

# Unlikely Angel:

Dwight Ripley *and the* New York School

*Curated by Douglas Crase*

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POETS HOUSE 72 SPRING ST, 2ND FL, NEW YORK, NY 10012

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Dwight Ripley *and the* New York School

Our continuing romance with the New York School poets derives in large part from their own romance with the artists of their time, notably the painters of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery. With the gallery as a venue, these painters and poets fashioned a ferment of affairs, rivalries, and collaborations that seems to exemplify our bravest bohemian dream of youth. One may suspect it's a youth that never was. But the suspicion passes; and we are left dreaming anyway of the poet-and-painter pairings: the plays, parties, poem-paintings, and legendary poet-and-painter pamphlets—the Tibor de Nagy Editions—that constituted in each case the poet's first book.

When we try to enter those dreams, however, whether to follow or reject them, the romance the New York School most closely resembles is the primal, read-only kind whose origins were obscured by one's own birth. Looking back, we are encouraged not to look too far. We get creation stories instead, and they are all to a degree metaphysical. In the version advanced by the gallery director John Myers, for example, the original moment occurs when the gallery is proposed to him by Jackson Pollock—a miraculous ordination, to be sure. But in the more popular “random walk” version, Myers is one among many, who proceed as tangentially as if they meant to leave on a picnic until someone suggests they open a gallery, which, with no other preparation, they do.

In a physical world, events have causes and foregrounds. So it only makes sense if this Poets House exhibit reveals our New York School romance to have a longer foreground than the creation stories allow. The surprise may be that the discovery is liberating, though it always is when an official spell dissolves, or the curtains part and one sees the machin-

ery behind the metaphysics. In the case of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, we see the money, connections, advice—for the early poet-and-painter pamphlets even the printing—and they can all be traced. They reveal a pattern of cause-and-effect that has reached us directly from the hopes and disappointments of a preceding generation in another country.

I'm not sure we would have ordered a foreground like that. I, for one, am the throwback type that likes to believe the New York School—however much they crowed of their French influence, however much O'Hara's heart was in his pocket with poems by Pierre Reverdy—was indigenous, as its name implies, to our own civilization. It was America waiting to happen, released by the end of war and the convergence in a great city of the republic's best energies. Nothing prepared me for the discovery that such an America might wait on the indulgence of a London-born, Oxford-educated sophisticate with the elevated name of Harry Dwight Dillon Ripley.

Ripley's story was unusual and complex; it's hard to imagine a less likely angel for the New York School. He didn't even want to be an American. He and Rupert Barneby, sharing a lifelong devotion to botany, were attracted to the United States by its rare desert plants. In Nevada they found a new species, a kind of desert parsley they named, after Ripley, *Cymopterus ripleyi*. Even then they expected to return to England. They ended up in Dutchess County, New York, instead—which is where they were when much of Nevada was turned into a nuclear test site and an atom bomb was dropped on *C. ripleyi*. The species has since been discovered elsewhere; but Ripley was never to know that it survived. Understandably depressed, he almost gave up botany. He redirected his attention, and, lucky for us, his checkbook, to the fortunes of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery.

Given the drama of these events (they add up, arguably, to the Big Bang theory of the New York School) it seems odd they went unremarked, while the more prosaic stories took their place. It's true that Ripley was a "silent backer" as he has been called in a biography of Clement Greenberg. But friends of the gallery understood, all the same, where the money was from. The poet Harold Norse remembered that it was simply "Dwight Ripley's gallery." Norse had reason to know; he was Ripley's infatuation during the year the gallery was founded. Myers recalled that Ripley promised a subsidy of four times the gallery's rent (it was five times, at least in the first year) but insinuated that Ripley was drunk when the promise was made—as if to deny him the merit of intent. One senses in Myers's story a mix of gratitude and resentment, which wasn't exactly resolved by the condescension on display. The irony is that Ripley was no longer rich. His fortune could not be extracted from England intact, and for the rest of his life he was chronically short of funds. But the damage of first impressions was done. He was "millionaire dillittante Dwight Ripley," as Judith Malina spelled it in her diary.

All accounts agree that Ripley did drink too much, and had many talents. The gallery's co-director and namesake, Tibor de Nagy, described him as an alcoholic and a genius. Friends said he was fluent in fifteen languages, which seems a lot, though we have as evidence the poems he wrote in languages including Catalan for his *Poems* of 1931, and in Polish for the American newspaper *Gwiazda Polarna* during World War II. On the strength of these poems in Polish he was visited after the war by Czeslaw Milosz, who was then a diplomat from communist Poland. (They met at the Plaza Hotel and again in Dutchess County; Ripley reports by letter to a friend that Milosz had a "thick

neck.”) But not one of Ripley’s talents—poetry, botany, art, or alcohol—seems by itself to explain what we see when we enter a room of his drawings. The talents added up, it appears, to more than their sum as parts.

Ripley’s custom was to work in series, so his surviving drawings come sometimes with serial titles: *The Bomb No. 1* is from a show called “The Bomb,” held at Tibor de Nagy. His earlier *Evolution with Mushrooms, Bud, and Pineapple*, shown in 1946 at Peggy Guggenheim’s gallery, was likewise one in a series. This is now a well-known work (it was reproduced in the Guggenheim Museum’s magnificent *Peggy Guggenheim & Frederick Kiesler: The Story of Art of This Century*), but we are missing its original title. Clearly it resembled its series, described by a reviewer at the time as “evoking ideas of the biological world.” According to Ripley’s diaries he had been reading Dobzhansky’s *Genetics and the Origin of Species*, the landmark work that synthesized genetics with natural selection, and opened the way to modern evolutionary science. The Dobzhansky, the description in the *Times*, the surviving drawing itself—these taken together illuminate all of Ripley’s work and unfasten his reputation as a “dillittante.” They free us to speculate that his multiple interests in botany, etymology, and art were less fractured enthusiasms than they were elements of a coherent worldview focused by the logic of evolution. The diversification of words, as in etymology, or of styles as in art, would emerge in this view as a wealth of speciation like that in a great botanical genus, as Ripley and Barneby were seeing in the deserts of the American West.

Larry Rivers observed once in *Art News* that Ripley’s drawings were as witty as Steinberg’s, which may be true, though I would have added that

they are more affectionate. The drawings of “Birds, Fish, and Cages” take gentle liberties, for instance, with the botanical and zoological illustrations that Ripley loved in childhood. Equally tender are the responses visible in his “Evolution” drawing. He began that drawing with a stylized send-up of Surrealism, namely the variant known as Biomorphism, which was so popular at Guggenheim’s gallery. Then, with a sassy nod to collage, he forced his biomorph forms to fruit, i.e., to reproduce, granting them thereby a future in which to evolve and fend for themselves. This must have been a joyful alternative (consider it from their point of view) to being trapped in a permanent departure from that order, whatever it was, whose loss the Surrealists seemed secretly to regret. Ripley’s drawings, in other words, are free of self-pity. They hint at a mind shaped in England, and a familiarity with the English brand of Surrealism that the New York School poets would later regard as “pale” in contrast to the flashier, continental kind.

No one is going to conclude from his drawings that Ripley had a major aesthetic influence on the painters and poets at Tibor de Nagy. Schuyler described how the poets were affected by floods of paint, we remember, while Ripley worked in colored pencil. We can’t say he had no influence, however, because there is always the quantum possibility that some product of his interests, relayed by Myers and de Nagy, or sensed by a younger artist who happened on his drawings at the gallery, got mixed into the inheritance that has devolved through generations since. It’s intriguing to discover drawings from his “Birds, Fish, and Cages” period that represent, for example, the first poem-paintings to be seen at de Nagy. The difference, beyond the colored pencil, was that Ripley’s were *self*-collaborations, the work of someone who was the poet and artist

both. There is also the example of wit. Reflecting on Ripley's show of January 1954, critic Stuart Preston wrote approvingly in *The New York Times* that it was "high time the 'School of New York'—today's abstract expressionists—found an artist to buffoon it." To place that appraisal in its suggestive context, we need only note that four years were yet to elapse before the appearance of "homespun Dada" (as defined by the same critic) in the first solo show of Jasper Johns.

Ripley's financial influence, by contrast, needs no suggestion. One might even claim, based on the money trail, that we'd have no New York School of poets without him. Thus, we could exchange one creation story for another. We might as easily say we'd have no New York School without the farsighted owner of the San Remo bar, or the farsighted admissions officer at Harvard Graduate School who declined to accept Ashbery, bumping him on to Columbia University in New York. With or without Ripley, each of our poets would be present in the anthologies today. But could the manner of their convergence have been the same? There was to be no Tibor de Nagy Gallery without Ripley, no advice to that gallery from Greenberg, no guaranteed cast of painters and their collateral poets. And the poets would not have entered the purview of Myers—an alternative history some might have looked on wistfully, as it was Myers who invented the label "poets of the New York School," reviled immediately as inaccurate and confining, though it turned out to be a conveyance, surely, to the stars.

Having seen the sociability in Ripley's drawings, we may logically wonder why the poets and painters never told us about their artist-angel. But there was no conspiracy; they barely knew him. Myers

explained that Ripley refused to interfere at the gallery and was modest concerning his own work. His modesty was credible, too, because it wasn't thoroughgoing; privately, he sulked when his drawings were ignored. At the same time he exulted in the success of "his" artists, collected their works, and even wrote a play in verse to celebrate their arrival on the scene. This was "Beach at Amagansett," a parody of the poets' plays that Myers was producing for the gallery's adjunct Artists' Theatre. The Ripley play, of course, was not produced; most likely it was never submitted. It features two angels—modeled transparently on himself and Barneby—who eventually leave the stage to the artists, remarking as they go that it's a privilege to witness the birth of a school, not the "New York" school but the *scuola* Myers.

Label-free, meanwhile, and seized with the anxious business of being young, the poets and painters would scarcely have leisure or latitude to lift their patron into a future that they, themselves, were unsure of making. Today, with the riches they made securely around us, we can afford what they could not: to consider the hopes that preceded them and continued out of sight beside them for twenty-three years. Ripley died in 1973. The drawings of his last decade, the most productive of his career, are the more remarkable because he no longer had the gallery or the prospect of an audience. He must have relied, instead, on the habits that served him in his new country—contributing to its culture and pursuing his interests, while he staked his artistic survival on the proposition that these were subjects as fit for colored pencil as they were for paint and poetry.

—Douglas Crase

*Clockwise, from entrance*

1. Dwight Ripley, *Poems*, Elkin Mathews & Marrot, London, 1931.
2. Richard Kitchin, *Dwight Ripley*, 1942. Oil on canvas.
3. House party in Sussex, 1935. Photo by Joan Leigh-Fermor from Clive Fisher, *Cyril Connolly: The Life and Times of England's Most Controversial Literary Critic*, Macmillan, London, 1995.

*Back:* Patrick Balfour (later Lord Kinross), Constant Lambert (the composer), Angela Culme-Seymour (married Balfour), Dick Wyndham (photographer, host of the party), Tom Driberg (columnist "William Hickey" of the London *Daily Express*, later member of Parliament), Cyril Connolly, Stephen Spender. *Front:* Dwight Ripley, Jean Connolly, Tony Hyndman (Spender's boyfriend), Mamaine Paget (later the second wife of Arthur Koestler), John Rayner (of the *Daily Express*).

*Around corner in alcove*

4. Dwight Ripley on Frenchman Flat, Nevada, May 13, 1941. Photo by Rupert Barneby.
5. Dwight Ripley, *Language Panel: Pstruh! (trout)*, 1968. Ink and colored pencil on paper.
6. Dwight Ripley, *Travel Poster: Monte Gordo, Fuentebravía*, 1962. Ink and colored pencil on paper.
7. Dwight Ripley, *Language Panel: Cymopterus ripleyi*, 1968. Ink and colored pencil on paper.

8. *Cymopterus ripleyi* on Yucca Flat, Nevada, May 26, 1941.  
Photo by Rupert Barneby.
9. Dwight Ripley, *Rupert Barneby at Harrow*, 1925.  
Pencil on torn paper.
10. Dwight Ripley, *Portrait of Rupert Barneby, Esq. (botanist)*, 1955.  
Ink and colored pencil on paper.
11. Gladwin Hill, "2d Atomic Blast in 24 Hours Jolts Wide Nevada Area," *The New York Times*, January 29, 1951.
12. Dwight Ripley, *Botanist UFO No. 2*, 1970.  
Ink and colored pencil on paper.
13. "Charles Seliger, Kenneth Scott, Dwight Ripley, John Goodwin, David Hill," *Art of This Century*, 1946. Announcement card printed by Gonzalo Moré at the Gemor Press.
14. Dwight Ripley, *Evolution with Mushrooms, Bud, and Pineapple*, 1946. Ink, colored pencil, and cut printed reproductions on paper.

*Glass display case*

15. Dwight Ripley, five-year diary, 1941-1945.
16. Rupert Barneby, "A New Species of *Cymopterus* from Nevada," *Leaflets of Western Botany*, November 6, 1941.

17. The Dodge, Ripley and Barneby's field vehicle, in New Mexico, October 1939. Photo by Rupert Barneby.
18. Dwight Ripley, "Nevada 1944," *Quarterly Bulletin of the Alpine Garden Society of Great Britain*, No. 59, March 1945.
19. Max Ernst & Paul Eluard, *Misfortunes of the Immortals*, translated by Hugh Chisholm, cover and illustrations by Ernst, The Black Sun Press, New York, March 1943. 610 copies designed by Caresse Crosby and printed by Anaïs Nin and Gonzalo Moré at the Gemor Press.
20. Peggy Guggenheim, *Out of This Century: the informal memoirs of Peggy Guggenheim*, The Dial Press, New York, 1946.
21. Hugh Chisholm & André Masson, *Several Have Lived*, with cover and two illustrations by Masson, Gemor Press, New York, 1942. 500 copies printed by Anaïs Nin and Gonzalo Moré at the Gemor Press.
22. Rupert Barneby, "Provenance for *Several Have Lived*," 1991. Handwritten note.

*Five wall boxes*

23. Fishbowl-birdcage at Ripley-Barneby farmhouse, "The Falls," ca. 1947. Photo by Rupert Barneby.
24. Dwight Ripley, *Ponty and Pinty*, 1950. Ink and colored pencil on mimeographed flyer.

25. Dwight Ripley, *Avant-garde Boom*, 1951.  
Ink and gouache on stationery.

The names clockwise represent John Myers, poet Harold Norse, poet and filmmaker Willard Maas, art critic and editor Tony Bower, art and antiques dealer Russell Carrell, Tibor de Nagy, Ripley, Peggy Guggenheim, collector Colby Walworth, painter and filmmaker Marie Menken, Barneby, Ripley's handyman Giles Shipley, and playwright Waldemar Hansen.

26. Tibor de Nagy Gallery, ledger page, November-December 1950. Image is courtesy of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery records, 1950-1988, in the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C., and by courtesy of Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York.
27. Eric Brown, John Ashbery, Hilton Kramer, and Karen Wilkin, *Tibor de Nagy Gallery: The First Fifty Years, 1950-2000*, Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, 2000.
28. Cover photo by Jerry Cooke shows Alfred Leslie, right, installing the first solo show by Helen Frankenthaler, November 1951.

*Glass display case below wall boxes*

29. Dwight Ripley, five-year diary, 1946-1950.

Each page displays the same calendar date for all five years, from 1946 at the top to 1950 at the bottom. Thus the entry bottom left, "\$500 to John M[yers]," is December 5, 1950.

30. Grace Hartigan, Ripley, John Myers, Tibor de Nagy, unidentified friend of de Nagy, and Helen Frankenthaler at The Falls, 1951. Photo by Rupert Barneby.
31. "Season in Review," Tibor de Nagy Gallery, 1953. Announcement card.
32. Dwight Ripley, John Myers, Tibor de Nagy, unidentified friend of de Nagy, Helen Frankenthaler, Alfred Leslie, and Grace Hartigan prepare to launch a model airplane at The Falls, 1951. Leslie, who built the model plane, recalled that it had a rubber-band motor and required 250 turns to wind the propeller. Photo by Rupert Barneby.
33. Barneby (holding Possum), Ripley, and Clement Greenberg at The Falls, 1951. Photographer unknown.
34. Frank O'Hara, *Oranges: 12 Pastorals*, with cover painting by George [Grace] Hartigan, Tibor de Nagy Editions, New York, 1953. Mimeographed, 24 copies with covers painted in oil on paper by Hartigan.
35. Title page, *Oranges: 12 Pastorals*. Scanned image.

*Clockwise in conference room*

36. Dwight Ripley, *Petrel in a Cage*, 1951.
37. "Birds, Fish and Cages," Tibor de Nagy Gallery, 1951. Announcement card. Printed by Gonzalo Moré at the Gemor Press.

38. Dwight Ripley, *Merbomb in a Cage*, 1951.  
Ink and colored pencil on stationery.
39. Chester Kallman, *Elegy*, cover and two drawings by René Bouché, Tibor de Nagy Editions, New York, March 1951. 500 copies designed and printed under the direction of Gonzalo Moré.
40. Humphrey Jennings, *Poems*, introduction by Kathleen Raine, The Weekend Press, New York, December 1951. 100 copies printed by Ruthven Todd.
41. Kathleen Raine, *Selected Poems*, The Weekend Press, New York, December 1951 and January 1952. 250 copies printed by Ruthven Todd.
42. Ruthven Todd, *Two Poems: Christmas 1951*, The Weekend Press, New York, November 1951. 200 copies printed by Ruthven Todd.
43. Dwight Ripley, five-year diary, 1951-1955.  
  
Each page displays the same calendar date for all five years, from 1951 at the top to 1955 at the bottom. Thus the entry "Wire Ruthven" is February 6, 1952.
44. Frank O'Hara, *A City Winter and Other Poems*, two drawings by Larry Rivers, Tibor de Nagy Editions, New York, 1951 [*sic*]. 150 copies printed in March and April 1952 by Ruthven Todd.
45. John Ashbery, *Turandot and other poems*, four drawings by Jane Freilicher, Tibor de Nagy Editions, New York, November 1953. 300 copies composed by the Michael Press under supervision of Nell Blaine and printed by the Ram Press.

46. Kenneth Koch, *Poems*, with four color prints, cover, and five black-and-white illustrations by Nell Blaine, Tibor de Nagy Editions, New York, 1953. 300 copies designed by Nell Blaine and printed by the Lowy Press, Inc.
47. Helen Frankenthaler, *Happy Birthday '51*, 1951.  
Oil, plaster, and other media on canvas mounted on board.
48. Marie Menken, *If Earth in Earth Delight*, 1951.  
Oil, sand, glass, pebbles, string, and other media on masonite.
49. Dwight Ripley, *The Bomb No. 1*, 1954.  
ink and colored pencil on paper.
50. "The Bomb," Tibor de Nagy Gallery, 1955.  
Announcement card.
51. Alfred Leslie, *Untitled*, 1950.  
Oil, paper, and mixed media on board.
52. Grace Hartigan, *For Dwight with love—Grace*, 1952.  
Gouache on paper.
53. John Bernard Myers, from a letter to Grace Hartigan, June 2, [1960]. Image is courtesy of the Grace Hartigan Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library, Syracuse, New York.
54. John Bernard Myers, ed., *Semi-Colon*, Tibor de Nagy Gallery, New York, Vol. I, No. 1, [1954].
55. Dwight Ripley, from "Beach at Amagansett," unpublished, [1953].  
Original typescript, page three.

56. Dwight Ripley, *Churches: Congonhas do Campo*, 1956.  
Ink and colored pencil on paper.
57. Dwight Ripley, from a letter to “Dollapaloozae” [Marie Menken and Willard Maas], [July 1952]. Image is courtesy of the Willard Maas Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.
58. Barbara Guest, *The Location of Things*, illustration by Robert Goodnough, Tibor de Nagy Editions, New York, 1960. 300 copies designed by Cesare Lombroso and printed by Stamperia di Venezia in Italy.
59. Dwight Ripley, *Dodo in a Cage*, 1951.  
Ink and colored pencil on paper.
60. Fishbowl-birdcage, *ca.* 1900.



All items are from the Collection of  
Frank Polach unless otherwise noted.



*Please visit the reading area located next to the orange couch.*

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