foregrounding of scene in his "The Morning of the Poem," which is his catalogue of him sitting down to write a poem. The subject of the poem is ostensibly the poet and his concerns; however, from the beginning of the poem, the reader is immersed in the speaker's observations of everything around him, of everything that will eventually make it into the poem he is writing. "Wakening today in green more gray," the poet muses:

> How easily I could be in love with you,
>
> who do not like to be touched,
>
> And yet I do not want to be in love with you,
>
> nor you with me,
>
> "Strange business" the chinky chinaman said and
>
> from the kitchen window
>
> The jays are fatter than any jays I ever saw…" (*Collected Poems* 259-260)

Schuyler's poem is structured as one long, single thought. Finding a place to stop and start is as difficult as it is to keep up with where his mind takes the images present in the poem. The musings on love merge with the "chinky chinaman" and hundreds of other images throughout the forty-four page poem. Like Koch, both O'Hara and Schuyler are

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[3] Marjorie Perloff discusses the well-known anecdote that, at a poetry reading, Robert Lowell responded to O'Hara's declaration that he had written his poem ("Lana Turner has collapsed!") on the ferry over to the reading with "Well, I'm sorry *I* didn't write a poem on the way over here" implying that, for Lowell and other Confessional poets, "poetry is a serious business and that O'Hara was trivializing it and camping it up" (*Frank O'Hara*, 13).

concerned with inclusivity and excess brought about by a relaxation of aesthetic standards, often obscuring the poem to such an extent that reading and understanding the poem becomes effectively impossible.[4]

These moods of postmodernism—excess/inclusivity, horizontal depth, and relaxation—are all inextricable from the comedic aspect of Koch's poetry. What makes Koch's postmodern comedy distinct from the narrative kinds touted by Beckett and Pynchon is the very process of joining the word "postmodern" (understood as the poetics of excess *and* inclusivity *and* relaxation *and* spatial depth) with the specific kind of comedy produced in Koch's poetry. Koch's comedy is marked by a concern with satirical superiority, self-reflexive undermining of his own project, displacement and evasion, elasticity and the disruption of habit, fluidity and fragmentation, and creating a social and dialogical voice with his environment and personal coterie.

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[4] This is a tendency Koch would keep returning to throughout his career up until his death. With the publication of his last collection, *A Possible World*, Koch shows that the never left behind the influences of surrealism and abstract expressionism through poems like "Possible World" (whose first words are "Peach Peach Peach," "Tarzam," and "MONDO HUMP" spread across the page haphazardly), "To a Bug," and the paired poems "The Moor Not Taken" and "Thor Not Taken."

CHAPTER III
KENNETH KOCH'S POSTMODERN COMEDY

The first acknowledgement that must be made in regards to comedy is that any attempt made to define comedy in terms of its essence will ultimately fail. Defining something like comedy will only defer and perhaps cloud the meaning of comedy. Comedy is the space between the joke and the laugh—that which we must speak about, but which we cannot approach directly. Nevertheless, in order to define the specific type of comedy Koch innovates, we must begin with a discussion of Koch's poetry in relation to Charles Baudelaire's essay, "On the Essence of Laughter," move on to Freud, Kirby Olson, and Jerry Fleiger, and end with Chinitz's discussion of Koch's postmodern comedy. In order to facilitate my discussion of Koch's postmodern comedy, I will focus primarily on "Fresh Air"—an early, satirical poem of Koch's—and "The Art of Poetry"—a middle-period poem that deals with some of the same themes as "Fresh Air," but with a less biting tone.

Koch's poem begins by setting up both the theme and the setting for his lengthy exploration of the idea of stale poetry versus fresh and enlivened poetry—the tension he saw in mid-century poetry at the time:

At the Poem Society a black-haired man stands up to say

"You make me sick with all your talk about restraint and mature talent!

Haven't you ever looked out the window at a painting by Matisse

Or did you always stay in hotels where there were too many spiders crawling on
    your visages?...

I am afraid you have never smiled at the hibernation

Of bear cubs except that you saw in it some deep relation

To human suffering and wishes, oh what a bunch of crackpots! (*Collected Poems* 122)

The black-haired man promptly sits down and the others at the Poem Society "shoot arrows at him" (122). This setting at the Poem Society suggests grandness and solemnity; that poetry must be organized into a capitalized Society brings to readers' attention that Koch is immediately setting up a contrast between the prevailing academic, New Critical poetic of the time and his new, revolutionary, subversive, and superior poetic embodied in the concept of fresh air. Koch's suggestion of "restraint and mature talent" (line two, above) lodges the Poem Society firmly in the bosom of the New Critical approach to poetry as does the black-haired man's criticism that the Poem Society has never smiled at bear cubs except in their relation to human suffering.

Koch's intention here is to satirize the academic poetic of the day, which he saw as a "kingdom / Of dullness" full of "slimy people connected with poetry, / Too, and people who know nothing about it!" (122). Koch places these words in the mouth of a "blond man" who is also, at the end of his tirade, shot with arrows by the "assembled mediocrities" as the chairman of the Poem Society, whom Koch describes as "physically ugly," "small-limbed and –boned and thought he was quite seductive," and whose voice "had the sound of water leaving a vaseline bathtub," (gets up in front of the crowd to recite "the poetry of his little friends" on the "subject of love between swans" (122). The satire in these various examples is quite biting towards his subject and remains relentless throughout the several-hundred line poem; clearly, for Koch, the Poem Society and those who dance "up and down" in "terrific glee" at poetry coming from the kingdom of

dullness are to be despised as something to be laughed at.

Indeed, the representations of the Poem Society are quite humorous. Koch even goes so far to say that after the blond man and the black-haired man return in thunder and clouds to recite poems about the “east and thunder” and “prehistoric charcoal whales”—an absurd and hilarious image in and of itself—the chairman of the Society “[w]ilted away like a cigarette paper on which the bumblebees have urinated” (122). These two images, the whales and the bumblebee urine are humorous because of the contrast they present: this new, revolutionary poetic (represented in the poem by the blond man, the black-haired man, and later the Strangler) is both ancient and powerful and this modern, self-aggrandizing poetic is tiny, disgusting, and wilts before the power of the “new poem of the twentieth century,”

> Which, though influenced by Mallarmé, Shelley, Byron, and Whitman,
> Plus a million other poets, is still entirely original
> And it is so exciting that it cannot be here repeated.
> You must go to the Poem Society and wait for it to happen. (*Collected Poems* 123)

Readers are meant to laugh, along with Koch, at the silly and disgusting Poem Society and revel in the mystery and wonder suggested by this unrepresentable song of the new poem set against the Poem Society’s love between swans. That the academic poets—the “great” poets who view poetry as some artifact to be studied under the guidance of a professional and a microscope—wilt before this almost natural force of the new poetic suggests that Koch’s humor in “Fresh Air” operates with a derisive comedy that demonstrates the superiority of one over another in a way similar to what Baudelaire discusses in his essay “On the Essence of Laughter.”

*

In his essay, Baudelaire approaches the idea of the comic and laughter from a highly religious, Christian point of view. For Baudelaire, laughter, as well as sorrow, are both results of the Fall of man into sin and his subsequent expulsion from Eden. He claims that laughter and tears are both children of woe and that laughter especially is a "token of an infinite grandeur and an infinite misery" (154). This is to say that laughter is "profoundly human" and is thus generated from and as a consequence of a (Baudelaire would think) flawed human idea of man's own superiority over other humans. One man trips—he "would be the last to laugh at his own fall" (154)—and a bystander laughs. This idea of superiority involves the misery of one and the perceived grandeur of another. As with the bystander who laughs at the unfortunate man who has tripped, so too does Koch laugh from an observational point of view at what he sees not so much as the misfortune of the Poem Society but the flaws that it cannot itself see. In the early lines of the poem, it is clear that Koch perceives his new aesthetic as superior to the aesthetic of the Poem Society (the "restraint and mature talent" of the poem as endlessly revised).

In Koch's poetry the idea of superiority and comedy is compelling for two reasons. Firstly, the idea of superiority a comic power structure founded on the sentiment that Koch and his group are better than the Poem Society and the assumption that everyone knows this to be the case, whether or not they will all admit it; Koch perceives himself to be superior to the Poem Society because he avoided the perceived mistake of dullness and the laughter of critics at those associated with the "kingdom of dullness." Koch's caricature of the chairman is directed at what Koch perceives as a major fault in the Poem Society's social behavior and artistic principles, which results in a constructed power

dynamic—central to almost all variations of satire—in which the joke-teller perceives himself superior to the butt of his joke. This superiority indicates that Koch, the joke-teller, has overcome the faults in the object of his satire since he is able to achieve distance and look at the Poem Society from the outside, and what he finds is an all-permeating dullness.

This observation leads to the second compelling implication of Baudelaire's vision of the comic for Koch's postmodern comedy. Koch's ability to achieve distance from the object of his satire expresses what Baudelaire talks about as man's superiority to animals. If we extend the idea of superiority from interpersonal relationships to a broader cultural idea of superiority, we arrive at an idea of superiority-as-comic in relation to not only other cultures but also to other species of animals (if the human is to be perceived as an animal who laughs). In the case of the animal-human relation, the perceived superiority of the observer becomes an actual superiority: the human is superior to the animal in intellect, knowledge, and consciousness. The human has the ability to refine her behaviors, to make them conform to a cultural standard or to some religious/moral/ethical standard. It is through distance from "brute creation" (154) that the human is able to observe the behaviors of animals and find them humorous. The farther along the process of cultural and intellectual development a human goes, the further the human gets from the animal. Koch, then, perceives himself to be at the most extreme distance from the Poem Society and enables the poet to observes and make commentary like:

> Sun out! perhaps there is a reason for the lack of poetry
>
> In these ill-contented souls, perhaps they need air!
>
> Blue air, fresh air, come in, I welcome you, you are an art student,

> Take off your cap and gown and sit down on the chair.
>
> Together we shall paint the poets—but no, air! perhaps you should go to them,
> quickly,
>
> Give them a little inspiration, they need it, perhaps they are out of breath,
>
> Give them a little inhuman company before they freeze the English language to
> death!
>
> (And rust their typewriters a little, be sea air! be noxious! kill them, if you must, but
> stop their poetry! (*Collected Poems* 125-6)

By gaining this distance, Koch achieves perspective on the state of poetry in the mid-century United States. However favorable Koch presents this idea of infusing fresh air into the dreary, dead, and dull poetry of the academy, Koch still remains at a distance from this kind of poetry, having been through the academy himself: he was a graduate of Harvard.

Baudelaire argues further that, “the nations of the world will see a multiplication of comic themes in proportion as their superiority increases” (154). This vision of the progress of nations and civilizations reinforces the idea that the comic rests on the notion of cultural superiority. As development occurs, human culture is able find more things comical and able to invent more ways of representing those things as such. With distance, the human, as Koch has begun to do in his poetry, can begin to imitate nature and other cultures, especially elements “preexisting in nature” (157)—an idea that only expands in Koch’s work, where imitation combined with a sense of distance takes on a postmodern, intertextual cast.

If imitation is an expression of man’s superiority over man or nature, then it is no

wonder that in prose, drama, or everyday discourse, we find humor resulting from a woman re-presenting a cow on stage in full costume or a man pretending to be a dog chasing its tail[5] or Pope imitating the conventions of Greek heroic poetry in *The Rape of the Lock*. These scenes all convey the sense that later cultures imitate the cultures they inherited for both comic and serious purposes. Thus emerges imitations such as *Young Frankenstein* or *Spaceballs*. Mel Brooks's film, of course, is mocking the conventions of the monster genre, both literary and cinematic; by twisting towards humor the convention of the mad scientist and the society's fear of his experimentation, Brooks demonstrates his own superiority over the genre, evidencing, perhaps, the tiredness of the genre. Brooks' intentions, like Koch's, are not merely to mock and imitate the generic traditions he has inherited. Part of his purpose is to pay tribute to the genres he is working with, to delight in the conventions, celebrate them, and encourage others who work with the genre to improve the genre by breathing fresh air into the tired conventions and themes and plots of the genre. Brooks' films, like Koch's poems, become pastiches of their source material; rather than mock the source material mercilessly, they celebrate the generic conventions they are lightly making fun of through comic imitation.

As modernism moved towards the postmodern mood, the idea of the pastiche proliferated itself. This proliferation is due, arguably, to the vast commercialization and commodification of art and pop culture during the post-war period, especially as regards mass access to these various kinds of expression. In Koch's poetry, especially, the

[5] This would not be unheard of in some of Koch's poetry from *Sun Out* and in his avant-garde drama. See *The Banquet*, published by Coffee House Press, 2013 for examples, especially: "Guinevere, or the Death of the Kangaroo," "Scotty Dog," and "The Two Bulls."

pastiche is readily visible in poems like "Mending Sump"—a quotation and mockery of Frost's "Mending Wall"—and "Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams" in which Koch celebrates and parodies the thematic structure of Williams's "This is Just to Say."

Rather than use his pastiche to enact a social program the way Pope did with *The Rape of the Lock*, Koch uses his pastiche to give credit to and celebrate the achievement of poets who have come before him and those whose work he likes. In "Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams" Koch both celebrates and makes fun of the tone and theme of his source material by creating more and more zany alterations on the speaker's innocent lack of consideration for the person to whom the poem is addressed. The first stanza of Koch's poem reads:

> I chopped down the house that you had been saving to live in next summer.
> I am sorry, but it was morning, and I had nothing to do
> and its wooden beams were so inviting. (*Collected Poems* 135)

Between Williams' poem and Koch's, the expression of the theme changes from eating plums from the ice box to chopping down someone's house. This is a far more serious transgression than eating someone else's breakfast, as that person now has no place to live. Additionally, Koch takes the justification for the action to the absurd by suggesting that the wooden beams of a house can be inviting, making fun of the "delicious / so sweet / and so cold" (73) reasoning of Williams' poem. By taking the theme and making it seem absurd, Koch pokes fun at Williams' poem and even includes a more direct allusion when he says "the firm March wind on the porch was so juicy and cold" (135). Had Koch ended the poem with this line, it would be much easier to say his project was to make fun

of Williams' poem, yet the final stanza concludes the poem in somewhat of a celebratory tribute to Williams and his influence on Koch:

> Last evening we went dancing and I broke your leg.
>
> Forgive me. I was clumsy, and
>
> I wanted you here in the wards, where I am the doctor! (*Collected Poems* 135)

This tribute to Williams is funny, and somewhat dark; however, it shows Koch's perceived superiority to Williams since Koch appears to have mastery over the aesthetic Williams used to write the poem.

The sense of superiority expressed by such pastiches contains within it an implication that the artist knows what she is doing when she crafts the imitation. Baudelaire wants to introduce into this self-awareness a dualism within the human being: the human has "the power of being oneself and someone else at one and the same time" (164). What Baudelaire means by this is that the artists who create the comic must be aware of what they are doing, but that the artists must *appear* to be unaware of what they are doing, thereby producing "in the spectator, or rather the reader, a joy in his own superiority and the superiority of man over nature" (164-5). In this sense nature contains within it both the meaning of nature as natural, animal world and the meaning of nature as human qualities and characteristics.

By giving the appearance of ignorance, the comic artist lodges in the reader the *responsibility* for creating the comic. Baudelaire argues that the "special abode of the comic is in the laugher, the spectator" (164), which is to say that between the reader and the artist is a contract centered around a dual ignorance; both sides of this dualism hinge upon pretense: both artist and reader pretend that they are unaware that the one knows

what the other is doing. This reflects the idea that the comic is the space between the laughter and the joke: the contract between reader and artist hangs in the space; it is intangible but makes its presence felt in the response of the reader to the comic art work.

Baudelaire's emphasis on superiority, imitation, and the profound human-ness of comedy are foundational to an understanding of Koch's postmodern comedy, his deceptive seriousness. Koch's comic poems, especially those of his early career like "Fresh Air" and "Thank You,"[6] for example cling to the idea of the superiority of the poet over those about whom the poet is writing. In this regard, Koch's early comedy is marked by the biting, sarcastic, and even satirical kinds of humor found often enough in earlier writers (like Swift, Dryden, Pope, Wycherly, and Vanbrugh). His comedy mercilessly mocks the academy poets of the 1950s and 1960s in order to subvert their influence and perhaps bring about some kind of change in the way poetry is approached and written.[7] This is the postmodern aspect of Koch's comedy in action: a different way to approach the writing of poetry.

In his later career Koch would turn the idea of superiority as comic expression comic on its head. Echoing Baudelaire's insistence on a dual ignorance, Koch's later poems pretend to not know what they are doing. "Accidental" conjunctions of ideas and

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[6] This poem is a series of sarcastic expressions of thanks to unknown subjects; for example: "And thank you for the evening of the night on which I fell off my horse in the shadows. That was really useful" (*Collected Poems* 137)

[7] Koch himself wrote four books on reading and writing poetry. They are: *Making Your Own Days*, his most theoretical work that takes its name from Frank O'Hara's poem "A True Account of Talking to the Sun on Fire Island"; *Rose Where Did You Get That Red?*, a book about teaching poetry to children; *Wishes, Lies, Dreams*, a book about teaching children to write poetry; and *I Never Told Anyone*, his book about teaching poetry to people in nursing homes.

words, misunderstandings of what a speaker or writer says or writes, and a deceptive kind of self-deprecation all become markers of the shift Koch makes toward lodging the meaning of the comic in the reader. This shift can be heard in a more nostalgic, I-don't-know-anything tone and attitude found in much of Koch's later poetry. This is not say that any of Koch's humor left his poetry; indeed, if anything it matured and became more controlled and toned back.

In addition to being mocking, biting, and superiority-based, Koch's comedy is highly imitative. This is just to say that Koch draws from previous poets and generates pastiches through quotation and the imitation of their forms/techniques, as in "Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams." Alongside well-known pastiches of Frost and Williams, much of Koch's poetry can be read as an imitation of a Whitmanesque, catalogic sprawl as in the varying line lengths of "The Boiling Water" or "Fresh Air." Long lines within long poems with several lists are a staple in Koch's poetic career. Within his imitation of Whitman's formal features, Koch is able to transform the Romantic self-expression against itself and is thus able to create a space for the comic to enter into his poetry.

Lastly, Koch's poetry conveys a sense of profound sense of humanity. Beyond merely recording an event in the common speech of man in order to communicate to the common man, Koch's poetry is heavily concerned with the everyday, both in a theoretical and experiential sense. His poetry *is* profoundly human. Found in his poetry, often enough, is the inclusion of the first names of his friends, relatives, and fellow artists. This inclusion is in the style of Frank O'Hara and his reliance on the first names of his friends in poems like "For Grace after a Party," "A Party Full of Friends," "Having

a Coke with You," and "At the Old Place." This inclusivity is aimed quite often at subverting the expectations of the reader and furthering Koch's tendency to lodge the comic in the reader's response to the poem. It is a voyeuristic invitation into a sort of secret club that can laugh at everybody outside of it and even to laugh at themselves, perhaps enabling a sense of comic relief—in the most literal sense—to seep between the lines of the poem.

*

Koch's comedy is subversive at the same time it is inclusive; it is human at the same time it imitates and mocks the human. Above all, it is concerned with displacement and evasion, an idea taken up by Freud in his *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Within this work, Freud takes up the mystery of the joke, what it is, how to create it, and how it functions. His primary assertions reinforce the Baudelairean idea of the comic as superiority of one human over nature or another human. In Freud, however (and in later theorists), the comic and the joke hold a special place within social discourse that appears to be more like satire than anything else. Freud argues that jokes *are* concerned with superiority but that often they are meant to be instructive (57); though at first appearance the joke—we could substitute "comic poem" here—seems like nonsense, often this seeming indicates the presence of sense behind the nonsense.

As Koch shows in "Fresh Air," his joking is meant to be instructive to both the Poem Society and other, younger poets who may happen to read his poem and experience this new aesthetic concerned with concrete things. An exemplary moment in "Fresh Air" comes in section five of the poem; the air that Koch has welcomed in to liven up poetry has departed to give fresh air to other poets, and as soon as "she has departed,"

…Ugh! what poisonous fumes and clouds! what a suffocating atmosphere!

Cough! whose are these hideous faces I see, what is this rigor

Infecting the mind? where are the green Azores,

Fond memories of childhood, and the pleasant orange trolleys… (*Collected Poems* 126)

Once the fumes of rigor have invaded, Koch satirical says:

Oh! stop! help! yes, I see—disrespect for my superiors—forgive me, dear Zeus,
nice Zeus, parabolic bird, O feathered excellence! white!

There is Achilles too, and there's Ulysses, I've always wanted to see them,

And there is Helen of Troy, I suppose she is Zeus too, she's so terribly pretty—
hello, Zeus, my you are beautiful, Bang!

One more mistake and I get thrown out of the Modern Poetry Association, help!
Why aren't there any adjectives around?

Oh there are, there's practically nothing else—look, here's *grey*, *utter*, *agonized*,
total, *phenomenal*, *gracile*, *invidious*, *sundered*, and *fused*,

Elegant, *absolute*, *pyramidal*, and…Scream! But what can I describe with these
words? States! (*Collected Poems* 126)

With this satire, Koch attempts to show the ridiculousness of modern poetry's aesthetic by suggesting that the kind of poetry he dislikes has no content other than contrived descriptors that cannot give an accurate description of anything concrete. Shortly following this sarcastic tirade against the Modern Poetry Association, Koch answers his question and says the only things he can describe with these words are "complex states, magic states, states of consciousness governed by an aroused sincerity" and cries out,

"Help! Where am I? am I in the barnyard? Oink oink, scratch moo! Splash!" (127). After showing the absurd nature of using "practically nothing else" than adjectives, he begins to outline his own instructions for poetry—a theme he returns to in "The Art of Poetry"—in one, long, urgent line: "My first lesson. 'Look around you. What do you think and feel?' *Uhhh…*'Quickly!' *This Connecticut landscape would have pleased Vermeer*. Wham! A-plus. 'Congratulations!' I am promoted" (127). This contrast Koch sets up between the adjective-heavy "grey" poems of the Modern Poetry Association reveals not only a different set of aesthetic concerns but also the seriousness with which Koch approaches the writing of poetry as something markedly different than the somber, despairing, self-aggrandizing poetry of the New Critical aesthetic. This seriousness, however, is masked by the nonsense in his poem ("dear Zeus, nice Zeus, parabolic bird," etc.), which, when closely inspected, demonstrates the absurdities within the poetic world outside the poem.[8] It becomes a comic contrast containing a judgement on the margins of both poetic and popular society.

Jokes for Freud *are* judgements, but they are judgements that create a comic contrast (10). Rather than existing as judgements in the traditional, legal or social sense (i.e. racial, classist, sexist judgements), jokes for Freud are judgements released from the "usual rules and regulations" (11) of social discourse. They function within a distinct margin of society that is exempt—or should be exempt—from the established rules of power relations. Koch's judgement of modern poetry is exempt from the normal rules

[8] Besides Koch, we find other exemplary users of nonsense masking seriousness in other postmodern comic writers like Pynchon, Beckett, and their successors like David Foster Wallace. See *The Crying of Lot 49* (Pynchon), *Waiting for Godot* (Beckett), and *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (Wallace).

that govern society because he makes it an aesthetic judgement encompassed in the lines of a poem published under the auspices of Donald Allen and given credibility through the medium of publication. Jokes and the comic, then, become inherently subversive because they are aesthetic *and* earn immediate credibility through their publication. Often, they are the satisfaction of a socially/politically/aesthetically repressed instinct in the face of what Freud terms an "obstacle" (101). Koch's poem allows him to explode outward from under repression and make his critique of the New Critical aesthetic by evading restrictions and making accessible the inaccessible pleasure of subverting the established conventional structures.

This idea of subversion and evasion holds currency for Koch's comic project; in fact, much of Koch's work is predicated on this sense of subversion. As previously discussed, Koch's early work centers around a perceived superiority over those confessional poets in the tradition of the academy, especially in poems like "Fresh Air." His poetry is subversive insofar as it turns conventional methodologies for crafting poetry upside down, as evidenced in his poem "The Art of Poetry," a subtle, comical poem meant to give instruction to "those of you who are left, when these others have departed," those who use their poetic talents to write poetry rather than songs or, Koch adds comically, advertisements (264). In this poem, Koch has honed the biting, satirical comedy he used in his earlier poems. Here, his tone is more gentle and prodding rather than loud and boisterous. He writes,

> Mental health is certainly not a necessity for the
> Creation of poetic beauty, but a degree of it
> Would seem to be, except in rare cases. Schizophrenic poetry

Tends to be loose, disjointed, uncritical of itself, in some ways
Like what is best in our modern practice of the poetic art
But unlike it in others, in its lack of concern
For intensity and nuance. A few great poems
By poets supposed to be "mad" are of course known to us all,
Such as those of Christopher Smart, but I wonder how crazy they were,
These poets who wrote such contraptions of exigent art?
As for Blake's being "crazy", that seems to me very unlikely.
But what about Wordsworth? Not crazy, I mean, but what about his later work,
boring
To the point of inanity, almost, and the destructive "corrections" he made
To his *Prelude*, as it nosed along, through the shallows of art?
He was really terrible after he wrote the "Ode:
Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood", for the most
part,
Or so it seems to me. (*Collected Poems* 254)

The opening of this poem challenges and subverts conventional compositional expectations of the "great" writers, especially those who were considered great in his day. By connecting modern poetry to the schizophrenic's lack of "concern / For intensity and nuance" Koch suggests that poetry need not be such an intense strain of effort but rather be a "loose, disjointed, uncritical of itself" composition that does not take itself too seriously. Koch does not mention meter, rhyme or form within the poem, except once and only fleetingly toward the end. Further, Koch criticizes Wordsworth's "destructive

'corrections'" to his poems and calls Whitman's "corrections" to *Leaves of Grass* "almost always terrible" (254), which suggests that Koch takes issue with the New Critical mentality that poems are meant to be refined artifacts and instead reveling in the process of poetic creation. This seeming lack of concern for formal poetic compositional strategies[9] subtly subverts the solemnity promoted by the academy as what constitutes "good" poetry, and engages in, to Freud's language, a "rebellion against that [institutionalized] authority" that seeks "liberation from its pressure" (105). Koch turns to comedy for his revolution, for in the spirit of Freud, Bakhtin, and others, comedy is surely the most subversive of all literary forms (hence, perhaps, the carnivalesque is a proper attribution to comedy in general and Koch's comedy in particular).

Within this kind of rebellious subversion, Koch's poetic comedy, expresses his comic function through consistently evading the reader and the reader's expectations of and for the poem. By setting up the poem as an instructional poem for poets about how to write poetry, readers could expect sound, step-by-step advice on how to write a poem and how to make it great and noteworthy. However, Koch's attitude in the poem evades this expectation by not mentioning rhyme or meter until the end and appearing ambivalent towards whether or not becoming famous is the end of poetic creation. "Becoming famous," he advises, "will not hurt you / Unless you are foolishly overcapitvated and forget / That this too is merely a part of your experience" and goes on to say that "those who make poets famous / In general know nothing about poetry" (260). Koch's poem is

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[9] Koch, in "On the Great Atlantic Rainway," calls this "Formulalessness, to go from the sun / Into love's sweet disrepair" so that "unsyntactical / Beauty might leap up!" (*Collected Poems* 73).

not a systematic aesthetic treatise on the writing of poetry. It wanders and cycles back on itself, undermining its own project, especially with statements such as “And Sophocles wrote poetry until he was a hundred and one, / Or a hundred, anyway, and drank wine and danced all night, / But he was an ancient Greek and so may not help us here” (254). He invokes the name of a great tragedian and immediately recants his invocation. Immediately after these lines Koch again reneges his position by saying, “On / The other hand, he may” (254), allowing for Sophocles to be re-qualified for meaningful entrance into Koch’s poem. At the same time, the Koch seeks to give good and sincere advice to aspiring poets, and the advice is good, as in when he suggests that the poet have a good group of friends “who write as well as you do, who know what you are doing / And know when you are doing something wrong… / To keep you continually striving up an impossible hill” (255). This subtle intention to give good advice coupled with the wandering nature of the poem undermines the readers’ expectations by not providing a stable ground on which they can situate themselves to understand the poem as it is.

Apprehension of meaning in this and many of his poems is next to impossible, especially in his later work; this elusiveness demonstrates Koch’s dedication to a project of pleasure and humor as well as challenging the reader to think spatially and non-logically. In “The Art of Poetry,” readers must consider both what Koch is saying and how he is saying it. The poem, like the majority of Koch’s work, conforms to the aesthetic principles Koch both embodies and explicitly states in the poem itself:

> Remember your obligation is to write
> And, in writing, to be serious without being solemn, fresh without being cold,
> To be inclusive without being asinine, particular

> Without being picky, feminine without being effeminate,
>
> Masculine without being brutish, human while keeping all the animal graces
>
> You had inside the womb, and beast-like without being inhuman.
>
> Let your language be delectable always, and fresh and true.
>
> Don't be conceited. Let your compassion guide you
>
> And your excitement. And always bring your endeavors to their end. (260)

Koch evades the reader in an attempt to defeat the reader's expectations for finding some formulaic methodology for writing great poems. These principles evoke Koch's rejection of and rebellion against the inculcation of standards for writing and reading poetry in one, "Academic" and repetitive methodology. It is the same sentiment expressed by the line from "Fresh Air": "Is there no one who feels like a pair of pants?" (122). Both poet and reader are exhorted by Koch's exhortations to be fresh and serious but not solemn and cold simply to write about and enjoy the mere feeling of *being* a "pair of pants" or the west wind with the understanding that if the poem has expressed joy and pleasure and is free of any "cheap effects, asking illegitimately for attention" and the "'literary,' 'kiss-me-I'm-poetical' junk" (257), then the poet has said enough. Echoes of Whitman's famous question "What good amid these, O me, O life?" resound in Koch's question, and it would be fair to say their answers would be the same: "That you are here, that life exists and identity, / That the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse" (Whitman 217).[10] The poet in Koch's aesthetic doesn't need to connect his subject to any

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[10] This is the same sentiment expressed by Frank O'Hara in his line from "In Memory of my Feelings": "Grace / to be born and live as variously as possible." (*Selected Poems* 104)

kind of human suffering or large cultural statements. The poet doesn't have to say: Listen to me! I have the Truth of our time and I will speak it. Listen to me, here it is, I shall speak it.

Where this evasion turns into displacement in Koch's poetry is in the fragmentary nature of Koch's comedy. Freud claims that displacement is a technique for actually crafting the joke and generating the comic, which means that the poet would be engaged in a process of changing the emphasis in the joke (or in Koch's case, within the lineation of the poem); it is a diversion of the "train of thought" from one meaning to another (53), which returns again to the idea of subverting the expectations of the readers. The conventional response to a poem is no longer possible; meaning is lodged in the poem; readers must make the adjustment from traditional, soul-baring depth to horizontal relationality, a different kind of depth that both puzzles readers and forces them to consider subjects in relation to one another.

When Koch writes about how much experience a poet should have "to be sure he has enough to be sure he is an adequate knower / And feeler and thinker of experience as it exists in our time," he says that poets should "experience as much as [they] can and write as much as [they] can" and immediately displaces this meaning with the following line, "These two can be contradictory" (259). As soon as readers have a way in, Koch stops them from holding onto just one part of the whole and digresses with them about the contradictory nature of his own advice. His project of displacement and fragmentation of meaning into the various, constituent parts of the poem is a project of deferral. Readers are asked to wait patiently until the end of the poem for Koch to revel his final conclusion about how to write a poem. In this sense, Koch's comedy is fragmentary insofar as it is

evasive within the actual progression of the poem.

In addition to being exempt from the rules of social discourse and to comedy as an evasive, subversive practice, the joke is predicated on differences, especially as regards the specific *creation* of a comic contrast. In this sense, jokes and the comic are metonymically linked differences founded on the simple principle of bringing forth the concealed (14), in relation to the visible. That is, jokes, engaged in the process of revelation, allow for a comic contradiction of appearances. Freud argues that this contrast is achieved by the process of condensation and substitution—a process Koch utilizes to great effect in much of his early and later work.

This process of condensation and substitution is defined by Freud as the squishing together of two words or ideas such that the "less resistant" of the ideas/sentences/words is "made to disappear" while resistant pieces of the weaker implant themselves into the stronger of the two terms to be condensed (19). In "The Art of Poetry," Koch condenses words to create new concepts that alter the meaning of his poem. When he speaks of "following fashionable literary movements" and the "sooner you find your own style the better off you will be. / Then all 'movements' will fit into it," he generates the word "exercycle" (255) without giving any explanation for it. One reading of the term suggests that he combines the words "exercise" and something like "bicycle" together in order to tell readers that once they have their own style, they will have their own "machine" for writing poems in. Another reading proposes that Koch is combining "cycle" with the Latin root "ex," meaning "outside of" to suggest that once poets have found their own style, they will have something outside the cycle of the literary movements they have been following and will have created something entirely original and postmodern by

“imitating poets [they] like / And incorporating anything valuable [they] may find there” (255).

In two other instances, Koch condenses concepts into the words “esthetecologically” and “psychodegradable,” found in the lines: “Besides, I think poems / Are esthetecologically harmless and psychodegradable / And never would they choke off the spirits of the world” (256). Both words are fictitious and help to generate new relational meaning and humor in the poem in terms of the effects poems have on their environments. “Esthetecologically” appears to be a combination of aesthetics and ecology, and this combination suggests something to do with an aesthetic ecology in which “ten thousand poems per annum / Per person” would not “flood the earth and perhaps eventually the universe” (256); in fact, Koch seems to suggest, writing thousands of poems per year per person may be one of the most esthetecologically responsible things to do, especially since poems are psychodegradable. This word is a condensation of psychology or psychological and some form of degradation, most likely, in this context, biodegradable. The combination here indicates that poems, according to Koch, “only affects us / And ‘exists’, really, if it is worth it and there can’t be too many of those” (256); otherwise, the poem would decay in and be absorbed back into the mind.

His slight alteration of the language in order to generate a comic effect naturally calls attention to itself as a type of naïveté that seeks to overcomes barriers through commentary on inconsistencies in language or behavior. The comic in this sense says something which disregards social inhibitions—namely, because the comic has no inhibitory reflex—and becomes a kind of self-reflexive truth-telling. The “jest betrays something serious” (Freud 107). Additionally, by calling attention to itself through the

method of condensation, the comic generates an awareness in the listener/reader of automatization of perception, speech, expectations, and behavior. The automatic as Freud defines it is the failure to adapt to a situation, thereby giving way to "automatic action of habit" (65). To both show and combat this awareness of the automatization in the writing of poetry, Koch sets out ten "rules" a poet should check his poem against before the poem is released "into the purview of others" (*Collected Poems* 256). This list includes none of the criteria one would expect in a list of when a poem is ready but rather things like: "Is it astonishing," "Do I stand up from it a better man," "Does it move smoothly and swiftly / From excitement to dream and then come flooding reason / With purity and soundness and joy," and "Would I be happy to go to Heaven with this pinned on to my / Angelic jacket as an entrance show? Oh, would I?" (256-7). By having aspiring poets ask these questions of their work, Koch is jarring their minds out of the nearly hardwired concerns about the form and meter and rhyme and solemnity of the poetic creation in an attempt to both maintain an awareness of automatization in society by scrutinizing each aspect of the everyday life of the human, making observations that generate the comic, which "arises as an unintended discovery derived from human social relations" (189), and to generate what Henri Bergson would call "elasticity" in the human.

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Building on this concept of the comic as recognition and display of the automatization of the human is Henri Bergson in his seminal work *Laughter*, in which he details the various ways that the comic "does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*" (3); the only way for the natural to be comic is through alteration by human intervention. He builds off of the classic definition of the human not as an animal who

thinks but as an animal who laughs. Within this theory of laughter as strictly human, we run across the notion that the comic is not merely human but the comic is found predominately in the daily interactions of humans with one another and, more precisely, in the disruption of these daily interactions.

Bergson's argument here is intriguing and bears a striking resemblance to the kind of comedy I have been outlining as predominating Koch's poetry. Bergson has realized that for laughter to function, for the disruption of habituation to occur, an "absence of feeling" must accompany and precede the laughter; he argues that the "indifferent, calm soul" is more likely to be moved by laughter than the soul that is fraught with emotion/sentiment (4). Habit, then, is necessary for laughter to function properly since the mind, "indifferent, calm" is more easily struck by the unexpected when it is automatized by habit. For comedy to succeed, habit must function as the primer, which the comic event sets off through the process of disruption.

For Bergson there exists in the realm of human experience certain events that, when decontextualized, can generate a laughing response from an observer, in poetry, the reader and the poet. In Koch's poetry, especially as he turned towards more reflective poems (like "The Circus" from *The Art of Love*, "To My Old Age," and "A Memoir"), time became the most occasional method by which Koch was able to disrupt habits in general and the habit of memory in particular, which translated on the page into the disruption of the reading habits and expectations of his readers.

In his penultimate book, *New Addresses*, Koch writes a series of poems reflecting back on his younger days, many of which are funny based on their titles alone; examples include "To Knowledge, My Skeleton, and an Aesthetic Concept," "To Orgasms," and

"To Some Buckets." One poem from the collection, in particular, "To Marijuana," evidences these certain events in human experience that jar readers from their habitual understanding and comprehension of poetry. Koch begins by personifying Marijuana,

> There is one wonderful moment
> That I remember, when I had smoked you
> I was sitting in front of a fire
> In a fireplace and I was crazy about a woman
> A new (i.e., recently appeared to me) human
> So crazy that to show how great I was, it was,
> Unmade I was, it was, I threw my glasses (eyeglasses)
> Into the fire. When I went to look for them
> Sometime after, they were gone and I was happy
> Happy as I have ever been. (*Collected Poems* 627)

The first jarring moment in the poem is to find out that Koch is not merely writing about his experiences smoking marijuana but actually writing to marijuana. Certainly this is not the first time that apostrophe has been used to address an inanimate object, but Koch's use speaks directly to a psychoactive drug. Proceeding to recall this one significant moment in which he used marijuana, Koch decontextualizes the event using vague references to "a fire," "a woman," and so on that removes the event from the concrete time and place in which the event actually occurred. The way he narrates the event creates the humor in the poem. The first eight lines consist of three separate complete sentences jammed together with the result of disorienting the reader, making the poem

somewhat difficult to read.[11] This difficulty forces the reader to artificially slow down the rush in which the lines seem to have been written, and upon slowing down, readers discover the unexpected turn Koch takes when he revises himself as he writes: “So crazy that to show how great I was, it was, / Unmade I was, it was, I threw my glasses (eyeglasses) / Into the fire” (672). Self-revision generates laughter in its own comic self-reflexivity by suggesting that Koch wanted to show how great marijuana was so he threw his glasses into the fire. This observation is one Koch could only gain by distance and decontextualization. Had he written this in the moment, perhaps the poem would have been much more absurd and incomprehensible (and perhaps just as funny), yet by allowing himself some distance on the events, Koch is able to laugh at his own youthful decisions and allow a disruption of his own memory to create a persona for marijuana and engage it in a dialogue as if it were a person, all of which allows Koch to invite readers to laugh at him too.

The comic in “To Marijuana” is also partly upon a disruption of the codes structuring human social behaviors. These codes present us with the idea that laughter is inherently social, that “Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo” (5). If no one opens a book of Koch’s poems, no one can laugh with Koch at the absurd, pretentious modern poetry or the fact that Koch, to impress a woman threw his glasses into a fire while toking on marijuana. Thus, Laughter and the comic both imply a complicity with others who laugh and finds its “natural environment” in society, and its function is social (7). What

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[11] A methodology Koch approves of. From “The Art of Poetry”: “A reader should put your work down puzzled, / Distressed, and illuminated, ready to believe / It is curious to be alive.” (*Collected Poems* 263).

this means for Bergson is that laughter has a distinctly utilitarian function to restrain and correct. We find this laughter-as-corrective formulation within the human response to involuntary actions such as tripping and general clumsiness. These involuntary actions occur through what Bergson calls a "lack of elasticity" or a "rigidity of momentum" (9) that prevents the body from adapting to new situations.

Habit, then, gives the body a kind of inertia, an impulse of bodily momentum, which causes the human to continue on through her motions like a machine. The comic, however, undermines this mechanization of the human; it subverts the expectation of walking smoothly without any bumps/deviances in the path (for example) and brings laughter where "mechanical inelasticity" is present rather than "pliableness" (9-10). Bergson calls this the "something mechanical encrusted on the living" (37) or the artificial mechanization of the human body through "disguises" such as fashions (48). The aim of laughter and the comic then is to contain and restrain eccentricities through the social gesture of the laugh (20). Society desires to eliminate, through the laughter-as-corrective formulation, inelasticity in the human body.

Although Koch's postmodern comedy does indeed subvert habit and draw attention to the mechanical nature of the human being and her behaviors, it would be difficult to argue that his use of the comic is so utilitarian throughout his career. The social-corrective function of laughter *can* be seen in poems like "Fresh Air" and "The Art of Poetry" in which he makes the reader laugh in order to help rid the Academy of its cultural inelasticity in terms of what can and what cannot be good poetry. This, indeed, is the society attempting to, not quite restrain but rather, eliminate rigidity of momentum. Nevertheless, what will be most useful about Bergson's discussion of the utilitarian use

of comedy is the turning of these “accidental” instances of comedy found in life into art.

As in “To Marijuana,” Koch takes an ordinary, normalized event, that of smoking marijuana, and turns it into the kind of art Koch promoted throughout his life and career. Coupled with the comedy, Koch turns to reflect on the event in a lighthearted, humorous way. He says,

> If you could have given me such dramatic glances
> All life long I’d surely be a pothead but I also like
> To wake up in the morning fresh and strong
> And to write poems with my glasses on—
> Without them, I’m unable to see. (627)

Koch, by personifying marijuana creates a social environment in which they could converse, if marijuana could respond to Koch at all. In this environment, Koch blames marijuana for the actions, the “throwing thing” (627) he says later in the poem, even though the reader gets the sense that Koch is merely kidding around; he knows that marijuana is just a psychoactive drug and that when he was high he may have though throwing his glasses in the fire was an incredibly important course of action to take.

Koch using some of his own personal experiences is not only true of his own postmodern comic aesthetic of experiencing as much as one can and writing as much as one can about that experience; it also confirms that, according to Bergson, the comic oscillates between life and art (*Laughter* 22) such that the material for the comic is found in the everyday life of the poet. The occurrences of the quotidian become comic when they are made into art and are imitated in verse. Koch, as a caricaturist of his own experience, observes life, detects within it natural distortions and renders those

distortions visible through what Bergson terms “magnification” (26); deformities become comic when they can be imitated (23); Additionally, Bergson maintains that the human becomes “imitable” when it becomes mechanical (29), which is to say that gestures are imitated only in mechanical uniformity. The imitation—as a work of art—then, is responsible for the generation of the comic through the foregrounding of the automatization of human behavior; this foregrounding is achieved by an artificial mechanization of the human body (48). Koch takes the rote practice of mechanically remembering an event and crafts the memory into a short poem that allows for a deeper investigation of the event itself and allows him to break both himself and the reader out of the habit of experiencing an event through contemplation and questioning. He wonders at the end of the poem, “I’m not sure what you should be to me, / Marijuana, in the times that are yet to come— / Merely a memory?” (627). In these lines, Koch moves from his comic reverie into serious (but not solemn) consideration of an event and an experience that would have remained only an event and only an experience if not for the transformative power of his poem to, as it were, snap him out of mechanistic memory. Additionally, this same indecision that moves Koch from mechanization to comic reverie in the poem is also what forces the reader to consider again the poem in a new context, one that is still humorous; with lines in which Koch suggests a “new bout with you, in the name of appetite, or love, / And occasionally bad (I’d guess) poetry—but then you never know, do you?” (672), it becomes clear that Koch is still laughing at this experience at the same time that he holds it up for the readers’ consideration. His statement here, as in “The Art of Poetry,” increases the tension of indeterminacy felt in the poem, which at the same time that it makes the reader laugh, also makes the reader contemplate the poem, its

writing, and Koch's experience as both life and an imitation of life in art.

Bergson, perhaps most different from Freud and Baudelaire and more similar to later theorists, describes comedy as a game that imitates life (69). The comic is not merely concerned with excerpting certain behaviors from life and representing them as in a mirror for the enjoyment of an audience but is concerned with taking those events selected from life and transforming them into art. The poet does this to make readers aware of their, or in Koch's case his own, habituated mechanization so that they can laugh at this behavior from a distance. When the comic poet presents to readers a humorous perspective on an event, like Koch's experience with marijuana, readers laugh when they detect—however unconsciously—the mechanism the poet uses to tell the event to them.

Apart from the manipulative implications of Bergson's theory of the comic as a sort of imitative puppeteering of the mechanical in the everyday, this idea of the comic as a rigid game played by Koch indicates Koch's major concern with a deceptive seriousness. Thought of in terms of improvisation, this concern masks as play the serious art of the game meant to make the reader laugh. Part of Koch's project in writing "To Marijuana" is to sincerely look back at his life (*New Addresses* was published two years before his death), but part of it is also to give pleasure to the reader through comedy. Deceptive seriousness at one and the same time subverts the usual expectations of the reader and then lulls the reader into a new set of expectations that hide the fact that the poem wishes to convey the pleasure of reading and writing poetry to the reader. As in "To Marijuana," Koch narrates an event made humorous by time and distance from the event itself, and when readers expects him to continue with humorous apostrophe to marijuana, Koch

turns toward contemplation of marijuana itself, keeping, as it were, readers on their toes.

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Many of Koch's poems "keep readers on their toes" by showing an embodied fluidity of thought, especially his more experimental and fragmented poems he returned to throughout his career. His poem, "On Aesthetics," shows an immense flexibility in both its content and construction such that one of the only unifying factors in the poem is that each individual piece has something to do with the aesthetics of some object or concept. Its construction is odd; it is built after the fashion of ninety-five "micropoems" that vary in length and style from one-word lines to sprawling lines, from short two-line poems to longer twelve line stanzas that could have come out of a longer work. Additionally, the subjects of each micropoem range from abstract concepts like death and beauty to concrete objects like babies, Noah's Ark, and penises and from states of being (of "Being Glorious" or "Being a Baseball") to actions ("Cavalcanti Grieving for Lost Love"), proper names (Verlaine, Victor Hugo, Plato), animals, times ("After the Opera), and numerous other assortments of unclassifiable things. For example, "Aesthetics of Obituary" reads:

> To avoid the clichés
>
> Of the obituary writers
>
> Die in obscurity.
>
> A fine bed in a light-filled room
>
> Someone who adores you is at your side
>
> And vowed to silence. (*Collected Poems* 489)

Rather than write about how obituaries can be beautiful and can be appreciated as such,

Koch writes humorously about how to prevent one's death from being remembered like everyone else's. That the advice he gives on how to avoid clichés is to "die in obscurity" is humorous since it combats a basic human drive to know and be known. For poets and artists, this indeed would be difficult to imagine. The exhortation to obscurity and the closeness of human relationship reveals an otherwise hidden truth in human experience: obituaries are full of clichés about the deceased; with hardly a thought for the nuances of the individual's life both writers and readers of obituaries unquestioningly assume the truth of what the obituary says and perhaps unconsciously expect them all to say essentially the same thing. What Koch exposes in a short poem like this, with its humorous, sarcastic tone, is the rigidity of human behavior towards the writing about of a death of another whom they did or did not know well.

The idea of rigidity is picked up by Kirby Olson in his book *Comedy After Postmodernism*, in which he claims to "constitute how comedy might function within a society in order to keep it from getting overly rigid and ridiculous" through the process of "deflating overstuffed reputations" and "killing off bad ideas"; additionally, he seeks to demonstrate how comedy can offer a society a "sense of right proportion" by enabling participants in that social order to "look at [their] preoccupations from a distance" (155). He argues that we need to replace the "rigid morality" with the "flexible, fluid thought" comedy can provide, a type of thought that does not take itself or its judgements too seriously (156). Koch's poem wanders from subject to subject, advancing no single aesthetic or moral principle, which serves to deflate absolutist notions of both aesthetic and nomic values. To illustrate with three successive poems:

AESTHETICS OF BEING A BASEBALL

Go as fast as you can

In whatever direction

AESTHETICS OF CÉZANNE

To have painted

the apples

that were in

the orchard

so red

and so gold.

AESTHETICS OF LOVING AN AZTEC

Be careful of your heart

Or the Aztec will rip it out. (*Collected Poems* 495)

Even within these three micropoems Koch's flexibility in form and content is apparent. In "Baseball" and "Aztec" the first letter of each line is capitalized, yet in "Cézanne," the initial letters are lowercase; further, the tone and of "Cézanne" differs from the other two poems in that "Cézanne" sounds and reads like another pastiche of Williams' "This is Just to Say." Koch's lines "so red / and so gold" precisely imitate the last lines of Williams' poem ("so sweet / and so cold") in both lineation and syllabification. The sound of the word "gold" is meant to suggest Williams' word "cold," and if the reader is familiar with Williams, the poem becomes humorous once the imitation is perceived. Further, the connection of Williams to Cézanne's still life paintings suggests an aesthetic principle of minimalism and close inspection of everyday life that Koch reflects in his imitation of and reflection on both artists.

With the inclusion of what the aesthetic of being a baseball and loving an Aztec before and after a meditation on Williams and Cézanne, Koch creates humor through the juxtaposition of dissimilar micropoems in tone, form, and content. The nature of being a baseball as it relates to beauty is markedly different than that of "Cézanne." To be a baseball beautifully, Koch suggests, one should be passive and go wherever one is thrown as fast as possible. Placing this micropoem next to "Cézanne" creates a contrast both in aesthetic principles and in content of the micropoem, which joins the two and gives both equal weight and credence in the poem. Being a baseball is different than Cézanne's still life painting, but both suggest something beautiful about the connected nature of the appreciation of beauty, that one can, indeed, appreciate Cézanne and dream sincerely about being a baseball beautifully without giving up either. Koch's dedication to inclusivity goes as far as to join with baseballs and Cézanne not just Aztecs but loving an Aztec. This two-line poem is arguably the most comic of the three in the way that Koch uses lineation to turn the meaning and the tone of the poem between "Be careful of your heart" and "Or the Aztec will rip it out." The shock of the turn masks an obvious statement: that Aztecs are known for ripping out the hearts of still-living sacrifices; however, when this line is juxtaposed with the first line, a comic dissonance occurs. The first line seems to give sincere advice, even though the situation created in the title is ridiculous, and when Koch breaks the line, the reader is unprepared for the ripping out of hearts.

Breaking the expectations of the reader, quite literally, Koch relaxes what could have been a potential rigidity in the aesthetics and composition of the poem as a whole on the level of the micropoem. His movement from "Plato" (the micropoem before

“Baseball”) which reads, “There has to be something better / Than what we see. Otherwise, we’d see it” (494), to “Baseball” to “Cézanne” to “Aztec” shows Koch’s ability to fluidly move from subject to subject and to find and create a space for multiple kinds of aesthetics to coexist with one another in the same poem without passing judgement on their validity. The entire poem itself is a meditation on the aesthetics of aesthetics.

There is, indeed, a place *within* and *alongside* the so-called “rigid morality” for comedy to act as a balance and as a corrective in both the Bergsonian and Kochian sense. Olson addresses this problem of including the comic within the social stratum of high, literary art, but pushes too far in arguing that “transcendent values” (Olson 156) have no place in a society that includes the comic and are mutually exclusive with comedy and the kinds of value comedy, especially Koch’s, can bring to a society. So, though Koch’s comedic project is not remotely invested in toppling something so cosmic as transcendent values, it is at least concerned with finding a place *within* and *alongside* the solemn kind of poetry contemporaneous to him by allowing into his poems a serious, humorous treatment of subject as various as Platonic philosophy, loving an Aztec, and moss.

Koch’s comic but serious treatment of such a wide range of topics raises the question Olson argues that the comic canon is centered on, “Is [the work] Odd?” (2). Koch poems are certainly odd, as evidence by discussion of *When the Sun Tries to Go On*, “Fresh Air,” and “On Aesthetics,” especially. This oddity arouses the sense of

difference immediately perceptible when a reader encounters the comic work.[12] The work is set apart from the "normal" more lyrical work of Koch's contemporaries. "On Aesthetics" remains distinct because of its broad scope and its oddity within that broad scope, especially by including subjects like the principles of beauty in being incredibly careful with ones heart or it could be ripped out, but the poem also provides the readers the "sense of right proportion," (Olson 155) through holding up for contemplation at a distance subjects the average reader might not consider beautiful.

In this project, Koch moves beyond merely contemplating the importance and seriousness of the overlook (as he did in "The Boiling Water") and turns the subjects into objects of beauty to be apprehended. Koch's transformation of the quotidian into beauty can be seen in micropoems like "Aesthetics of Baby" and "Aesthetics of Small Theatre" both of which, in four lines contemplate what is the nature of the beauty of each without passing judgement on either. "Aesthetics of Baby" reads:

> Seat yourself on the floor
>
> Bend your trunk forward
>
> Head outstretched with hands reaching
>
> And crawl. (*Collected Poems* 490)

This micropoem emerges from the sentiment, already discussed, that Koch expresses in "Fresh Air": "Is there no one who feels like a pair of pants?" He takes the often overlooked and evokes the miraculous beauty of a baby beginning to crawl by looking

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[12] Additionally, Olson argues that comic resists canonization and that the comic contains within itself a lack of solemnity "bordering on iconoclasm" (3), remarking that the comic is constituted by singularity and difference;

intensely at the motions a baby goes through before it crawls and allows the reader to contemplate the intense potential a baby has in bending forward and reaching outward and finally crawling. By placing "And crawl" on its own line, Koch gives the reader fulfillment in the event after contemplating the baby's success. This close reading of the baby's actions places at a distance the baby as an aesthetic object and bring proportion back into the poem: a tribute to Williams and Cézanne is just as beautiful and important as a baby beginning to crawl. However, interspersed within these moments of beauty are oddities to weird to ignore like "Aesthetics of Small Theatre," which reads,

> Don't bring a horse
> Into a small theatre
> But, if you must,
> Put it on stage. (495)

What makes this micropoem odd is how quickly Koch shifts from how a small theatre could be beautiful to a cautionary example of what not to bring into a small theatre. Koch quickly undermines this caution by saying that to make a small theatre beautiful—for it to have an aesthetic quality to it—one must put that horse on stage; this advice is at one and the same time absurd yet presented as sincere.

Often, these sorts of oddities manifest themselves in an irreverence that "breaks the standards of rational thought" and radically departs from the wisdom and majesty that can be passed down from generation to generation (3). Olson further notes that in the postmodern mood the comic writer becomes a philosopher and the philosopher becomes a comic writer such that the comic is able to take precedence in its action of helping to "deterritorialize the sublime and render it as burlesque" (7). Koch, in his irreverent and

odd treatment of the phallus, clearly renders the sublime as burlesque in “Aesthetics of Penises”:

> Rising and falling like swans
>
> On Greek vases
>
> Suggesting the connection
>
> To life, that Greek men had,
>
> And satyrs and gods. (*Collected Poems* 507)

Needless to say, the irreverence in this micropoem “breaks the standards of rational thought” in suggesting that male genitalia has a set of principles that govern its beauty; however, Koch joins this oddity, “rising and falling like swans / On Greek vases” with the means to connect to life. The penis is beautiful precisely because it gave Greek men, satyrs, gods, and presumably men who encountered Koch’s poem a connection to life—a way to understand and interpret their experience, however odd that might be. Koch is only able to observe this aesthetic by a commitment to inclusivity and relaxation. Readers are then able to laugh at this absurd irreverence and accept it as a valid, equal part of the poem, which breaks normalized thought about poetry and aesthetics open.

These considerations can be summed up in the idea that the comic “opens rationalism to its supposed opposite, irrationalism” (6). Rather than “irrationalism”, it would perhaps be more appropriate to say “non-rationalism”, for the former implies the absence of a logic that Koch’s comedy has and enables it to function well. This comedic logic would instead be non-rational in the sense that its logical schematic is not normative in terms of what readers, critics, or other poets would expect. However, this necessary distinction does not disbar Olson from rightly saying that comedy is “precisely a certain

freedom from definition", that it "sets forth to see the loophole and save the day for the anomic" (6), except that Koch attempts to save the day for the aesthetic anomic rather than the social. Koch's structuring of the poem into ninety-five micropoems disobeys a more traditional logic of poetic composition that would have a poem be a single, self-contained meditation of an idea or exploration of an image or story. By including meditations on ninety-five different topics without a real unifying idea other than the contemplation of aesthetics, Koch fragments the poem as a singular entity into poems in the plural, all housed on the same canvas of the poem called "On Aesthetics." This fragmentation reflects what Koch calls, in reference to Paul Klee's painting, "Little bits of freedom / Imprisoned by light blue sound" (498) suggesting that if these micropoems were not contained within the larger poem, they would abound without order or organization. Koch, then, produces serious meditations and deflates them with laugh-out-loud comical reflections.

This is to say that comedy encourages a balancing act in which high thinking of the is deflated and often exposed as being pretentious; comedy is the foil that keeps readers from regarding the solemn as some pagan idol. Comedy, Olson, should function as a "tonic for this age of ultraserious orthodoxy"; it would instead offer "fragmentation and lopsidedness" (14). The comic would replace the "orthodoxy", the eponymous Truth with fluid, contextual truths that provide not only a commentary on the nature of truth but also on the established Academy full of its rules and regulations of what is good poetry and how should one write it. In other words, for Olson, comedy is engaged in a commentary on the established Western Canon.

What is crucial in Olson's understanding of postmodern comedy for a discussion of

Koch's postmodern comedy is that Koch's comedy interrupts the established discourse of "good poetry" and allows a glimpse of the concrete actuality *behind* the constructed discourse surrounding the Poem Society and its "transcendent" truths about the construction of good poetry. As in "On Aesthetics," Koch creates an entirely unsystematic rendering of aesthetic theory. His interest is in the practical rather than the theoretical; since he does not elaborate his discussions of the different aesthetics, readers are left contemplating the concrete objects within the poem. The "truth" for Koch is not so much in the communication of grand proclamations but in the presence of real things. In this sense, one facet of Koch's poetry previously discussed but perhaps not fully elaborated is the immanence of Koch's comedic project. As seen with Bergson, the comic hinges upon an encounter and conversation with the everyday experience of the human. In Koch, this encounter results in a fractured, digressive, and often deceptive re-production of human life, rather than a one-to-one imitation of the habituation of human behavior.

This fragmented picture of reality that Koch presents is unified in its fragmentation. Had he retitled the poem "On Life," the sentiments and images expressed within would remain unchanged: the beauty would still be there to contemplate. Fragmentation in Koch can be perhaps best described as an intentional *mis*apprehension of the observed or the encountered. Rather than attempting to present life "as it is," Koch unabashedly presents life as he sees it and as he encounters its various experiences. In "Aesthetics of Creating Light," Koch presents the experience of creating light in a way that is most beautiful to him:

Put one hand

Next to a light-switch

With the other hand

Feeling for the wall.

"Creating" light strikes him a certain way that may not "actually" be how to create light, but for Koch, creation seems to be bringing into presence something that is not already there. By turning on a light-switch, Koch "creates" light out of the darkness through a hand motion and faith in an electrically heated tungsten filament. That Koch's project should allow for misapprehension indicates the relaxation found in postmodern comic writing; additionally, it suggests what Olson rightly calls a lack of concern for the "sacred realm of politics" (17); in this sense, Olson is right to pit the comic as the "other face of the reverent" that has been "scapegoated" so the reverent could stay in power.

This lack of concern for politics and the emphasis on presentation of subjective experience through the relaxation of standards suggests that Koch does not take himself too seriously. Nor does Koch attempt to set himself up on the highest pillars of culture; he is mostly content to reside in the margins, where the can make fun of the high from the low, where he can write zany meditations on the aesthetics of various non-rational objects. In this sense, the comic resists, as Olson points out, an ethical or political reading (17) since its concern, especially in Koch, is with neither ethics nor politics. The implications of this resistance are clear: comic writers are concerned with representing humorously, through misapprehension and an engagement with the quotidian, the vagaries, mechanizations, and ridiculous solemnities of human experience, subverting any they wish to revise, ridicule, ignore, or include in their art.

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Alongside Olson's insistence that comic writers do not take themselves too seriously while still subverting the systems they look for loopholes in, there exists within comedy a "contagious and seditious" quality in representing the quotidian that as Jerry Fleiger argues in *The Purloined Punchline*, can subvert not only the conventional notions of convention but also the conventional notions of subjectivity, rationality (as Olson has noted), and consciousness (4). According to Fleiger, the postmodern comic text pokes holes in the fabric of the Logos—the central governing aesthetic of the post-war United States and the high modernists. In this sense, postmodern comedy in general and Koch's in particular is concerned, in part, with decentering the formal conventions of writing poetry, moving it away from the governing poetic discourse toward the exorbitant such that a radical perspective on reading and writing poetry emerges; Fleiger calls this "something" that proceeds "on its merry way" unheeded within the systems of discourse and argues that this is essential to the postmodern comic text (5).

Koch expresses this decentralization of formal conventions in "The Art of Poetry," as has been previously discussed, by challenging notions of refining and revising a work until it is perfect and promoting an idea of loose and disjointed poetry, whose reigning aesthetic is "Formulalessness," or "the modern idea of fittingness, / To, always in motion, lose nothing" (*Collected Poems* 73), as Koch writes in "On the Great Atlantic Rainway." Koch extends this challenge to the actual forms used to write poetry in his time:

> The epic has a clear advantage over any sort of lyric
>
> Poem in being there when you go back to it to continue. The
>
> Lyrics is fleeting, usually caught in one
>
> Breath or not at all (though see what has been said before

About revision—it can be done). The epic one is writing, however,

Like a great sheep dog is always there

Wagging and waiting to welcome one into the corner

To be petted and sent forth to fetch a narrative bone (262).

Koch's privileging of the epic over the lyrics brings to the fore his commitment to postmodern excess and inclusivity. Though he does suggest that the "Minimum requirement is a form" and lists Spenser and Ariosto as candidates for formal imitation, Koch's exuberance about the epic suggests an opening of form to the variety of contemporary experience because, according to Koch's reason "we are so uncertain of everything and also know too much, / A curious and seemingly contradictory condition, which the epic salves / By giving us our knowledge and our grasp, with all our lack of control as well" (262). The epic, then, is best suited, as opposed to the lyric, to represent the confusion of life in the United States in the mid-century. Koch even goes as far to suggest that "the epics is a form / Our international time-space plan cries out for—or so it seems / To one observer" (262). Again, Koch here undermines his own position as commentator and critic by hesitantly and self-reflectively positing his point of view from an entirely subjective and self-aware point of view.

Koch's long poem is, for him, merely one voice in a sea of thousands—and this is exactly the kind of epic Koch wishes to be written.[13] With all of the thousands of years of

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[13] Koch himself wrote two book-length epics, *Ko; or A Season on Earth* and *The Duplications*, both of which exemplify his concern with wandering from story to story, collecting and including everything he possibly can from baseball to burials at sea to coronations of fictional English monarchs. Both can be found collected along with *On the Edge* and *Seasons on Earth* in *On the Edge: The Collected Long Poems of Kenneth Koch*

experience, especially the great technological developments that came about because of World War II, it becomes easy to understand why Koch would advocate the aspiring poet to undermine the regency of the lyric with the epic, which does not limit its subject matter and makes no pretensions to have all of the answers for the modern malaise. Rather, Koch writes that the lyrics must be "bent" into a form more suitable for the time so that "Fragments of being reflect absolutes (see for example the verse of / William Carlos Williams or Frank O'Hara) and you can go on / Without saying it all every time" (262). Representing only "slices of life" is for Koch what modern poetry should do, both in the "bent" lyric and the wandering, diversionary form of the epic.

Additionally, as Fleiger notes and as Koch emulates, the postmodern comic text invovled in subversion of the Logos is also, like Freud's idea of the comic as displacement, dealing with the aesthetic diversion of the reader by the writer (21). Often in Koch, suspension through diversion marks the comic nature of many of his poems. The passage of the poem is marked by digressions from the main subject or theme of the poem. Diversion and suspension are essential components to understanding Koch's postmodern comedy because within his poems, this diversion is executed to divert the poet himself rather than the reader such that the poet becomes the butt of his own jokes and causes the reader to laugh at *him* when he makes his digressions, realizes it, and gets back on the trail of the poem.

In this capacity, the poet enters into conversation with the reader, and the comic text *is* itself the conversation rather than merely the product of the discourse. As has been noted before, "The Art of Poetry" wanders from topic to topic throughout the poem, giving precedence to few and dominance to none; however, it also engages directly in

conversation with readers. The poem is an instructional poem and concerns itself with giving good advice to the aspiring poet—Koch was, after all a professor of poetry at Columbia and taught poets as various as David Shapiro and David Lehman—but it does so in a conversational tone. Koch does not concern himself with strict formal conventions; as can be seen in my quoted examples, line length varies considerably and is far from uniform. His word choice and selection of metaphors for the poem can best be described as efficient rather than weighty—what word and what image can he use to get his point across most clearly and humorously without being worrying about melodramatically bemoaning about the fallen state of humankind in the atomic age. His use of the sheep dog metaphor and his tender description of it as "Wagging and waiting to welcome one into the corner / To be petted and sent forth to fetch a narrative bone" is both humorous and conversational. The epic, for Koch, is not a great white whale that can never be contained; rather the epic is a dog that the poet can approach, love, and play with to the endless enjoyment of the poem.

The pseudo-efficiency Koch employs in writing his poem also allows him to engage in diverting the reader and suspending his or her progress through the poem. The metaphor of the sheep dog causes the reader to pause and consider the metaphor's spatial relationship to the epic and to the poem as a whole; as he suspends the reader's project and diverts the reader's attention, Koch is able to incorporate and add more metaphor and more subjects into the poem, allowing him to suggest lyric poems are like "flowers / Crannied in the Great Wall of China" and "adjust to us like a butterfly, then epically eludes our grasp" (262). Within these diversions, Koch slips in a pun on the word "epic," suggesting lyrics remain remarkably, or even heroically, outside of our ability to

comprehend its convoluted and self-aggrandizing tone and theme. In this way, and in this way only, would it be proper to say that Koch's comedy, as postmodern, turns from closure and tradition—namely, through this kind of diversionary relaxation and excess/inclusivity of content, ideas, and breaking down any notion of a fourth wall between reader and poet. Talking about poetic drama, Koch most directly addresses the reader when saying, "To write drama / One must conceive of an answerer to what one says, as I am now conceiving of you" (263). By envisioning of the reader as a participant in the conversation—albeit one-sided—Koch invites the reader to reflect, react, and test the propositions set forth by the poet, further indicating Koch's positions his subjectivity as one voice among many in an act of subtle self-criticism.

"Self-criticism" (28) becomes, in the context of postmodern comedy, an actual act of expression. Self-criticism manifests itself not only within the digressions found within comic works but also within a self-reflexive comedy concerned with dis-integration of poetical forms. Rather than be contradictory to a poetics of excess/inclusivity and assemblage-construction, this dis-integration within postmodern comedy—specifically the type of comedy that is Koch's—retains all of the deconstructed forms and reassembles them in new ways that, as Fleiger suggests, exposes all possible versions of meaning, while at the same time demonstrating the failure of the project to do as promised (51). Developing this coupling of exposure with failure further, Fleiger suggests the comic hinges upon two major elements. The first element is that the comic transgresses boundaries/limits only to reinforce those limits again so that they may be transgressed again; the second element is that the comic relies on contrasts and discontinuities that have no lasting consequences, for they are merely repeated as long as

the work lasts in print or performance (45, 49). This notion of repetition is what Fleiger calls "comic post-ponement" (49), and for the comic to succeed it must depend on maintained discontinuity, knowing however, that the project will ultimately, through exposure, fail, though the written work remains. Koch's digressions serve to move back towards the main point of the poem in order to show that the digressions have no permanent bearing on the poem; however, Koch allows more metaphors and more topical digressions and postponements into the poem. His project to establish a coherent poetic, ultimately fails because of his wanderings and constant self-critical attitudes toward his own positions. Additionally, Koch's jabs at lyric poetry are light-hearted and do not attempt to cause any rifts between the epic and the lyrics. In fact, Koch reintegrates the lyric back into his compositional poetic: "The lyric is a necessity too, / Or in the interstices of your epic poem" (262). The lyrics is not an unusuable form; rather is it a necessary poetic expression, but it is not the only acceptable form for use by the budding poet.

Koch's comedy exemplifies Fleiger's idea of dis-integration, but rather than turn the breakdown of social/poetical forms into some kind of cynical joke ("Fresh Air" excepted), Koch's projects concern themselves with re-assembling the pieces broken apart. "The Art of Poetry" has as its main theme the establishment of a unified but not singular poetic; his poetic is a poetics of reintegrated fragmentation, which is a direct expression of his postmodern inclusivity and excess.[14] Further, however, Koch's comedy,

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[14] As has been shown in Chapter 2, *When the Sun Tries to Go On* is one of the most extreme examples in Koch's oeuvre of this kind of fragmentary unification. Part of his

in addition to utilizing assemblage techniques coupled with misapprehension and, often, intentional misunderstandings centers around the self-effacement of the poet. That Koch's comedy is self-reflective cannot be put in question. What needs to be spoken of regarding the self-reflective/effacing nature of Koch's poetry is the comic function of that practice, which is exemplified most readily in some of his long "instructional" poems. Koch's project in these poems (i.e. "The Art of Poetry," "The Art of Love," "The Problem of Anxiety," "Some General Instructions," etc.) is to provide some sort of definitive statement about how do to things, a manifesto/statement on art/life/etc., but that project is quickly undermined by Koch himself as in these lines from "The Art of Poetry":

> And Sophocles wrote poetry until he was a hundred and one,
> Or a hundred, anyway, and drank wine and danced all night,
> But he was an Ancient Greek and so may not help us here. On
> The other hand, he may. (*Collected Poems* 254)

Immediately, Koch posits a claim and undermines it in a quick turn of phrase that illustrates both the digressive/divertive practice and other major components of Koch's postmodern comedy. With an understanding that all of the elements that make up Koch's exemplary vein of postmodern comedy are all networked together, it is easy to see how diversion enables *and* contains within itself subversion of the reader's expectations for the poem. Additionally, the diversion contains within itself the conversational aspect (usually manifested in the tone of Koch's poems) of the poem, generated between the

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purpose in that poem is to present a painterly poem, a poem that attempts to do in words what the Abstract Expressionists did with paint and canvas.

poet and the reader; this conversation enables Koch to lodge the comic in the reader, which is just to say that the comic is found between the joke/poem and the laughter from the laugher. Koch turning himself—or his narrative voice—into the butt of the joke, the object of the comic allows readers to both situate themselves in the superior position (returning to the superiority theory of the comic) and laugh at the fallen, flawed object.

Within the layering of diversion—that is contains, enables, is enabled by, and is supplemented by subversion, diversion, conversation, and substitution—it becomes easy to see how Koch's poetry is distinctly postmodern in the terms I have set forth here. That diversion (indeed, all of the elements constituting Koch's comedy) is so layered speaks to the excess/inclusivity of the poetic project. Koch allows everything into his poems, from the most quotidian to the most rare; as in "The Art of Poetry," Sophocles is followed shortly after by peroxide, hair transplants, marijuana, and "kiss-me-I'm-poetical junk". Additionally, this diversion is marked by a relaxation of style, content, and form. Many of his poems continue for hundreds of lines and the lines sprawl across the page in exceptionally long sentences only sometimes punctuated with commas (rather than periods). However, behind all of this diversion, all of this excess, this subversion, lies a deeply serious artistic project concerned with expressing and communicating pleasure while at the same time inviting the reader to enjoy and take pleasure in the reading and experience of Koch's poetry as it is being written before the reader's eyes. This serious project, though, should not be confused with the dreadful, depressive solemnity of the Academy Koch so strove against. As Koch reminds his readers in "The Art of Poetry": "Remember your obligation is to write / And, in writing, to be serious without being solemn, fresh without being cold," and "To be inclusive without being asinine" (260).

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Koch's diversionary project of inclusivity does not merely end with his exaltation of the epic as what the mid-century United States most needed in poetry. Chinitz, in his article "Arm the Paper Arm: Kenneth Koch's Postmodern Comedy," has argued that Koch's inclusivity should be attributed to Koch's entirely embodied commitment to a postmodern poetic expression. In addition to subverting the modernist practice of composing poetry and attacking the aesthetic of institutionalized modernism, as outlined above, Chinitz argues that Koch's comedy builds off of his "intimacy with mass culture" and his "general program of defamiliarization" (312, 313), which Koch accomplishes through the practices of diversion, subversion, and the resuscitation of the poetic practices worn out by the academy.

Chinitz rightly lodges Koch's diversionary aesthetic in the "surreal setting" (313) and imagined conversations about himself of "On the Great Atlantic Rainway" in which Koch's friends say of him, "And yet he drives between the two" (*Collected Poems* 73). Chinitz calls this expression Koch's "nascent postmodern inclusiveness, this openness to all phases and levels of culture," which means "never to get stuck in place, ever to change" and that poetry, for Koch, "should be unrestrictedly omnivorous" (314-315). Rather than ask what can or should go into a poem, Koch asks, "How can this be made to fit?" The answer, as above from "On the Great Atlantic Rainway," is "formulalessness" or "the modern idea of fittingness" (*Collected Poems* 73), which Chinitz argues is "not merely an aesthetic imperative: it is largely the *substance* of poetry (321).

This omnivorous formulalessness in Koch throws together everything from Ariosto to Williams to Paul Valéry and places them in direct contact with popular culture,

with allusions to Popeye (to whom Athena gave “a Butterfinger full of stars” (403) in Koch’s “Days and Nights”) baseball and English coronations. The humor in this kind of interaction originates with the readers’ knowledge of pop culture and the ways that both pop culture and institutionalized modernism are, respectively, twisted and elevated into art or brought down to be nothing more than another facet of culture at large no more important that the other. Indeed, the epic quality of Koch’s inclusivity, his interaction with popular culture, and his technique of revivification through defamiliarization can be most clearly seen in his own epic *Ko, or A Season on Earth*.

This poem ostensibly tells the story of a young Japanese pitcher named Ko, who comes to the United States to play for the Dodgers in Tampa. However, the poem, written in the ottava rima of *Don Juan* and *Orlando Furioso*, diverts itself from the “main” plot within a few stanzas. Koch, already having diverted his narrative from Ko in Japan to the Dodgers in Tampa and from the Dodgers to the various attendees at Amaranth the First’s coronation in England—including a man named Huddel, another named Andrews, his beau Doris, and Amaranth himself—then turns his narrative to focus on Andrews and Doris, who awake to discover their house and street have somehow been transplanted to a floating barge. Shortly after, Koch diverts the plot again:

> While their big barge is moving down the Thames,
>
> Let’s move to Indianapolis, where the Speedway
>
> Is filled with customers, who with ahems
>
> And haws are waiting for the sight they need way
>
> Down upon the speedway and with stems
>
> Of pencils write their choices down with greed. Way

Past the starting gate a little car

Is finally admitted ‘neath the bar. (*On the Edge* 85)

Diversion from the main plot to multiple subplots involving coronations and gambling at the Speedway illustrate Koch’s commitment to comic omnivorousness by juxtaposing these plots all together in the same poem without formal transitions. He debunks the formal conventions of writing epics and poetry with forms, and the result is, as Chinitz argues, “to celebrate the *breakdown* of constraint and convention and the consequent deliverance into liberty” (323).

Liberty in and from form results in Koch’s ability to wander narratively seemingly without form while at the same time writing with a highly strict and regulated form. Within the embrasure of regimented meter and rhyme, Koch engages in postmodern dissolution of form to defamiliarize comically for the reader ottava rima and the epic. Chinitz attributes this comic element to a “distinctively postmodern response to the world from which it issues,” elaborating that this world is one in which “almost anything one might wish to express has already been reduced to a cliché” (317) like the rose as an image of romantic love, or the epic as a narrative poem.

Rather than accept the death of these forms, Koch seeks to revivify them through comedy; observing the end rhymes of the stanza above, it becomes clear how Koch’s comedy works in addition to diverting readers to always keep them on their toes in the poem, never knowing quite what to expect from the poem. Koch foregrounds in his stanzas what Chinitz calls the “exigencies of rhyme,” which Chinitz suggests would be off-limits to the poet who is concerned with the “elementary principle[s] of formal craft” (322). However, as has been shown, Koch is anything but concerned with formal craft.

By choosing to make a series of absurd rhymes on "Thames" and "Speedway" suggest part of Koch's project of diversion and revivification of the epic form. The rhymes "need way" and "greed. Way" both are humorous in that readers can easily see that these rhymes are clever at the same time as they are ridiculous. These rhymes break down the high aesthetic conception of form as a more rigid method of poetic expression and enable readers to laugh at Koch's use of the form for pleasure and humor, which suggests to readers that ottava rima can make room for play in the postmodern conception of epic poetry.

The rhyme even goes so far as to force the plot into diversion. Chinitz notices that Koch's "rhymes are deliberately outrageous, and when he finds himself stuck for a rhyme word, the contortions he has to go through to find one actually seize control of the plot" (322). In the example quoted above, the narrative shifts from the Thames to the Speedway, and for Koch to find rhyming words, he has to shift the direction of the narrative: race attendees turn from waiting to see who will win to gambling on it, and from there the narrative turns to a little yellow car that has a late entrance to the race and whose driver will end up burning down the entire Speedway. These contortions to find rhyme force the narrative to follow the rhyme to the point that, as Chinitz points out, "the story of Ko himself is all but scuffed out" (322).

Regardless, Koch's postmodern comic diversion evidences the play with surfaces Koch uses to divert the reader and displace the ostensible main subject of the poem. What Koch does in *Ko* is attempt to capture the broad expanse of experience; he constructs a world that believes in its own existence because it is populated by characters who live an move within the world; however, *Ko* never brings is central plot to any form of real

conclusion. I would suggest, echoing Chinitz, that *Ko*'s diversions "turn out to be not merely distractions but its real content" and that the main plot in *Ko* has "no more claim to centrality than any of its ostensible side-lines" (322). Chinitz's claim suggests that Koch's strategy is to subvert the formal epic elements of the poem, eliminating a highly rigorous hierarchy and replacing it with a "mischievous anarchy" (323). *Ko*, like many of the poems previously discussed, expounds the lack of a center in the poem to be held up for contemplation; there is no relegation in Koch's comedy of certain elements to the background and others to the foreground. In *Ko*, Koch engages in a poetic leveling that treats everything from his characters, numerous digressions into pop culture, and even the stanzaic structure of the poem equally. This lack of center is no better seen in the poem than the final stanza, which surveys the actions the characters are engaged in at the time the poet decides to stop writing about them and move onto something else. Like the beginning of the poem, and according to the conventions of writing epic poetry,[15] the final stanza ends *in media res*:[16]

> And Amaranth sails for Asia. Meanwhile Ko
>
> Is pitching, pitching, pitching and he's caught
>
> By Sanford Yu, a rookie. In Athens Do-
>
> Ris climbs the Acropolis steps and, having bought
>
> A ticket, enters it. And meanwhile Jo-

---

[15] Byron, in stanzas VI and VII of *Don Juan*, undermines his own project in the same way by declaiming that "Most epics plunge 'in media res'" but that that is not his method, which is "to begin with the beginning" (1-2).

[16] Although I have not counted, the most popular word in the poem appears to be "meanwhile" along with the conjunction "and."

Seph Dah comes up on deck and bows. “It’s hot,”

Says Amaranth; “don’t bother bowing, please.”

Huddel, meanwhile, is flaking at the knees… (*On the Edge* 181)

Beyond “meanwhile” appearing three times in this stanza alone, Koch ends the entire poem in a gesture of complete deferral and postponement. The ellipses give the sense that more is to come from Koch; however, no more ever does. Koch leaves readers in puzzlement, and they are only able to laugh at the oddity of Koch’s bizarre wanderings that give them zero closure on the play of surfaces they have just experienced. The comedy in this poem culminates in what Chinitz calls Koch’s “homage to independence, to playfulness, to release from limitation, coercion, and external control” (322). In other words, Koch’s comedy in *Ko*, as in the majority of his poems throughout his career, is concerned with play and joy, reveling in the experiences the poet notices in the process of writing the poem. Even in his later retrospective poems, like *Seasons on Earth* (1987), “The Boiling Water,” “A Memoir,” and *New Addresses*, Koch retained the joy and play with subversion, displacement, fragmentation, fluidity, and leveling of his earlier poems like “Fresh Air” and *Ko*.

Chinitz rightly argues that in addition to maintaining this exuberance and play throughout his career, a seriousness always underpinned Koch’s comedic project. As Chinitz understands and discusses seriousness—as have I in my discussions—seriousness is not to be equated with solemnity and especially not the cheap, self-aggrandizing, pompous solemnity of the kind of poets who had “produced a pedantic art which sought to push the limits of Eliotic or Audenesque modernism to the furthest extremes of delicately cultivated nuance” (311). Rather, Koch understood that much more than death

and dread is serious; as in "The Boiling Water" Koch meditates not only on the bee who has "taken his life / Merely to sting" but also on the fly whose serious moment is "when its wings / Are moving" and on the match "when it bursts into flame / And is all alone, living, in that instant, that beautiful second for which it was made" (332, 333). Koch does not disparage the seriousness of death but expands what can be serious, and, as Chinitz suggests, Koch's postmodern comedy "finds seriousness constantly in unexpected objects and exhibits it in ways that enliven but do not trivialize it" (324).

Koch's meditation on the match asks readers to contemplate this small things we take for granted and to consider how much went into the making of it so that it could burn for an instant—the instant for which it was made—and burn out to be thrown away. Certainly Koch's poem implies that if the match could feel and communicate those feelings, it would feel extreme joy at being able to burn and to be of service, to do what it was made to do. Additionally, "The Boiling Water" ends not with an image of self-preservative death but with a tender image of the small and insignificant fly whose most serious moment is "when it lifts its little wings" (334).

The exuberance of Koch's earlier poetry has not vanished in this later poem; rather it is focused more intently at the unexpected objects of everyday life that are passed over by other poets or by those who do not take the time to consider the importance of certain moments and certain objects—the boiling water enables human relationship to circle around it because water boiling creates the potentiality for tea or coffee and tear or coffee creates the possibility for conversation with friends or spouses or new acquaintances. In his later poetry, Koch's raucous, biting humor and rampant

experimentation become more subtle and reflect an attitude reminiscent of a chuckle at the zany, rambunctious wanderings of his youth.

CHAPTER IV
KENNETH KOCH'S MATURING COMIC ARC

Koch's postmodern poems, as outlined above, employ a remarkable range of techniques to create comic effects. From diversion, satire, and subversion to joy, displacement, and self-reflexivity, Koch's poetry innovated form and content, suggesting new relationships between subjects both traditionally poetic and non-traditionally poetic and shifting the focus of poetry from solemn introspection to an expansive social poetic that finds the serious moments in life outside of the self. His comedy brings to the fore the vagaries of everyday life, the social aspects of life that become comic under inspection and in retrospect. Koch, in his own way, develops an expanding poetics of the everyday from the perspective of the energetic comic poet who wishes to communicate honestly the constant human negotiation between joy and sorrow.

This comic force, rather than remaining static and becoming tired and drab, developed considerably over the course of Koch's long career. His early poetry shows Koch as an experimental poet attempting to do with language what had never been done before. The poems of this period including the seemingly disjointed world of *When the Sun Tries to Go On*, the poems in *Sun Out*, and *Thank You and Other Poems*, and his collaborative work Ashbery, published in the New York School's journal *Locus Solus* and, unfortunately, no longer widely circulated.[17]

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[17] The title of this journal is taken from surrealist writer Raymond Roussel's novel *Locus Solus*. The collaborations in this journal were often written with various restrictions or rules set for each line. For example, in "Gottlieb's Rainbow" each line "contains the words *bonus* and *bumper*, a color, a season, and the name of a philosopher" (Lehman 80).

In addition to their insistence on horizontal relationality—where readers must consider how, for example, Timon of Athens must relate to cheese and how both must relate to Major 'Blotter'—the poem's from early in Koch's career are marked by a biting sarcasm, parody and pastiche. Such is the case in poems I have already discussed, like "Fresh Air" and "Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams." Although the types of comedy represented by these two poems were prominent in Koch's early poems, biting satire and loving pastiche were not techniques he would resort to as frequently later in his career; the satire became toned and controlled and the pastiche appeared only occasionally. Rather, he became committed to a comic subversion of "reality" that in many ways spoke to his desire to invent a new poetry and present the world and the experiences within it as honestly as possible. Spurr argues that Koch sought out authenticity in a poetry "leaping forth from the radical astonishment that life is here and that we are in it" (345). It is this awareness that we are living that makes Koch's poetry deceptively serious. The authentic language of the poet is an affirmation of life and our awareness of it. Spurr believes that Koch attempts to get at this sublime authenticity by way of the "transformation and comic distortion" of experience (345).

The purpose of this comic distortion is twofold. One is Koch's attempt to see the things of the human experience in a new light, to have the same energy as the namer but cede that Adamic responsibility in favor of an exuberant Whitmanesque, catalogic assimilation of all stimuli equally. The second purpose of comic distortion is to become a kind of truth-telling in the highest ironic form, which in Koch's poetry presents itself as what Spurr calls "a perfect democracy of stimuli: anything, regarded in the light of its own being" (348). This "democracy of stimuli" suggests that Koch's desire is to present

the world as he perceives it from an authentic yet subjective speaker-position. His project is not to speak to the elite or from the elite position but to place the elite alongside the odd and the surreal. His comic distortion in poems like “The Circus” (I)[18] makes possible this leveling of material for the poem by attempting to supplant and alter the present reality with something much more surreal, like giving a rabbit a machine gun in a poem. Koch writes,

> Minnie the Rabbit fingered her machine gun.
>
> The bright day was golden.
>
> She aimed the immense pine needle at the foxes
>
> Thinking Now they will never hurt my tribe any more. (*Collected Poems* 98)

In this reality Koch has presented, the rabbit carries a machine gun that metamorphoses into a pine needle, and this rabbit is capable of what appears to be rational thought. Reporting these events matter-of-factly, Koch distances himself from the events in the poem in order to show as objectively as an interested narrator can the oddness of this scenario. He make no interpretive moves in the poem, and his tone seeks to present a weird reality with distant expository writing. The humor here works to displace the reality people are used to, where rabbits do not think or carry machine-gun-pine-needles and causes it to function according to a kind of logic in which rabbits can defend themselves from foxes but still be subject to death at the hands of a man and be laid up in

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[18] The numbering of the poem is not native to Koch’s title. He wrote two poems entitled “The Circus,” the second purportedly dealing with the writing of the first. Both will be discussed in this chapter, so to facilitate discussion and prevent confusion, the first poem published is numbered throughout as (I) and the second, later poem as (II). (I) was published in 1962; (II) was published in 1975.

a trap for the dogs to find. His presentation of Minnie the Rabbit is funny simply because it is odd; this oddity is one of Koch's early poetic principles. The humor here is dark and biting but not satirical (as it is in "Fresh Air") and rather absurd.

Koch's absurd distortion of reality in "The Circus" (I) allows him to break the narrative into twelve fragments, some of which seem to be less related to each other than the rest. The events that transpire in this poem—a rabbit with a machine gun, an elephant man who is neither man nor elephant—could never occur outside of the poem, and to the reader, this absurdity feels funny. Further, this fragmentation allows Koch the narrator to function as a kaleidoscope through which readers can see the non-sense of the poem, especially in lines like "she was young and pretty, blonde / With bright eyes, and she spoke with her mouth open when she sneezed" (97). The obvious absurdity in these lines would cause a careful reader to pause and consider how one could speak while sneezing with his or her mouth open. An impossibility, this description is humorous precisely because it cannot exist in the world exterior to the poem. The non-sense of speaking with one's mouth open while sneezing sounds almost like a folk proverb and is followed by long, repetitive run-on sentences and heavily enjambed lines:

> And she said that this circus might leave—and red posters
> Stuck to the outside of the wagon, it was beginning to
> Rain—she said might leave but not her heart would ever leave
> Nor that town but just any one where they had been, risking their lives,
> And that each place they were should be celebrated with blue rosemary
> In a patch, in the town. (97)

By running together the ideas presented in these lines, Koch borders on confusing the reader with what he has just said but asks readers to consider the relationship of these ideas to each other. It is comic to hear the breathless wonderings of a “Sentimental / Blonde” (97) as when she slams together her desire to never leave and her desire to never leave her heart in this town. The third line quoted above trips up readers upon first reading, and after closer inspection, readers realize that “her heart” works doubly in the line to fit with the first half (“she said might leave but not her heart”) and also with the second half (“not her heart would ever leave”) creating a comic ambiguity that Koch does not take the time to resolve.

Further linguistic ambiguities emerge when Koch introduces readers to the arrival of the circus in town. After Minnie is seen with her machine gun that could be a pine needle, Koch tells how the train stopped for the night in Rosebud, Nebraska, saying that “It was after dinner it was after bedtime it was after nausea it was / After lunchroom” (98). The comic turn in this scene surprises readers with the suddenness of a place juxtaposed with times and feelings. That these lines are run together is no surprise, however. Koch reveals in the lack of punctuation and unexpected turn of phrase the moods of the different cars in the circus. This scene consists of six lines, after which Koch quickly moves on, calling the train an “ungodly procession” moving down a “purple highway” and tells that the circus arrived in pomposity:

> With what pomp and ceremony the circus arrived orange and red in the dawn!
>
> It was exhausted, cars and wagons, and it lay down and leaped
>
> Forward a little bit, like a fox. Minnie the Rabbit shot a little woolen bullet at it,

> And just then the elephant man came to his doorway in the sunlight and stood
> still. (*Collected Poems* 98)

The train is distorted into an exhausted creature that lies down and then leaps forward like a fox; both comparisons are equally absurd outside the realm of the poem and cause the reader to laugh; however, within the world of the poem, these comparisons reveal what Koch would have perceived as a more authentic and honest description of a train than any elitist poetic description could give. Koch's description is simple: the hissing of the train once it is stopped at the station and the venting of smoke give the sense of tiredness and exhaustion, and presumably the fox would crouch and scuttle forward only to leap at the last instant onto its prey, like the train, before coming to rest. When Minnie appears again in the poem, she sees that the circus train is like a fox and must shoot a bullet at it in order to protect her tribe; this non-sense connection further distorts the world of the poem but is consistent with the odd world created by Koch. Lastly, with an easy ambiguity, the reader is left wondering if the elephant man is a circus freak suffering from physical deformities or if he is the man who leads, trains, feeds, and performs with the elephants. For all the reader knows, he could be something else entirely. The strangeness in these moments reveals Koch's concern with sometimes befuddling oddity in his early poems.[19]

Koch juxtaposes this comic strangeness with seemingly serious moments that hold the reader in tension. In section eight of the poem, Aileen, the trapeze artist, "has

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[19] Another example of this comic oddity is The Strangler from "Fresh Air," whose "ear is alert for the name of Orpheus, / Cuchulain, Gawain, and Odysseus" and who "annihilate[s] the students of myth" by strangling these "several bad poets" (*Collected Poems* 124-5).

fallen into the dust and dirt" (99) and the spectators believe that she is dead; however, Koch relieves this tension by bringing Aileen back to life, but the happy note is soured by the doctor's uncertainty about whether or not Aileen will ever be able to perform on the trapeze. The tone in the poem shifts here to a less fragmented narrative to a more serious consideration of mortality. Amidst vivid descriptions of characters like the "sky-blue lion tamer" and the "red giraffe manager" (99), an unidentified voice queries,

> What is death in the circus? That depends on if it is spring.
> Then if the elephants are there, *mon père*, we are not completely lost.
> Oh the sweet strong odor of beasts which laughs at decay!
> Decay! decay! We are like the elements in a kaleidscope,
> But such passions we feel! bigger than beaches and
> Rustier than harpoons. (*Collected Poems* 99-100)

For Aileen, who flies and flips across the vastness of space between trapezes, not to be able to do so anymore is a serious thing. It is tantamount to not being able to do what one is made to do. Koch posits this as a kind of death juxtaposed against a clever, albeit strange, image of pachyderms laughing, which is funny enough by itself. Even more humorous is the suggestion that they laugh at decay, a concept of which perhaps only humans are cognizant. However, what could have become a moment of solemn contemplation on the character's own death is immediately undermined after the question, "What is death in the circus?" is asked. The asker of the question answers him- or herself with "That depends on if it is spring." The comic subversion of these lines relieves the weight of the moment but does not erase any consideration of the seriousness

of death. The question lingers even after the poem has moved on to the potential salvific nature of the elephants.

Following these lines, the question of death in or at a circus continues with a rather gruesome description of the death of machine-gun-wielding Minnie the Rabbit, which is presented as a kind of pagan sacrificial ritual committed by laughing cultists with blood and pleasure in the brutality of the act:

> Minnie the Rabbit felt the blood leaving her little body
>
> As she lay in the snow, orange and red and white,
>
> A beautiful design. The dog laughs, his tongue hangs out, he looks at the sky.
>
> It is white. The master comes. He laughs. He picks up Minnie the Rabbit
>
> And ties her to a pine tree bough, and leaves. (100)

This scene is bizarre in its placement in a poem that begins reveling with humor about this circus and generates a scoffing reaction at first. However, the comedy in this scene is hidden beneath the grotesque seriousness of the death of Minnie the Rabbit. The dog and the man laugh at the death of this small creature, and though the reader may be somewhat appalled (though how much sentimental attachment one could have to a rabbit mentioned three times in the poem is up for question), on in the world of the poem, this appears to be a hilarious event. In this moment, Koch's biting satire resurges when he has his characters laugh at the bloody death of Minnie. Clearly, death is something to be taken seriously; however, here, as in other poems Koch eschews the idea that death is the only thing worth writing poetry about since there are other subjects worthy of poetry. The laughter at death is his darkly comic jab at the seriousness of death. Even still, this moment has its apparent seriousness, a tone that continues for the remainder of the poem,

which ends with an image of peace: "The soft wind of summer blew in the light green trees" (100). It is as if with this image, Koch suggests that the reader can now rest in the gentleness of the soft summer breeze and make sense of the extraordinary events that precede it the concluding moment of meditation.

At times, especially in Koch's early poetry, it is hard to tell where the joking stops and the serious begins. As has been outlined above, Koch's seriousness is deceptive; it hides beneath the comic exuberance of the poem. Seriousness, as Koch has written in "The Art of Poetry" should not be confused with solemnity. For Koch, serious means both care and concern for his artistic project and an authentic introspection that presents life in all of it strangeness. Koch's poetry begins to make a turn toward this kind of seriousness, maturing in a way as Koch matured—though he did not grow solemn—from the exuberant play of his early poems. This growing maturity is especially evident in his volume *The Art of Love*, particularly in the opening poem of the volume.

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"The Circus" (II) spotlights tendencies seen in only a few of Koch's earlier poems. In this poem, the poet attempts to remember who he was when he wrote "The Circus" (I), including what he was doing and where he was living at the time. Mark Halliday refers to this retrospective poem as elegiac, which he defines as "lingering over the loss of what was good in the past" (361). While there *are* some elements of regret in "The Circus" (II), the poem functions less as an elegy and more as a light, comic reflection on Koch's younger days as he grows older.

Any quality of the elegiac in "The Circus" (II) is supplanted by Koch's efforts to endow the past with a quality of comic immediacy tempered by the limits of memory. In

this sense, Koch's purpose in the poem is to explore what his memory is and how remembering significant events in the past become humorous and slippery, rather than the past being something to be mourned. For Koch, reflection is an acceptable poetic as long as it does not consume the poet's living in the present. He says,

> Sometimes I feel I am actually the person
> Who did this, who wrote that, including that poem The Circus
> But sometimes on the other hand I don't.
> There are so many factors engaging our attention!
> …So it seems strange I found time to write The Circus
> And even spent two evenings on it, and that I have also the time
> To remember that I did it, and remember you and me then, and write this poem
> about it (*Collected Poems* 241-242)

The humor in these lines—brought about by the quick reversals and run-on sentences—prevents a note of mourning-sadness from over-taking it, though the possibility of nostalgia creeping in remains distinct. Koch undermines his project in these lines, a first in his career, when he reverses his train of thought in line three as quoted above. This undermining creates uncertainty in the poem, which is a step away from his earlier biting confidence about his own poetic. Additionally, this backing away comes in that Koch does not focus on establishing a poetic[20] but rather on his own personal memory. Koch, in a sincere tone yet through a subversion of formal compositional principles, admits that at fifty years-old he, too, has trouble remembering the circumstances that allowed him to

[20] Of course, it could be argued that "Fresh Air" did not actually seek to establish a poetic but merely to make fun of the prevailing principles of poetic production at the time.

write what he calls, in a comic twist, “the best / Maybe not by far the best Geography was also wonderful / And the Airplane Betty poems (inspired by you) but The Circus was the best” (241).

The run-on train of thought brings to the fore the light way through which Koch treats the difficulty with remembering exactly what has happened over a decade ago; the run-on sentences also, through the playful persistence Koch writes with, show the humor with which Koch contemplates which of his poems from his earlier work was the best. This trivial matter is in his oeuvre the meat of his poetry: rather than make any large cultural claims as if he were on the outside looking in, Koch instead looks back from his own subjective position, self-reflectively laughing at himself and inviting readers to share that laughter and that reflection.

This entirely personal looking back makes references to personal friends whom readers would not have personally known: “So I’m mentioning them maybe this will bring them back to me / Not them perhaps but what I felt about them / John Ashbery Jane Freilicher Larry Rivers Frank O’Hara.” (243). Rather than expostulate on the deep, sorrowful meaning behind this nostalgia, Koch invokes his friends’ names for personal reasons and allows readers to see this personal moment. Readers are asked to consider Koch’s deep connections to his friends and what he felt about them both now and when he was writing “The Circus” (I). This glimpse serves as a more effective way to communicate feelings of nostalgia to readers in such a way that seems to be more honest than some self-bemoaning poem about death and loss. His memory here is spatial, concerned with people and places and how Koch felt and feels about them rather than with Koch venting his emotions onto the page. The simplicity of his telling about his past

is encapsulated in this line: “Their names alone bring tears to my eyes” (243). He does not develop this sentiment any further but moves quickly to addressing readers about the “paradox” of “leaving it,” the past, behind and moving forward so that readers can continue living and recall the past again at a later date after they have achieved some distance from it (243).

Beyond this reflection on the conclusion of his friends into his poems now that he is fifty, Koch further invites the reader to go back with him to the night in which he wrote “The Circus” (I) and raises concerns that are common to the human experience in attempt to show himself as an aging man reflecting lightly on the prospects of his growing older. His reflections are on his mortality, his own future both personally and artistically, and whether or not he has been a successful artist in his career so far. He presents himself not as a glorious tragic poet or critic with pompous certainty that what he has done is important to readers and to culture but as a humble man living everyday experience with his readers. When Koch does this, his tone is sincere, but it is also light, as evidenced by the running together of ideas and lines in the first lines of “The Circus” (II):

> I remember when I wrote The Circus
>
> I was living in Paris, or rather we were living in Paris
>
> Janice, Frank was alive, the Whitney Museum
>
> Was still on 8th Street, or was it still something else?
>
> Fernand Léger lived in our building
>
> Well it wasn’t really our building it was the building we lived in
>
> Next to a Grand Guignol troupe who made a lot of noise
>
> So that one day I yelled through a hole in the wall

Of our apartment I don’t know why there was a hole there

Shut up! And the voice came back to me saying something

I don’t know what. (241)

While his turn of phrase and attention to the usage of language (in the line about “our building”) brings out the humor in the run-on sentence and the oddity of the possessive idiom “our building” and the reader chuckles at the wit, his revision of his own language also brings to the foreground the problem of memory and remembering correctly. This is a problem for which he had no answer even at the end of his career, when poems like “To My Old Age” and “A Memoir” carry on the difficulty of remembering the person one was when one wrote the poem or loved the woman who meant so much to the poet in the past.

Here, Koch taps into not only the immediacy of the past as he tries to recall memories of memories, revising and rereading what has already occurred and bringing those events into the forefront of his mind; he also touches upon the flux in which his self always lives. One might call it the eternality of change or (to borrow a line from Schuyler’s “The Crystal Lithium”) the unchanging change. The present self is pressed upon by sense experience and forced to confront those experiences and react to them based upon predilections and events of the past as well as desires and hopes for the future. A person must decide, “What will satisfy me? What will make me happiest?” Koch further extends this questioning to his own abilities and even the time of the year. By expressing doubt about his abilities and the time of the year, Koch expresses a significant technique of his comic that would mark his later poetry until his death. His undermining of his own self and project highlights the idea that the self is almost always

in motion through time; it also reveals the Koch does not take too seriously the prospects of growing older:

> You were back in the apartment what a dump we actually liked it
>
> I think with your hair and your writing and the pans
>
> Moving strummingly about the kitchen and I wrote The Circus
>
> It was a summer night no it was an autumn one summer when
>
> I remember it but actually no autumn that black dusk toward the post office (241)

The severe enjambment in these lines only serves to emphasize the lack of seriousness with which Koch understands the difficulty of memory; in other words, recalling the past is hard work but it is not so hard that one needs to despair about it. Rather Koch tries to puzzle it out and wavers back and forth in indeterminacy, which suggests that the run-on sentences and lack of punctuation are the poems attempt to unify form and content. That this attempt does not result in a coherent, solitary answer to when exactly Koch wrote "The Circus" (I) indicates both Koch's lack of concern for formal unity in the poem and his playful persistence in not letting his inability to concretely recall the past plunge him into the depths of despair about death.

Koch continued to rely on playful persistence about his poetic subjects throughout the middle period of his career and became more self-reflexive with his narrative voice and humor in his later poems, especially in "Days and Nights," the title poem of his 1982 collection, *Days and Nights*. The poem spans hundreds of lines and is separated into with titles as mysterious as "The Stones of Time" and as supposedly serious as "The Invention of Poetry.' Koch builds the humor in this poem through a matter-of-fact tone and delivery, which communicates a sincerity of sentiment about his subject; however, this

sincerity is about subjects entirely ridiculous as the need for inventing poetry. Koch writes,

> It came to me that all this time
>
> There had been no real poetry and that it needed to be invented.
>
> Some recommended discovering
>
> What was already there. Others,
>
> Taking a view from further up the hill (remnant
>
> Of old poetry), said just go and start wherever you are (400).

Of course, this claim that no "real poetry" has existed since the moment Koch realized that it needed to be invented is absurd. However, Koch's earnest sincerity in the lines about this subject cause readers to laugh at the incongruity of the statement; there has been poetry and it has not needed inventing. Even so, Koch's earnestness suggests his humor masks a serious consideration about the state of poetry in Koch's time when he says, "When I said to F, Why do you write poems? / He said, Look at most of the poems / That have already been written!" (400). Poetry of the kind Koch envisages, the kind that does not take itself too seriously and does not attempt to pompous claim some unquestionable "truth" about contemporary existence, really had not been invented until the New York School and others challenged the reigning New Critical poetic. The humor, here, as in many of Koch's poems, it balanced by the serious undertones of the poetic subject; however, at the same time that the poem has a serious treatment of its subject, the seriousness cannot be taken too seriously, since the claim Koch makes still remains somewhat ridiculous.

Further comic elements in the poem reflect the subtle way Koch maintains some of his earlier techniques of composition even in his later poems. He nods to his early experiments with language contrasting the kind of poetry he was "supposed to like best" with what he thought was more pleasing to him:

> All alone writing
>
> And lacking in self-confidence
>
> And in another way filled with self-confidence
>
> And in another way devoted to the brick wall
>
> As a flower is when hummed on by a bee (400)

This is the kind of poetry Harvard and the Poem Society would have him enjoy while he "thought Orpheus chasms trireme hunch coats melody / And then No that isn't good enough" (401). Alluding to his work with *When the Sun Tries to Go On*, Koch self-reflectively critiques his own early poetic practices without despairing about it; he quips, "I wrote poems on the edges of thistles / Which my walking companions couldn't understand / But that's when I was a baby compared to now" (401). The ambiguity in this stanza highlights both Koch's humor and the experimental spatial nature of his earlier work. Did Koch merely write poems about "the edges of thistles" or did he actually inscribe the words of the poems onto the literal edge of a thistle? And what is it his walking companions could not understand—was it the writing of the poems, the poems themselves, or something else entirely? This uncertainty should generate humor and reveals after closer inspection the humor beneath the surface of the lines. Koch's turn at the end, the self-reflexive joke about his work having matured since the 1950s, gives off

both a sense of sincerity regarding his certainty that he has actually matured as a poet and a sense that he has lost none of the joy he experienced in maturing his poetic.

A major tool Koch uses throughout this poem to create humor is balancing blunt shifts in tone with sincere reflections on poetry and his growth as a poet. In addition to subverting his own project when he bluntly states, “I never finished it,” about a sestina, whose end words are “William Carlos Williams,” “grass,” “Sleep,” “hog snout,” “breath,” and “dream,” (401), Koch also shows his humorous response to some unknown person’s—perhaps a rival poet or friend exhortation that Koch should get up and write because he was “missing the whole day” (402). Koch replies,

> I said Shut up
>
> I want to sleep and what he accomplished in the hours I slept
>
> I do not know and what I accomplished in my sleep
>
> Was absolutely nothing (402)

The humor in these lines arises from both Koch’s blunt and somewhat rude reply and from the enjambment of the lines leading up to the fact that he has accomplished nothing during the time he slept. Clearly, Koch shows here that he did not make his status as a poet overly serious but that he would rather work when he feels like working. Additionally, the line breaks heighten this joke by aiding Koch in the subversion of readers’ expectations of what he will say next; Koch builds the stanza toward a punchline and writes something unexpected, even though really accomplishing absolutely nothing in his sleep is exactly the only thing Koch could write. The punchline serves as a comic let down that may not elicit hearty laughter but at least a chuckle.

The next stanza balances this joke with a deep meditation on where the “stuff” of poetry comes from. Koch reflects on “How much is in the poet and how much in the poem / You can’t get to the one but he gives you the other,” (402), which raises the question of meaning in Koch’s poems; the poet himself is not confident he can locate where meaning in poetry comes from. Rather than meditate at length on this problem, Koch dismisses it through simile, saying the poet’s “experience is like a bubble. / When he gives it to you, it breaks. Those left-over soap dots are the work” (402), which suggests that poems are meant to be—or cannot be anything other than—fragments of the poet’s experience. The poet’s life breaks open onto the page, and readers are given whatever fragments survive the breaking. Surely, this comparison of experience to a bubble is odd and at first glance would cause laughter since the simile is entirely unexpected; however, what is striking is the masked depth to the odd comparison. Koch’s tone is earnest; thought he may be making a joke, he is serious about considering the implications of this fragmentary experience, especially since the older a poet gets, the more difficult it is for the poet to recall his past and order it in meaningful ways. Koch ends this section with another active transition between the comic and the serious:

> At the window I could see
> What never could be inside me
> Since I was twelve: pure being
> Without desire for the other, not even for the necktie or the dog (402)

Beginning the final stanza of section one with both formal rhyme and meter, Koch quickly breaks the formality of the stanza into a slant rhyme with the word “being” and extends the last line far beyond the meter of the previous lines in the stanza. This

meditation on “pure being” is prevented from becoming too introspective and self-aggrandizing and instead maintains its comic tone through the inclusion of a necktie and a dog alongside the mysterious “desire for the other.”

The poem then wanders into various zany images that recall “The Circus” (I) and “Fresh Air,” and includes an image of the poet “Wrapped in a huge white towel, with his head full of imagery” and examples of that imagery: “Athena gave Popeye a Butterfinger filled with stars / Is the kind of poetry Z and I used to stuff in jars” (402-3). These lines are utter nonsense to readers looking for some kind of easily accessible meaning or moral. What Koch asks readers to do is laugh at and take pleasure in the oddity of the lines, to feel the words and consider what it would actually look like for Athena to give a star-studded Butterfinger to Popeye. Again, Koch’s humor reflects on his past and invites readers to laugh at the strange kinds of poetry Koch experimented with as a much younger man and undermines any conception of the poet as a supreme authority figure pontificating “truths” to his readers.

Koch eagerly presents himself as someone who wants to share with others the pleasure he gets from writing poems and reflecting on how he wrote poems in the past and the transformations and misapprehensions his poetic processes went through over time:

> Sweet are the uses of adversity
>
> Became Sweetheart cabooses of diversity
>
> And Sweet art cow papooses at the university
>
> And sea bar Calpurnia flower havens’ re-noosed knees (404)

Each transformation of the original line becomes more and more ridiculous and farther removed from the original than the previous line. This stanza marks both auditory misapprehension when a poet attempts to record in a poem what he hears others saying and a misapprehension brought about by time and distance from an original event. The farther away from the initial line the stanza goes, the less and less like the initial line the stanza looks. Successive lines in the stanza almost appear to have been influenced directly by their predecessors; "And se bar Calpurnia flower havens' re-noosed knees" looks and sounds much more like "And sweet art cow papooses at the university" than "Sweet are the uses of adversity." This development, or even contortion, of the lines reflects the mise en abyme of memory: recalling memories actually is the process of recalling memories of memories. In other words, the real event becomes inaccessible with each subsequent remembering after the first. This twisting becomes a comic meditation on the strange permanence poetry and language gives to what we can record. The initial line is accessible in written language even when the mind and the spoken word alter the initial line irreparably after a first hearing.

Koch's anxiety about the passage of time influences this comic contortion of repeated misapprehensions. His anxiety about getting old, though he treats it lightly, it compounded with his concern with his own notoriety:

> Now if I say, "I am the poet Kenneth Koch," they say "I think I've heard of you"
> Or "I'm sorry but that doesn't ring a bell" or
> "Would you please move out of the way? You're blocking my view
> Of that enormous piece of meat that they are lowering into the Bay
> Of Pigs." What? (403)

The desire to be known is, of course, normal for anyone who writes and publishes for readers, yet Koch's treatment of this desire is in no way so self-conscious that it debilitates him from writing about it or finishing the poem. With the double comic turn of the "enormous piece of meat" and the "Bay / Of Pigs," Koch shows that while he is concerned about his legacy, lack of notoriety does not bother him as much as it would a self-aggrandizing poet of an earlier time operating under a more strictly formal poetic; what is central for Koch is a commitment to pleasure and inviting readers—anyone who happens to stumble across his work—to experience that pleasure with him.

*

Koch's commitment to pleasure did not abate in his late period, which I define as including his last four collections: *One Train* (1994), *Straits* (1998), *New Addresses* (2000), and *A Possible World* (2002). If anything, his emphasis on looking at his life and inviting readers to share in its wanderings intensified. In fact, *New Addresses* consists of fifty different odes Koch wrote to subjects as various as the Ohio River, Jewishness, orgasms, and his old age. He also touched on abstract subjects like destiny, the unknown, fame, and aesthetic concepts as well as topics that are humorously Kochian in their titles like "To My Heart As I Go Along," "To One Thing after Another," and "To Insults." The poems in *New Addresses* exemplify the poetics of Koch later work. Comedy in these poems works somewhat differently than in his middle period and is much different than the biting comedy of his early work. "To Old Age" shows Koch at his most mellow and yet still maintaining that comic spirit of his earlier work.

"To Old Age" begins by immediately addressing Old Age in the second person: "You hurried through my twenties as if there were nowhere to look / For what you were

searching for, perhaps my first trip to China" (656). The apostrophe and subsequent personification of Old Age as some whimsical being who rushes everywhere help to build a humorous sincerity in the poem as does the odd non-sequitur about Koch's trip to China. Koch extends this image in the following lines when he says of Old Age:

> You said, "I love that country because the love everything that's old
> And they like things to look old—take the fortune cookies for example
> Or the dumplings or the universe's shining face." I said,
> "Chopsticks don't look old," but you were hurrying (656)

Koch builds the humor in these lines through irony; of course Old Age, as a real person, would love a country where everything is ancient, and looking old is prized, at least according to Koch's poem. The fortune cookie as an example of something that looks old is odd and humorous since ancient is most likely not a quality one would immediately associate with fortune cookies; again, Koch defeats readers' expectations and clouds in each succeeding line what he puts forth in the previous line[21] by attempting to engage Old Age in conversation to counter Old Age's assertion that China as a whole likes things that look old. Trying to engage in conversation something that cannot think or act but only happen is absurd to the point that readers are not sure whether to take Koch seriously or not; even still, readers not paying close attention may miss the humor here by simply accepting the reality of Koch's poem without wondering how it is Old Age can speak or can be spoken to.

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[21] In "Some South American Poets" from *The Pleasures of Peace* (1969), Koch calls this *hasosismo*, or "the art of the fallen limb" (*Collected Poems* 199).

Koch balances these brief moments of humor with moments of sincere reflection on his life as when he says Old Age was hurrying "Past me, past my love, my uncomprehended marriage, my / Nine or ten years nailed in the valley of the fools, and still you were not there, / Wouldn't stop there" (656). Images of Old Age rushing past all of these moments in Koch's life gives the suggestion that Koch's life has been one in search of old age itself. That his marriage remains uncomprehended to him at seventy-five suggests the difficulty Koch has had in understanding and making sense of all of his past experiences and ordering them together in some meaningful way—this ordering process is one purpose of *New Addresses*, to serve as an autobiography written in the style of apostrophe.

While this reflective move in the poem does highlight a more serious turn in Koch's poetry, the excitement and exuberance is not lost from his poetic. Rather than turn entirely inward and despair of growing older—as previously mentioned, Koch was seventy-five at the time of writing this poem—Koch revels in his memories. He writes,

> You disappeared for a year
> That I spent in Paris, came back to me in my father's face
> And later in my mother's conversation. You seemed great in the palm trees
> During a storm and lessened by the boats' preceding clops. (656)

In these lines, sadness does not creep in; instead Koch remembers how alive he felt living in Paris such that Old Age seemed to leave him for that year; this feeling is common to human experience in general. There are those who can relate to the joy of such an experience that being anywhere else than a Paris or a Madrid or an Everest would not really be living anymore. Further, Koch's memory of his father's face and mother's

conversation suggests a tender memory rather than one of despair. Koch's language on this is sparse; in fact, beyond the lines quoted above, his parents—now deceased for quite some time—do not come back into the poem at all. The simplicity of his language about these memories precludes any despair and sadness from reigning in the poem; rather, his feelings towards them are left delightfully ambiguous. Certainly, a sense of his own mortality sits in the background of this poem, but Koch appears to understand or believe that tender memories do not require exceedingly verbose descriptions of the scene or the poet's feelings toward those scenes to make them meaningful and powerful to poet and readers alike. It is almost as if Koch wrote the lines with the idea that less language about the memory would leave more joy at the memory in the poem and that more description would only allow despair to threaten to creep in.

Koch quickly turns from these memories back to Old Age and proceeds to gently poke fun at what would have been his perceptions in his youth of what growing old must be like. He writes about how "Looking at a gun or at a tiger I never thought I was standing facing you. / You were elsewhere, rippling the sands or else making some boring conversation / Among people who scarcely knew each other" (656). His recollection about this perception of being old as talking about boring subjects brings back into the poem a sense of light exuberance that Koch is happy to let into the poem. One can almost see Koch laughing at himself after writing this line, for he is old at this moment in his life and still able to laugh at Old Age for making boring conversation between other people who are old.

This humorous image has a somewhat more serious side to it as well and builds off the self-knowledge Koch has about his own age. He immediately follows these lines

with an allusion to his poetic forebears, all of whom died young, relative to Koch's age at the time he wrote the poem: "You were left by Shelley to languish / And by Byron and by Keats. Shakespeare never encountered you. What are you, old age, / That some do and some do not come to you?" (656). Koch's anxiety is clear in these lines; Shakespeare was the oldest of these predecessors, and he is believed to have died in his fifties, while Koch has already outlived Shakespeare by at least twenty years. Koch wonders in these lines what is to be now in this season of his life, especially when someone like the Bard died long before reaching that age. The anxiety of growing older is more tangible in these lines than in the rest of the poem, especially at the mention of Keats and Shelley, both of whom had a remarkable influence on the poets of their time and after and never lived to see thirty.[22]

The question he asks about what old age actually is serves as one of the few direct insights readers are given into Koch's seriousness in this poem, and this borders on becoming somber, which would of course be understandable at this point in Koch's life and career; however, Koch is far more subtle than to let notes of unquestioned somberness inhabit his poem. The use of the word "languish" to describe what Old Age had to do after Shelley, Keats, Byron, and Shakespeare died suggests that rather than a heroic death, flaming out in a flash of brilliance, these poets missed something by not being able to find and come to know Old Age in all its fullness. This subtlety and ambiguity in his portrayal of Old Age confirms Koch's unending commitment to pleasure and enjoying as much as possible the different stages of life that come and go, even

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[22] David Lehman notes that Shelley was "the first poet Koch loved" in *The Last Avant-Garde*. For further information see Chapter 5, pg. 215ff.

though he calls Old Age "an old guru who won't quit talking to us in time / For us to hang up the phone" and says, "You scare me half to death / And I suppose you'll take me there, too" (656). Koch's fear is not debilitating, nor does it drive him to ponder suicide. Rather, he thinks of Old Age and by extension the future as a companion for life:

> You are a companion
> Of green ivy and stumbling vines. If I could break away from you
> I would, but there is no light down in that gulch there. Walk with me, then
> Let's not be falling…this fiery morning. *Grand âge*, *nous voici!* Old age, here we are! (656)

Like all people growing older, Koch too wishes he could return to a previous time when he was younger and presumably more virulent, when he had more energy to do things he now cannot do, but Koch, unlike so many, realizes the futility of such an attitude—"there is no light down in that gulch there." His attitude is one that will not embrace an end before his time, but it is one that welcomes what lies ahead with uncertainty and joyful expectation. This anticipation of what life has to offer reflects the poetic he reflectively develops in "Days and Night":

> Our idea is to write poetry that is better than poetry
> To be as good as or better than the best old poetry
> To evade, avoid all the mistakes of bad modern poets
> Our idea is to do something with language
> That has never been done before
> Obviously—otherwise it wouldn't be creation (405)

This sentiment encapsulates Koch's approach to poetry and his desire to live as variously

as possible. For Koch, the content of his poetry and the form of his life are inseparable, which enables him to write comically, reflectively, and sincerely about his own life and invite readers to experience the joys, sorrows, and just plain strangeness of a fully lived life. His invitation at the end of "To Old Age" is not merely meant for Old Age, but for us, to walk with Koch and our own coming old ages into the unknown and to be able to say with Koch, "*nous voici!* . . . here we are!"

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