The City, Art and Death in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara

Thesis submitted in accordance with the requirements of the University of Liverpool for the degree in Doctor in Philosophy by

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PREFACE

The purpose of this thesis is to offer a reading of Frank O'Hara's poetry, in the light of three of its principal topics: the city, art and death. The thesis aims to assess the relevance of O'Hara's work for the contemporary reader, and help to establish O'Hara as a major and influential twentieth century poet. In some respects, the research presented here follows on from the work of Geoff Ward and Marjorie Perloff - both of whom have attempted to demonstrate O'Hara's importance, to champion his achievement, and to bring his work into greater general prominence. Building on the foundations established by Ward and Perloff, this thesis hopes to provide a reading of O'Hara's work which demonstrates his innovations in thematic subject matter as well as in style and in formal matters. Reading O'Hara's poetry through the themes of the city, art and death complements recent scholarly analysis of the topic of homosexuality in O'Hara's poems, by providing a more comprehensive assessment of his work. The topic of homosexuality is not within the scope of this thesis, and will be touched on only incidentally.

I am grateful to my academic supervisors, Geoff Ward and Tony Barley, for their invaluable suggestions and

encouragement, and to the British Academy for funding my research. Thanks are also due to Joan Sills, Steven Jardine, and Nicola Caldwell, who have offered suggestions at all stages of the work. Vital technical advice and assistance has been given by Oliver Sills and Geoff Maddocks. For tremendous personal and practical support, my thanks are due to all mentioned above, and to John Sills, John Edward Caine, Poppy Sills, Carmelina Mazziotta and Jason Mwenda.

READING O'HARA TODAY

INTRODUCTION

For some considerable time, Frank O'Hara enjoyed a reputation as a poet's poet, associated with the painters and poets of the New York School - many of whom were his personal friends. O'Hara's poetry, dealing as it does with art and artists, and with life in New York City, calls into question traditional positions concerning social context, autobiography and the autonomous artwork. Recent critical accounts of O'Hara's poetry suggest that these concerns show his work to have been sharply predictive of matters explored by recent literary theory, and the emergence of the Language Poets in America. O'Hara's work as anticipatory of current theory is discussed, for example, in Geoff Ward's recent book Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets (London: Macmillan, 1993). In consequence, O'Hara has been brought into new prominence as an influence on current poetic practice. This thesis aims to demonstrate how O'Hara developed the subjects of the city, art and death to bring about major innovations in the tradition of city writing and ekphrastic literature, and contribute to an expansion of the boundaries of elegiac poetry.

These findings will contribute to the revival of interest in major, but neglected figures in modern American poetry, a revival demonstrated in, for example, the publication of recent books such as Michael Davidson's San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-

Century, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), which, along with Ward's Statutes of Liberty, addresses the work of the New American Poets of, respectively, the West and East Coasts. A quarter of Ward's study is dedicated to O'Hara's work, and he suggests that his book was written 'in order to express, however inadequately, my sense that the poetry of Frank O'Hara is demonstrably great poetry'[1]. Ward's purpose echoes that of Marjorie Perloff, whose critical monograph on O'Hara (Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters, [Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1979]) remains the key comprehensive published study on his body of poetry. In the introduction she states that:

> it has been assumed that his [O'Hara's] poetry is trivial and frivolous....[and] interest has centred on the man rather than the work. The purpose of my book is to right this balance.[2]

In both these works addressing O'Hara's poetry, the authors make enormous claims for the significance of his work. Perloff states that her study reflects:

> [her] conviction that O'Hara is one of the central poets of the postwar period, and that his influence will continue to grow in the years to come.
>
> (PAP p.xii)

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[1] Geoff Ward, Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poetry. (London: Macmillan, 1993), p5.
Further references to this book throughout the thesis will be noted in the text as 'SL'.

[2] Marjorie Perloff, Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters, (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1979), p.xi.
Further references to this book will be noted in the text as 'PAP'.

Fourteen years later, Ward's book concludes that 'no subsequent poetry has been as powerful'(SL pp188-9). Both Ward and Perloff offer a critical reading of O'Hara's work which focuses on his wide-reaching importance as a poet - for Perloff this means O'Hara's continuation and extension of a sense of tradition in his work (PAP p.xii), and for Ward, the refraction in the poetry of:

> the full retrospect of the American Renaissance, and of the changing structures of European poetry from Romanticism to the present....O'Hara's work takes on more than either the ephemeral 60s 'happenings' or the boxed-in ironies of the Movement with which it is contemporary.
>
> (SL p.4)

Ward and Perloff both demonstrate O'Hara's use and subversion of a wide range of literary influences, suggesting they are fundamental to a study of his poetry. Perloff suggests that:

> The problem of influence is a major topic, for O'Hara assimilated an astonishing variety of styles... The result of assimilating such varied influences is the creation of a new kind of lyric poem.
>
> (PAP p.xiii)

Perloff explores O'Hara's use of his literary forebears in order to present a comprehensive explanation of how his poetry is formed, and in what way he uses these traditions to generate his own innovative style. Her work is invaluable as a guide to the formal procedures and style of O'Hara's work, and to its chronological development. It

does not, however confront the relevance of the ubiquitous themes of the city, art and death as major routes into apprehending O'Hara's innovative re-writing of the genres.

Although Perloff addresses the subject of art in O'Hara's work at some length, her interpretation suggests that he was indeed part of a 'school', following the techniques of visual artists; she does not address O'Hara's original way of including visual matter into the verbal space of the poem. Perloff's work revolves around studying the overall style and formal originality of O'Hara's poetry, without exploring the relevance of its thematic subject matter to the innovations which stand as his bequest.

Ward's book, a much later study, also places emphasis on O'Hara's use of his literary influences. Ward concentrates his reading of O'Hara on the points in the poetry where its often abstract, non-representational surface breaks up, to reveal openings onto and into metaphysical reflection - or at least into the possibility of the same. Ward focuses on the subject of temporality in O'Hara's work, and his book gives a reading of that topic by highlighting the paradoxical lightheartedness and morbidity within the poems, attempting to:

> locat[e] the sources and effects of fragmentation recorded in O'Hara's work, where avant-garde spikiness may mask the pathos of the broken ...
> (SL pp37-8)

Like Perloff, Ward's reading addresses O'Hara's place in the tradition of poetic writing, comparing him at length to

Byron (SL pp40-50), and thus perhaps confirming Perloff's assertion that 'generically, his major poems follow Romantic models' (PAP p.xiii). Ward and Perloff alike attempt to place O'Hara within the tradition of great writers - both in English and other languages, and it is to this end that the two authors appear to conduct their studies. Ward ends his chapter on O'Hara in Statutes of Liberty, by comparing him to Whitman, asserting that O'Hara 'competes' with the earlier poet, 'in whose company he finally stands.'(SL p.82)

Ward's study is able to assess how time has shaped O'Hara's influence and importance since the publication of Perloff's book, which was written just over a decade after the poet's death. He charts O'Hara's influence on subsequent generations of poets[3], in addition to applying recent philosophical theory - especially De Manian deconstruction - to a reading of O'Hara's poetry. Ward's postscript, which specifically outlines O'Hara's influence on several American and English poets of the 1970s and 80s, provides evidence of the influence of O'Hara's poetry. A comprehensive examination of O'Hara's relation to theory, and his direct influence on individual succeeding poets does not fall within the scope of the work presented here. The thesis does not attempt to cover the same ground as Ward's study, yet occasionally points out tendencies in O'Hara's work which appear to be complimentary to

[3] See the chapters 'Lyric Poets in the Era of Late Capitalism' (pp135-176), and 'Postscript: Going Around Cities'(pp177-89), in SL.
Also see Language Poetry and the American Avant-garde, BAAS Pamphlets in American Studies 25, (Keele, 1993), which traces the influence of the New York School of poets on the Language Poets of the 1980s.

theoretical terms and practice that have become part of general critical usage.

The present account of O'Hara's poetry takes off in different ways from that of Perloff and Ward. In the work of both scholars, the emphasis is on O'Hara's innovations through form and style - 'a creative messiness of layered-space bric-à-brac..[which] turns deep' (SL p.38); the interest centres on the internal workings of the poem's frame, such as the sense of paradox and opposition working within the poems. Ward suggests that 'to pursue...complementary opposition would be to dive deep towards the mainsprings of O'Hara's writing' (SL, p.40).

The research presented in this thesis diverges from both Ward's and Perloff's works by identifying the poetry's major themes, and provides a reading of his work through these. Unlike Perloff's work, the present assessment aims to give a retrospective review of O'Hara's poetic output, in order to determine what his work offers the reader at the end of the twentieth century. This account will hopefully complement Ward's retrospective reading of O'Hara. Ward's focus on the poet's predictive anticipation of theories of deconstruction and Postmodern aesthetics, offers a reading which indeed demonstrates O'Hara's relevance to current practice. The intention of the present research lies not in an examination of O'Hara's relation to current theory, but in an analysis of his re-writing of genres. Through such an analysis, the thesis argues that O'Hara provides new and exciting ways of reading the subjects of the city, art and death, which are

pertinent to the concerns of today's reader. Close reading of O'Hara's treatment of these themes, demonstrates that much of the poetry's innovation comes through his attention to subject matter. The thesis will also examine how these subjects dictate style and formal considerations, assessing the ways they prove fundamental to O'Hara's poetry.

The method of examining O'Hara's poetry through its themes, is becoming an important way to read his work, as evidenced by much of the critical work on O'Hara today, which focuses on the homosexual reading of his poetry. Articles such as Gregory Bredbeck's 'B/O - Barthes's Text/O'Hara's Trick', PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America [4] suggests that O'Hara's poetics 'calls into question the promise of a homosexual semiotics...'[5]. Homosexuality is also the topic of Alice C. Parker's The Exploration of the Secret Smile: The Language of Art and of Homosexuality in Frank O'Hara's Poetics, (New York: Peter Lang 1989), and it follows Stuart Byron, 'Frank O'Hara: Poetic "Queertalk"'[6]. These critiques place O'Hara as a crucial literary figure for today's homosexual studies. In order to examine O'Hara's innovations and influences on a wider scale, this study focuses on a reading of O'Hara's poetry through its major concerns - other than homosexuality - the city, art and elegy.

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[4] Gregory W. Bredbeck, "B/O - Barthes's Text/O'Hara's Trick", PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, v.108(2), (1993), 268-82.

[5] Gregory W. Bredbeck, "Barthes's Text/O'Hara's Trick", R268.

[6] Stuart Byron, 'Frank O'Hara Poetic "Queertalk"' Real Paper, Boston, (April 24, 1974), 20-21.

Although O'Hara's poetry is famously eclectic in its subject matter - his mock manifesto 'Personism' opens with the statement 'Everything is in the poems'[7] - certain subjects occur so often that they become the motifs which mark out O'Hara's work. The city, art, and a melancholy awareness of mortality - what one critic calls 'an underlying pace that is elegiac'[8] - are key elements of the poetry itself and are obviously important topics to O'Hara personally; thus they constitute themselves as fundamental themes in any overall consideration of his work. This thesis will examine these three fundamental topics in O'Hara's poetic output, devoting a separate chapter to each of them in order to give a thorough account of the purpose and importance they have in his work.

It is hoped that the readings offered below will complement recent work on the homosexuality of O'Hara's poems. These readings aim to provide a critical account of O'Hara's writing which assesses how his concerns - in particular the representations of the city and art, which shape much of his work - have been developed by O'Hara along innovative paths to open up the genres of urban literature and ekphrastic poetry into new dimensions.

In 1973 Thomas Shapcott wrote that:

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[7] Frank O'Hara, The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara, Ed. Donald Allen, (New York: Knopf, 1972), p.498.
All further references to this book will be noted in the text as 'CP'.

[8] Thomas Shapcott, 'From "Two Tombstones"', in Frank O'Hara: To Be True To A City, Ed. Jim Elledge, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 47-54, p.53.

> with Frank O'Hara the actual innovations he made... seem minor, and only part of a general pattern that in terms of metrics and linear expression ambles garrulously back through Ginsberg, Cummings, Sandberg home to Whitman...[9]

In an article on the New York School of Poets in 1992, Ward remarked that the growing respect for John Ashbery's work in the years since O'Hara's death, sees 'Frank O'Hara relegated to a continuing but marginal influence on the avant-garde, a poet's poet.'[10] In the present study, O'Hara's status as a minor innovator and his usefulness only as a 'poet's poet' will be challenged through close reading of key subjects of his poetry.

The city - New York as landscape, environment and workplace - is a consistent foreground AND background to O'Hara's poetry. Studies in O'Hara's work take as read his status as a poet of the urban environment, epitomised by the title of the only Frank O'Hara biography, City Poet.[11] Gregory Bredbeck's 1993 article in PMLA states that he does NOT wish to 'examine O'Hara's poetics....as it memorializes the freneticism of the urban milieu of the late fifties and early sixties'[12], suggesting that this is already well documented and settled, yet the two works he recommends on

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[9] Thomas Shapcott, 'From "Two Tombstones"', p48.

[10] Geoff Ward, '"Why, it's right there in the procès verbal": The New York School of Poets', The Cambridge Quarterly, v.21(3), (1992), 273-82, p.282.

[11] Brad Gooch, City Poet; The Life And Times of Frank O'Hara, (New York: Knopf, 1993). Further references to this book will be noted in the text as 'Gooch'.

[12] Gregory W. Bredbeck, "B/O - Barthes's Text/O'Hara's Trick", (p.268).

the subject 'for discussion of the urban topic'[13] were written in 1972 and 1973 respectively[14] and cannot show the subsequent influence and impact that O'Hara has had on late twentieth century urban writing. Bredbeck's statement that O'Hara 'memorializes' the city in the fifties and sixties suggests that his poetry is restricted to a chronicling of a time and place which is now readable only for nostalgic pleasure. The word 'memorialize' condemns O'Hara's work to stand only for that particular time, to offer no more than a reminder of the past as it was, leaving little other than sentimental documentation of mid-century New York.

Is O'Hara's work offering more than this to the contemporary reader? If so what? This study will trace the direction and innovations of O'Hara's city poetry through the tradition of the urban genre. It will assess exactly how O'Hara was innovative in city writing, bringing about a turnaround in how the urban landscape and its effect on the individual, is portrayed in the text. The chapter on the city will discuss the representation of the city landscape through other media - film, photography, music and painting - to show how O'Hara's inspiration in creating a new, exciting, urban poetry diverges from traditional literary representations of the city. The city chapter will also examine O'Hara's poetry in the context of recent urban studies, arguing that O'Hara's urban poetics

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[13] Gregory W. Bredbeck, "B/O - Barthes Text/O'Hara's Trick", p. 281, n.2.

[14] The works to which Bredbeck refers are: John Gruen, The Party's Over now: Reminiscences of the Fifties - New York's Artists, Writers, Musicians, and their Friends. (New York: Viking, 1972), and: Susan Holohan, 'Frank O'Hara's Poetry.' In American Poetry Since 1960: Some Critical Perspectives. Ed. Robert B. Shaw, (Cheadle Hulme: Carcanet, 1973), pp. 109-22.

is relevant and influential for today's reader in our times of vast urbanisation.

The theme of art in O'Hara's poetry is much debated. That it is a major subject is acknowledged by all, yet most critics suggest that O'Hara is a follower of the painters in style as well as in life. Perloff has noted that:

> precisely because of his close association with the 'New York School', O'Hara was - and continues to be - considered an 'art world' figure rather than a serious poet.
>
> (PAP p.xi)

The emphasis here is on the New York art world - a specific milieu which O'Hara's poetry is seen as chronicling; in such a context, his work becomes merely an intimate diary of that rarefied milieu. A review of Lunch Poems in 1966 calls the poems 'messages to a personal cosmopolitan elite, which apparently consists of O'Hara and his immediate friends.'[15] In the 1990s, O'Hara as art-world chronicler is acknowledged. Ward suggests:

> O'Hara incorporated among the many projects of his poetry a soap-opera-cum art history Lives of the Painters....Read as they can be as a growing and single work, The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara do not merely issue from but document with unparalleled colour and detail the artistic milieu of postwar New York.
>
> (SL p.3)

The question of O'Hara's marginalisation as a hanger-on to

[15] Gilbert Sorrentino, 'The New Note', Bookweek, (1 May 1966), 19, p.19.

the Abstract Expressionist artists, has been previously addressed in critical accounts of his poetry; these attempt to parallel what O'Hara's poetic work does, with that of the painters - evident both in Perloff's study, and in the work of other scholars including Anthony Libby[16] and, more recently, Suzanne Ferguson.[17] The consensus seems to be that O'Hara is a poet who uses painterly techniques in the same way as the Abstract Expressionists artists who were his friends and colleagues. Again, this line of argument focuses on the formal procedures of O'Hara's work, largely overlooking the relevance of his inclusion of artworks within the text, for the genre of ekphrastic poetry.

In this study, the prevailing view of O'Hara as painterly poet will be examined, to assess exactly what O'Hara's use of the painters and paintings has been. It will aim to prove that the poet did not merely ape the methods of his artist contemporaries, and it will also determine whether those critical studies which suggest parallels between the painting and the poetry, stand up to examination. The chapter on art draws on specific paintings from the Tate Gallery's exhibition, 'Willem de Kooning: Paintings' in London, 1995. The de Kooning pieces are considered alongside some of O'Hara's poetry which is said to be inspired by the painter's work. It is hoped that the discussion of the different media will elucidate

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[16] Anthony Libby, 'O'Hara on the Silver Range', Contemporary Literature, 17(2), (1976), pp240-62.

[17] Suzanne Ferguson, 'Crossing the Delaware with Larry Rivers and Frank O'Hara: The Post-Modern Hero at the Battle of the Signifiers', Word and Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry, v2(1), (Jan-March 1986), 27-32.

O'Hara's own methods of distinguishing between the two within his poems.

Through a thorough assessment of the visual arts - and of the artists - in O'Hara's work, this study will argue that O'Hara's art poetry is not, contrary to majority opinion, a painterly poetry. It will explain the undoubted importance of the visual arts in O'Hara's work. Close reading of the poems alongside recent articles on ekphrastic writing will offer a re-reading of O'Hara's art poetry, demonstrating how he extends the boundaries of the relationship between poetry and painting.

The chapter on elegy will examine the awareness and portrayal of mortality in O'Hara's work. Initial critical reaction to O'Hara's work pronounced the poetry merely lighthearted: his verse was 'amiable and gay, like streamers of crepe paper fluttering before an electric fan.'[18] In similar vein, reviews of The Collected Poems in 1972 suggested that the volume is:

> a beautiful, meticulous, and painstakingly ornate job of book-making, but the splendor of the vessel only accentuates the triviality of its contents.[19]

Another review from the same volume characterised O'Hara's work as follows:

> His poetic world is light and bright, gay, charming, witty, sunny, and agreeable, but it is neither large

[18] Marius Bewley, 'Lines', review of Love Poems (Tentative Title), in New York Review of Books, (31 March, 1966), 20, p.20.

[19] Pearl K. Bell, 'The Poverty of Poetry', New Leader, (10 January 1972), 15, p.15.

> nor deep enough to fill the oversize pages of his Collected Poems.[20]

Yet, later critics and scholars have detected a stream of melancholy in O'Hara's poetry, noting his references and allusions to death and mortality, so much so, that recent work debates the 'curious and crucial placement of death', even suggesting that 'the more one reads O'Hara, the darker does his work become'.[21]

Such a discrepancy in these readings of O'Hara's work is striking, suggesting that the topic of mortality may indeed be fundamental to an interpretation and examination of O'Hara's body of poetry. Along with the themes of art and the city, it is one of the essential considerations in a new comprehensive reading of his work, eliciting questions concerning the very nature of O'Hara's entire body of work.

If death is a major feature of the poetry, can O'Hara's work be interpreted as elegiac? O'Hara's exploration of death within the text will be assessed alongside recent research on the modern elegy to demonstrate his textual approach to the subject. The chapter on elegy includes a focus on O'Hara's series of poems addressing the death of James Dean. The James Dean poems demonstrate O'Hara's subversion and extension of elegiac writing. Instead of reading his poetry as O'Hara's personal battle against time, as a transparent,

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[20] Michele Murray, 'Speaking Straight from the Core: Five Books Reveal the men Behind the Poems.', National Observer, (10 June 1972), p.21.

[21] Geoff Ward, "Why it's right there in the Procès verbal...", p.276.

representational way to deal with temporality, the chapter on elegy will focus on O'Hara's literary and linguistic USE of death, and the effect this casts back into the poetry.

The findings of the research presented here will hopefully contribute towards the revival of interest in O'Hara, and may help identify how his representation of these topics affect his influence on current practice. This thesis points to O'Hara's innovations within the subjects of city writing, art poetry and literary death. It will hopefully open the way for further study into how O'Hara's use of these genres is interpreted by current theoretical readings and developed by contemporary poetic practice. The present work will also attempt to demonstrate that O'Hara's poetry offers today's reader, independently of contemporary theory and poetics, a body of work which addresses a modern urban world and its concerns with warmth and wit.

In today's predominantly urban environment, a poetics which is based on the city must provide insight and relevance for contemporary readers and writers alike. The sensibility of the contemporary world can, in addition, only revel in a poetics which allows visual art to be incorporated within the verbal space of a poem, allowing two different media to co-inhabit in the same field. O'Hara's opening of the boundaries of both genre and media to allow total play within the text's framework, is pertinent to the contemporary world's eclectic outlook and aesthetic.

The topic of death - a topic significant to writers and readers of literature throughout history, is dealt with

by O'Hara through its linguistic and textual connotations, to produce a contemporary treatment of the topic, not as a metaphysical or spiritual struggle, but as an examination of a literary reaction to it, exploring meanings, definition and portrayal through textual means. This study attempts to provide a reading of O'Hara's poetry which demonstrates, with a close reading of his work through its major themes, its importance and aptness for today's readers.

THE CITY

WRITING THE CITY

The city as text is a much debated subject, especially in today's era of perpetual urbanisation, as the human individual questions his or her position in a constantly changing environment. Recent studies in urban literature are debating the reading of cities through either spatial or temporal dimension - imposing on the city some sort of scale by which to make it more understandable. As part of this on-going discourse, in the introductory chapter to a book of essays entitled Visions of the Modern City, William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock suggest that:

> The use of such metaphors is likely to continue for as long as the urban environment appears unintelligible, for they satisfy a deeply felt need to comprehend the city in visual terms. That a number of recent critics have stressed the importance of 'mapping' the contemporary city is indicative of a nostalgia for urban legibility.[1]

To need to view the city as metaphor at all suggests a sense of unfamiliarity and unease between the writer and the environment. The need for metaphor hints that the writer is somewhat estranged from the world that he or she inhabits, alienated from the very surroundings which contain him or her, and only able to approach it by reconstructing it into a more easily assimilable 'other' to

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[1] William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, 'From "Great Town" to "Non-place Urban Realm": Reading the Modern City', in Visions of the Modern City: Essays in History, Art and Literature, Eds. William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, (Baltimore/London: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), p.36.

react to. The city as metaphor is not presented just as itself, but in terms of something else, its very essence overlooked or not even noticed at all.

The words 'unintelligible...comprehend..legibility..' which Sharpe and Wallock use in the above quotation are in themselves very telling, in that they are suggestive of a desire to unscramble urban life and simplify it before it can be lived in, the word 'legibility' being particularly indicative of an assumption that the city should be deciphered into coherence, clarity, and conformity. As a consequence, literature rewrites the urban as something strangely alien and alienating, a hostile environment imposed upon the natural by which it is then judged.

The perception of the city which dominates its reconstruction into literature, is as a place of alienation with effects on the individual of isolation, disorientation and breakdown. Against the background of this perception, what, if any, is the impact of Frank O'Hara's fundamentally urban body of work? Is his poetry more than a continuation of these general themes of city writing? Is his work merely typical of its time, reacting to the mid-twentieth century environment, which here happens to be New York City? What is city writing in the Twentieth Century?

The conclusion of Dana Brand's book, The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth Century American Literature also comments on the literary situation in the twentieth century:

In the dominant discourses of our literature...it

> is still assumed that human beings can only handle a limited and relatively uniform amount of discontinuity and dissonance, that unity and order must be somehow imposed upon multiplicity so that consciousness can remain in control. Cities are still condemned for their lack of coherence, harmony and intimacy, as if it were ever possible or desirable for complex and diverse cities of several million to be distinguished for these qualities. They are described as unmanageable and alienating...In the literature that arises out of these expectations, the vital and the inevitable diversity and incongruity of the modern city are routinely made to serve as metaphors for social chaos and decay.[2]

Perhaps by way of coping with what Brand calls the 'lack of coherence, harmony and intimacy' of the city, O'Hara's urban poems unfold to allow unlimited amounts of space in which to house the city. The poet does not attempt to ensnare the city's size and pin it down in a poem; instead, it opens up through a language which is PART of that environment, shaped in and by it, rather than one which has to look on detached, alienated and in awe. In an essay on Robert Lowell's city poems, Helen Vendler suggests that:

> ..the first difficulty for the lyric poet is the actual constitution of the city - large, heterogeneous, full of unknown people, political, landscaped, historical. Its largeness must be reduced to fit the brief scope of the lyric.[3]

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[2] Dana Brand, The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth Century American Literature, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.193.

[3] Helen Vendler, 'The Poet and the City: Robert Lowell', in Literature and the Urban American Experience: Essays on the City and Literature, Eds. Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watt, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), p.52.

Yet O'Hara's lyric is more than equal to the city's make-up, and in no way is the city 'reduced' to 'fit' the poems. Instead, the poems open outwards, extending from inside themselves to encompass the scale of his environment, and function as a workable space which O'Hara utilises from within. The ability to open up to include the scale of the city can be seen in O'Hara's poem 'The Day Lady Died':

> It is 12:20 in New York a Friday
> three days after Bastille Day, yes
> it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine
> because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton
> at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner
> and I don't know the people who will feed me
>
> I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun
> and have a hamburger and a malted and buy
> an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets
> in Ghana are doing these days
> I go on to the bank
> and Miss Stillwagon (first name Linda I once heard)
> doesn't even look up my balance for once in her life
> and in the GOLDEN GRIFFIN I get a little Verlaine
> for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do
> think of Hesiod, trans. Richmond Lattimore or
> Brendan Behan's new play or Le Balcon or Les Negres
> of Genet, but I don't, I stick with Verlaine
> after practically going to sleep with quandariness
>
> and for Mike I just stroll into the PARK LANE
> Liquor Store and ask for a bottle of Strega and
> then I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue
> and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and
> casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
> of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it
>
> and I'm sweating a lot by now and thinking of
> leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
> while she whispered a song along the keyboard
> to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing
>
> (CP p.325)

In the opening of the poem, the reader is immediately thrust into a world where precise times and places seem

paramount, as O'Hara pinpoints and focuses in on an exact moment - 'it is 12:20 in New York', then swiftly widens the zoom by placing that minute in its place in history -'three days after Bastille Day', so that although the experience is initially narrowed to a distinct, static moment, its relation to Bastille Day allows it a broader, more cosmopolitan resonance, with the hospitable encompassing of French culture and history. So, in the opening lines, a set time in New York opens up instantly - New York can hold within it, as part of its temporal being, world culture and history, and make it its own; the city has the capacity to take on and assimilate other cultures and give them back reconstituted in an American idiom - or more precisely, an urban idiom, where the distinction between conventionally important events and trivia become eroded.

If this is to be accepted as something other than disorienting and alienating, it must be faced at the surface level, the 'heterogeneous' quality of the city as described by Vendler being present within a single frame, its variety present within the same focus. O'Hara utilises this idea of surface, which at the level of the text can only be flat and one dimensional, by dislocating the standard representations of reality and reassembling them - not in a coherent linear structure, but by juxtaposing pictures of city life and overlapping images, creating a busy surface which somehow has more dimension than a single snapshot or description could ever embody. Time shifts, surreal images and vividly 'real' concrete images of the

city are reformed into a new coherence which embraces the serendipitous nature of the city. O'Hara's writing in essence takes on the manifold aspects of the urban environment itself.

In this poem then, following the reference to Bastille Day, which we might expect has been set up as the introduction to an important event, O'Hara continues 'yes / it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine' - the almost triumphal 'yes' still promising to herald a major announcement, only to actually deliver a piece of daily mundanity. The connective 'and' between 'it is 1959' and 'I go get a shoeshine' is strangely placed to suggest a causal, logical progression between the big build-up of the moment, and the actual event, which turns out to be trivial and in the context of the dates, insignificant.

It is in this way that O'Hara plays with the planes of urban life - there is a certain depthlessness whereby logical senses of coherence and perspective are subverted. Events and descriptions are laid side by side, overlapping, like the cubist planes in the visual arts or even in some of the cubist poetry of early twentieth century French writers such as Reverdy or Apollinaire. In this way, all the layers of city-ness are open to view - the more 'real' hierarchical ordering by which we sense our environment is removed, so that all is laid flat on the surface of the poem, at the level of the language, remaining coherent and yet strangely re-shuffled.

Other of his city poems, such as 'Rhapsody', interlace

the coherent passages of narrative with more elaborate artifice:

> a sight of Manahatta in the towering needle
> multi-faceted insight of the fly in the stringless
> labyrinth
> Canada plans a higher place than the Empire State
> Building
> I am getting into a cab at 9th Street and 1st Avenue
> and the Negro driver tells me about a $120 apartment
> 'where you can't even walk across the floor after 10
> at night
> not even to pee, cause it keeps them awake downstairs'
> no, I don't like that 'well I didn't take it'
> perfect in the hot humid morning on my way to work
> a little supper club conversation for the mill of the
> gods.
>
> (CP p.326)

Physical, geographical realities - here, the Empire State Building, 9th Street and 1st Avenue - are contained in the same long, unpunctuated reel of images as the 'Manahatta' of Whitman's poetry and the strange image of a fly's-eye-view of a labyrinth, perhaps the ultimate perception of a city with its multiplicity of images and directions. All these form part of the same text - real and mythical, literary and factual, are present within the same focus, creating a busy and playful surface. This poem with its ostentatious rhapsodising of the city's features - 'o midtown tunnels and the tunnels, too of Holland' recalls Apollinaire's 'Zone'[4] which interlaces a physically real Paris with myth and with other countries and settings, lending O'Hara's poem a French glamour. Thus, O'Hara again

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[4] Guillaume Apollinaire, Selected Poems, translated by Oliver Bernard, (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1988), 21-31.

moves New York out into the world to echo 'The Day Lady Died', whose initial reference to Bastille Day is followed by a string of references to other essentially foreign cultures. Yet, by the very presence and apparently casual mention of these other cultures in the poem, they exist anew, not as out-of-place objects, but as part of everyday New York, which has taken them on as its own.

In 'Rhapsody', that cosmopolitanism, the assimilation of other cultures into Americanism, and particularly into New York, is manifest in the very formal considerations of the poem. O'Hara uses the French ostentation in an American idiom - the 'tunnels, too of Holland' being both an embracing of European culture and a glamorising of a New York landmark - the Holland Tunnel. So when the poem moves outwards to embrace 'Niagara Falls...Victoria Falls...Madrid...the Niger...Tibet...China...' all these places and cultures belong to the poem, which still manages to be 'about' Madison Avenue and its potential for anecdotes, 'a little supper club conversation'.

O'Hara lets the places and ideas he includes in his poems form their own landscape; places and events which promise to have an inherent meaning or priority lose this power in the poem, as at the level of the poem's surface there is no hierarchical ordering. Instead, O'Hara creates anew a coherence based on the surface texture of the poem, which gains its power from the juxtaposition and interaction of the images, and ultimately by their very inclusion as part of the poem.

In the opening to 'The Day Lady Died' this new coherence manifests itself in the apparent importance of the times, which turn out to function contrary to expectations. Firstly, the times announce nothing more than a shoeshine, and then move all the action in the direction of a dinner party to which the speaker is going. In turn, the dinner party ends up as only a vague and slightly unreal event in the poem, whose focus moves constantly in the here and now, making the present important and all-encompassing. The dinner party promises to be the major focus of the poem, yet it does not actually feature at all, and in effect becomes less important to the poem than the shoeshine, because it does not figure in the process of the poem's creation; what promises to be the subject of the poem makes itself obsolete by being outside the here and now, the encounters of the present. The poem does not degenerate into reflection - there is no time, all that matters is the move through the present.

'I DON'T KNOW THE PEOPLE WHO WILL FEED ME' - ALIENATION AND COMMUNITY IN THE CITY

As a future event, the dinner party is relevant only as an occasion of thoughts that the poet is having in the present moment, and which appear to tail off with 'I don't know the people who will feed me'. This last observation hints at the isolation and disconnection that characterises much city literature. The environment is strangely caught between a civilised friendliness where life is marked out

by timetables for the convenience of vast amounts of citizens, and dinner invitations which bring people together; yet this environment is also strangely isolating, as the times - the '4:19..the 7:15..' - also serve to de-personalise and regulate life around anonymous ordering systems. At a smaller level, these ordering systems also include dinner party etiquette, through which a sense of social rules are in force. In the vastness of the city, such rules of etiquette still allow the guests to be estranged from each other, held together only by principles of politeness, and so the speaker doesn't really 'know' his hosts.

O'Hara's comment here is almost child-like in its desolation, striking against the sophisticated urbanity he goes to great pains to put on later in the poem where he can:

> ....just stroll into the PARK LANE
> Liquor Store and ask for a bottle of Strega and.....
> casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
> of Picayunes...
>
> (CP p. 325)

References to theatres, shops and the exotic foreign products are a blatant form of name-dropping. O'Hara is making a statement to the effect that the sense of alone-ness can be eradicated by taking advantage of the wide variety that a huge mass of people brings to a city. Instead of being left out, become one of that very crowd of others by participating in the activities and lifestyle

that the city offers to the full; let Whitman's 'En- Masse'[5] be your code for living and fit into the multitude, be at home in the environment.

The hint in 'The Day Lady Died' at dislocation is sharply in the same focus as the casual, familiar mention of the landmarks and routine of New York life, showing that although it is reasonable to feel overwhelmed and alone in the face of the city's vastness, it is possible to make yourself a part of its culture: embrace the variety it has to offer - participate and become part of the city, belong. O'Hara negates the rootless cosmopolitanism epitomised by Eliot and running through most city literature. He also negates the whole Modernist version of the city, inherited from Baudelaire, as the site of decadence and apocalypse.

Here the wide and diverse features of the city become a new way to set down roots. They do not act to segregate or highlight the differences between people and cultures - rather, O'Hara can confirm his identity and his culture BY the references to the many foreign items and names so casually linked with the city's landmarks. This cosmopolitanism, O'Hara suggests, is what makes up New York. O'Hara is a New Yorker, all is contained in his city; he buys the NEW YORK POST full of New York news and gossip and ideas. He belongs. In effect, he becomes one of the lucky 'others' from a poem like Reverdy's 'A Mediocre Appearance', where the main character, by his very

[5] Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself', Collected Poems, Ed. Francis Murphy, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p.85.

singularity, becomes his own minor character in the face of the crowd of other people who somehow seem to 'belong'. On a train journey:

> people part
> other arms once again wave handkerchiefs. But that man
> is alone
> and his glasses mist with others' tears.....
> He has left no note and will be
> met by no one at the station.[6]

There is a feeling of paranoia in the words 'that man', as though he is being pointed out and stared at, an oddity. He is already apart, in his isolation, from others, and his story is devoid of positives; rather, he is described in a series of negatives, as though his life were literally a negative, in the photographic sense, of the lives of the other people, emphasised by pathetic passivity. Indeed, the passive nature of his life is underlined when at the end of the poem 'something is following him or / perhaps someone in the strange form of his shadow.' His own shadow is detached from him as a separate being and takes on a more active role than he himself has. The two reverse roles and as such, a shade of a shade, he almost becomes peripheral to his own poem, but cruelly he is not allowed to become merely a shade, as the shadow ensures that he is still very much in existence. That existence, however is doomed to stay 'mediocre'.

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[6] Pierre Reverdy, Selected Poems, Translated by Mary Ann Caws, John Ashbery and Patricia Terry, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books,1991), p.19.

In James Thomson's 'The City of Dreadful Night'[7] the idea of enforced existence, and sheer loneliness and disorientation amongst the crowd, is extended, so that the crowd is in fact a crowd of lost, hopeless people, all dislocated from each other, ironically bound together by their very isolation. Yet cruelly, the isolation is stronger than any true bond of togetherness, which only manifests itself through strange ritualistic gatherings and chants, devoid of the passion that mass participation can produce; the people remain locked within their own psyche, internalised with their own melancholy and do not reach out to their environment or to each other; the isolation wins.

Thomson's poem is full of echoes rather than voices, fraught with a maze-like sense of repetition, deja-vu and disorientation - a theme echoed in Eliot's The Waste Land which serves to make people into 'Hollow Men'[8], similar to Reverdy's man of mediocre appearance, or like Prufrock, who could himself be one of the 'lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows'[9] he sees on his wanderings. In these poems, the city plays host to a vast collection of disconnected and lonely people, becoming the occasion for breakdown in human communication, and standing as a metaphor for aridity and decay, for corruption of what is natural and good. The message is clearly that the vast

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[7] James Thomson, Poetical Works: The City of Dreadful Night and Other Poems, ed. Bertram Dobell, 2 Vols, (London: Reeves and Turner, 1985), I, 122-172.

[8] T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909 - 1962, (London: Faber, 1963), p.89.

[9] T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909 - 1962, p.15.

population of urban areas can only promote loneliness and alienation.

In an essay on the city and literature, James Baldwin claims:

> the tremendous noise of the city, the tremendous claustrophobia of the city is designed to hide what the city really does, which is to divorce us from a sense of reality and to divorce us from each other.[10]

The city does not function like this for O'Hara, who harnesses the perceived chaotic mass of people and turns it into a positive urban quality. 'The Day Lady Died' plays with feelings of disconnection and alienation by an initial suggestion of the individual being set against the crowd and made lonely within it, before the final rush up to the end of the poem, which turns out to be an elegy for the singer Billie Holiday:

> and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
> leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
> while she whispered a song along the keyboard
> to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing
>
> (CP p.325)

The focus here is on a shared experience - the reference to the '5 SPOT' and 'Mal Waldron' making the occasion so intimate as to almost exclude anyone NOT a citizen of New York from the event. It is the occasion and language of a shared intimacy which proclaims intense and actual

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[10] James Baldwin, 'The Language of the Streets', in Literature and the American Urban Experience, p.134.

closeness in the city environment. The ambiguous 'everyone and I' does not negate this closeness by separating O'Hara from a crowd of others. Rather, following the poignant memory of the club scene, it is the word 'and' that stands out in this clause, its connective property heralding membership and support, rather than categorising and emphasising differences. In the environment of such a closely shared set of references, where consciousness is informed by the place names and brand names of one's world - the raw data of the city - as much as by any detached sense of selfhood, the poetry moves away from the feelings of an 'I' and into the realm of a shared consciousness.

O'Hara's forging of togetherness from the city's potentially isolated and disparate inhabitants, builds on the ideals of Whitman, who, time and again in his city poetry calls for friendship and brotherhood amongst the citizens of New York:

> Stranger, if you passing meet me and desire to speak to me,
> why should you not speak to me?
> And why should I not speak to you?
>
> ('To You'p. 49)

> I dream'd in a dream I saw a city invincible to the attacks of the whole of the rest of the earth,
> I dream'd that was the new city of Friends,
> Nothing was greater there than the quality of robust love,it led the rest,
> It was seen every hour in the actions of men of that city,
> And in all their looks and words.
>
> ('I Dream'd in a Dream' p.164)

Give me faces and streets - give me these phantoms
incessant and endless along the trottoirs!
Give me interminable eyes - give me women - give me
comrades and lovers by the thousand!
Let me see new ones every day - let me hold new ones by
the hand every day!
Give me such shows - give me the streets of Manhattan!

('Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun' p.337)

City whom that I have lived and sung in your midst will
one day make you illustrious,
Not the pageants of you, not your shifting tableaus,
your
spectacles repay me.....
Not those, but as I pass O Manhattan, your frequent and
swift flash of eyes offering me love,
Offering response to my own - these repay me,

('City of Orgies' p.158)

I loved well those cities, loved well the stately and
rapid river,
The men and women I saw there were all near to me,
Others the same - others who look back on me because I
look'd forward to them,....

Ah, what can ever be more stately and admirable to me
than
mast-hemm'd Manhattan?.....

What is more subtle than this which ties me to the
woman
or man that looks in my face?.....

('Crossing Brooklyn Ferry' p. 189)[11]

O'Hara moves away from Whitman's pleas, dreams and illustrations in the very directness of his portrayals. In a way he is the true successor of Whitman, fulfilling his dreams and prophecies ('And mine a word of the modern, the

[11] All poems by Whitman referred to in this thesis are from Walt Whitman, The Complete Poems, Ed. Francis Murray.

word En-Masse - from 'Song of Myself' - see note 4). O'Hara's poems do not have to hope for comradeship and the possibility of relationships amongst the crowds of citizens; any reflection upon this is absent from his poetry. His poems are occupied in the celebration of those relationships actually in progress - in 'Rhapsody' , 'everywhere love is breathing draftily / like a doorway' and 'I cough lightly in the smog of desire'. Even the city's concrete, hard features and its atmosphere are composed of the elements of human relations - 'desire' and 'love', (typically, even the air here is 'smog' - a man-made city by-product). O'Hara's city acts as a giant net to draw people together, rather than an agent for dislocation and alienation. Whitman's is an ideal, O'Hara makes it happen.

O'Hara's poetry is the process of actually achieving a sense of belonging and comradeship. He uses the tradition of city writing to forge relationships from a sense of anonymous overcrowding, and to make familiar a sense of disorientation, by subverting the methods used by other poets. For example, here is a section from Apollinaire's 'Lundi Rue Christine':

> Look Sir
> The malachite ring
> The ground is covered with sawdust
> So it's true
> The redhaired waitress was abducted by a bookseller
>
> A journalist whom by the way I know only very
> vaguely
>
> Listen Jacques I'm going to tell you something very
> serious

Goods and passengers steam navigation company

He said to me Sir would you like to see what I can
do in the way of etchings and paintings
All I have got is a little maid[12]

The poem has no contextual setting, no hint as to any familiar place or time to root it to, apart from that of the title. The conversational collage gives the effect of being blindfolded in a crowded place, which disorients and sets the reader off balance. The reader - and perhaps even the writer - is immediately placed as an outsider or a stranger in the environment, unable to participate in it and lost amongst the voices. Compare this section from O'Hara's 'Personal Poem':

I walk through the luminous humidity
passing the House of Seagram with its wet
and its loungers and the construction to
the left that closed the sidewalk if
I ever get to be a construction worker
I'd like to have a silver hat please
and get to Moriarty's where I wait for
LeRoi and hear who wants to be a mover and
shaker the last five years my batting average
is .016 that's that, and LeRoi comes in
and tells me Miles Davis was clubbed 12
times last night outside BIRDLAND by a cop
a lady asks us for a nickel for a terrible
disease we don't give her one we
don't like terrible diseases, then
we go eat some fish and some ale it's
cool but crowded we don't like Lionel Trilling
we decide, we like Don Allen we don't like
Henry James so much we like Herman Melville

(CP p.335)

[12] Guillaume Apollinaire, Selected Poems, p.111.

The same use of snippets of conversation detached from their source and used purely as an aesthetic device in the poem applies, yet O'Hara has adapted it to familiarise a place, Moriarty's, and a time, lunch time. The bodiless voices here are a comforting, familiar noise by which the speaker orients himself. Although these are anonymous voices from an unknown crowd, it is a crowd of fellow-citizens, so much so that O'Hara and 'LeRoi' then add their voices to this collection, giving the effect of a harmonious symphony rather than a Babel. The subject of their conversation centres around literary figures and preferences; literature, in terms of its being the subject of a conversation, is now part of the urban environment, to be used as material of the city for the purposes of the poem. In effect, literature becomes as much an element of the city, through its part in the conversation, as the construction workers with their 'silver hats'. The poets are not detached from the city, but integrated as part of it, even preferring to 'walk on girders' than 'to be in the poet's walk in / San Francisco'.

Ultimately it is the conversation itself as part of the sounds of the city lunchtime which is important for the poem, its joining of voices giving rise to something musical, aesthetically pleasing, rather than a cacophony, so the 'tremendous noise of the city' which James Baldwin laments, is, for O'Hara part of a larger harmony that is part of the city's make-up.

ABSTRACT OR REFERENTIAL CITY?

Perhaps O'Hara can only turn away from the traditions of literature for inspiration in writing the city, and find his models in the other arts. Peter Conrad's The Art of the City: Views and Versions of New York,[13] refers to the use of street signs and neon signs as patterns - devoid of their intended utility - being of interest to visual artists such as Mondrian, Jan Matulka and photographers Paul Outerbridge and Walker Evans. A delight in the city's features as aesthetic devices is also evident in O'Hara's work.

Conrad suggests that the New York landscape provides its own patterns and music, the city's features become the material of art: 'the grid of the New York street plan was to Mondrian an abstract heaven'[14] in a way similar to that in which the everyday sounds of New York - the street cars, El trains, sirens, whistles, machinery - prove to be inspirational for John Cage. Conrad quotes Cage as saying 'I'm just crazy about the noise [of New York]. I consider it musical.'[15] For O'Hara, whose medium as an artist was language, words themselves in the form of overheard snatches of lunchtime conversation in an urban crowd, function in the same way as an aesthetic feature, turning Baldwin's 'tremendous noise' into artistic material.

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[13] Peter Conrad, The Art of the City: Views and Versions of New York, (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

[14] Peter Conrad, The Art of the City: Views and Versions of New York, p.120.

[15] Peter Conrad, The Art of the City: Views and Versions of New York, p. 119.

John Murphy suggests that this collage-like effect of the words in 'Personal Poem' makes language 'foregrounded to such an extent that meaning is almost subsumed by it'.[16] Yet the language, as part of a conversation with all its inherent meanings and contexts, and therefore as part of the reality of the New York lunch time, is vital to the poem. If the language was abstracted to the extent that it was pure play, devoid of any signification, then its power and effect in the poem would be lost. At all times O'Hara seems to be in contact with the actual physical features and experiences of his environment. Through this contact the poetry avoids total internalisation; O'Hara's is not purely a city of the mind or imagination, it is always rooted in the real New York.

O'Hara's poetry is thrown into relief by a comparison with Eliot's 'unreal'[17] cities or even Thomson's city which is 'of Dreadful Night' - an abstract beyond physical features or landscape:

> The city is of Night; perchance of Death,
> But certainly of Night; .....
> The sun has never visited that city,
> For it has dissolveth in the daylight fair.
>
> Dissolveth like a dream of night away;
> Though present in distempered gloom of thought
> And deadly weariness of heart all day.
> But when a dream night after night is brought
> Throughout a week, and such weeks few or many
> Recur each year for several years, can any

[16] John Murphy, 'Aspects of the self in the poetry of Robert Lowell, Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Essex, 1990), p.139.

[17] T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909 - 1962, p. 71.

Discern that dream from real life in aught?[18]

Here, the city is ambiguously dreamscape or physical reality, yet it seems to be the power of the mind that endlessly conjures up the city and transforms it into permanence. In Thomson's city, the inhabitants really only inhabit their own feelings of melancholy and despair:

> ....their woe
> Broods maddening inwardly and scorns to wreak
> Itself abroad; and if at whiles it grow
> To frenzy which must rave, none heeds the clamour.[19]

At the end of the poem, it is the statue of Melencolia which presides as 'That City's sombre Patroness and Queen'(p.172), tellingly endowed with 'full set eyes, but wondering in thick mazes / Of sombre thought beholds no outward sight.'(p.169). There is a constant emphasis on internalising the city, on looking inwards rather than reaching out, so creating an unreal city which stands for isolation and despair.

O'Hara avoids this particular psychological projection of the city, remaining firmly rooted in real New York, so in 'Personal Poem', it is the landmarks of the concrete city which dominate the direction of the poem, and serve to mark out a poetic route through lunch time:

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[18] James Thomson, Poetical Works: The City of Dreadful Night and Other Poems, p.124.

[19] James Thomson, Poetical Works, p.127.

> ...the House of Seagram with its wet
> and its loungers and the construction to
> the left that closed the sidewalk
> (CP p.335)

These, and the destination, 'Moriarty's' are the landmarks around and through which the poem functions, before ending by the narrator's return to work: the whole poem and the journey could not take place without New York, concrete and real as its start, end and contents. However, even in other contemporary New York poems, a psychological portrayal of the city dominates.

In Ginsberg's 'Howl' the landmarks of New York map out a strange, hallucinatory world, where things are at once concrete and unreal - the Bronx exists as 'holy Bronx'[20], and the city has 'boroughs of teahead joyride neon / blinking traffic light'(Howl, p.10), producing 'horrors of Third / Avenue iron dreams'(Howl, p.15). However, the city's inhabitants 'woke on a sudden Manhattan'(Howl, P.15) after being caught up in the hallucinatory distorted reality of the cityscape, an environment in which the speaker has to shout out of the flow 'this actually happened'(Howl, p17). There is difficulty in the definition of what is real and what isn't - the inhabitants were 'run down by the drunken taxi cabs of Absolute Reality'(Howl, p.16) - the city's features in Ginsberg's poem have an inherent other reality, here the taxi cabs become avenging

[20] Allen Ginsberg, Howl and Other Poems, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1959), p.10.

vehicles of philosophy, ironically drunk in a seemingly never-ending swirl of drug-related hallucination. The city is distorted; its landmarks and icons are pulled out of their actual contexts and given their own meanings and self-determination, as if to be put on the same mental and psychological plane as its human inhabitants; New York is the spur, the occasion and the location for a distorted reality, a drug-induced destruction of 'the best minds' (Howl, p.9). In a way, Ginsberg's city is similar to Thomson's in its internalised subjectification, and follows a tradition of endowing the city with metaphor for the human condition from as far back as Dante, whose idea of Hell had the mournful city, the 'woeful kingdom'[21] at its heart.

Murphy rightly points out that O'Hara does not want to remove himself entirely by looking inwards from the reality of his environment, and uses the poem 'Rhapsody' (CP, p.325) to illustrate his point that the poet 'does not want to fall over the edge into non-sense or an alogical disconnection from the world' and avoids this as he 'turns outward and makes contact with an observed reality through an objective fact which is part of his received knowledge.'[22] The features of the city do remain the touchstone and the occasion for his poems without taking on deeper symbolism. Even in O'Hara's early poems, where he

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[21] Dante, The Divine Comedy: Inferno, translated by John D. Sinclair, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p.421.

[22] John Murphy, 'Aspects of the self in the poetry of Robert Lowell, Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery', p.142.

experiments with surrealism and automatic writing, the city still functions as itself rather than as a transparent metaphoric link to something psychological.

'Second Avenue'(CP p.139), O'Hara himself describes, in his notes on the poem, as consisting of things which 'either happened to me or I felt happening (saw, imagined) on Second Avenue'(CP p.497). Although the poem is a jumble of apparently incoherent ramblings, these ramblings cohere by the simple fact that their conception was inspired by the street, so no matter how abstract, the street itself doesn't stand for anything else. The 'taxicabs whistling by' are not like Ginsberg's 'drunken taxi cabs of Absolute Reality' - they are there as part of Second Avenue and thus as part of the material of his poem without taking on greater depth, or being enhanced with a meaning in order to give the poem a message. In his notes on the poem O'Hara states:

> To put it very gently, I have a feeling that the philosophical reduction of reality to a dealable-with system so distorts life that one's 'reward' for this endeavor (a minor one at that) is illness both from inside and outside.
>
> (CP p.495)

Murphy has suggested that 'Second Avenue' is O'Hara's most abstract expressionist poem so that the poem does become non-sensical in its lack of substantive meaning:

> Less comfortable but more decorative. My head covered by a green cloth. Taxi cabs whistling by. Fulgently leaning

> from behind, slightly bent.And then the paralyzing rush
> of emotion, its fists caught in Venetian blinds,
> silent,
> burgeoning, like a smudge-pot in a tornado. Utica
> Avenue.
> 'Arrivaderla!' Chief Dispursing Officer, Division of
> Disbursement .'I'm glad there's something beautiful in
> his life'.
> Shall I ever be able to avail myself of the service
> called
> 'Same Day Cleaning', and in what face have I fought the
> Host?
>
> (CP p. 148)

The poem's contents are just that - contents. O'Hara's notes suggest that:

> Perhaps the obscurity comes in here, in the relationship between the surface and the meaning, but I like it that way since the one is the other (you have to use words) and I hope the poem to BE the subject, not just about it.
>
> (CP p.497)

In this poem the words are very definitely materials which he uses to artistic effect, yet their use as aesthetic material does not rule out any signification that the words might hold. In fact, as O'Hara points out, it is the 'relationship' between the effect, at surface level of the play of words, and the inherent meanings attached to them that make up the reading of the poem. The features of the city will always remain as features of the city in his work, important as realities in themselves.

In later poems, such as 'Rhapsody' or 'Music' (CP p.210), the long, constant incoherence of 'Second Avenue' has become more centred - the poems are now 'about' the

city more specifically. In Murphy's critique of 'Rhapsody', there is a sense that O'Hara initially has two separate views of New York - 'Essentially he is faced with abstraction and a solid reality and tries to merge the two'[23]. The idea of abstraction here suggests that it is something divorced from the real, perhaps like Ginsberg's city, rather than something aesthetic inherent in the real features of the city. Yet the opening of the poem begins with a very real, very solid feature:

> 515 Madison Avenue
> door to heaven? portal
> stopped realities and eternal licentiousness
> or at least the jungle of impossible eagerness
> your marble is bronze and your lianas elevator cables

The specific place appears first and foremost as a real element, pinpointed exactly in location as though to give no doubt as to its authenticity or reality. In its initial dearth of description, the plain giving of an address is unlike anything expected of poetry, except perhaps in younger poets than O'Hara, for example in John Wieners' Hotel Wentley Poems[24], which O'Hara admired. In 'Rhapsody', this building is a real building in a real city. 515 Madison Avenue is not an imagined symbol, a metaphoric landmark in a psychological landscape, and the first line of the poem - which is just the address - exists alone,

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[23] John Murphy, 'Aspects of the self in the poetry of Robert Lowell, Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery', p. 141.

[24] John Wieners, The Hotel Wentley Poems, (San Francisco: The Auerhahn Press, 1958).

almost as a statement of fact, as solid as the door. Only on the next line does it becomes a 'door to heaven', and then this is punctured by a question mark - its possibilities unfold, not as ideas that are separate to the place in itself, rather, they only exist because of it and through it.

O'Hara's abstraction of the city is abstract in De Kooning's sense of the word. Although he was discussing abstraction in the visual arts, de Kooning's notion of abstraction applies equally well to O'Hara's literary abstraction. De Kooning begins by discussing art before the notion of 'abstract art':

> There was only one thing you could take out of it ... - that abstract and indefinable sensation, the esthetic part - and still leave it where it was. For the painter to come to the 'abstract' or the 'nothing' he needed many things. Those things were always in life....They freed the shapes, the light, the color, by putting them into concrete things in a given situation.... then subject matter came into existence as something you ought NOT to have... They didn't need THINGS like tables and chairs...They needed ideas, instead, social ideas, to make their objects with...The 'nothing' part in a painting until then - the part that was not painted but that was there because of the things in the picture which where painted - ...was always recognised as a particular something...They had the innocent idea that the 'something' existed 'in spite of' and not 'because of' and that this something was the only thing that truly mattered...That 'something which was not measurable, they lost by trying to make it measurable.[25]

[25] Willem de Kooning, Collected Writings, Ed. George Scrivani, (Madras and New York,: Hanuman Books, 1988), pp. 42-52.

It is O'Hara's use of the city's real landscape and inhabitants which means his abstraction of the city does not take away from, nor become separate from, its real features. O'Hara does not build his poetry from 'ideas', but from the objects of his world, and so he is not faced with abstraction AND reality, but, as De Kooning suggests, the abstraction is freed from the features of the things he sees and hears - it is an integral part of his perception of the city, rather than being two 'states' which he attempts to merge.

Peter Conrad's discussion of the representation of an abstract New York in the visual arts suggests that 'abstraction needn't fear the incursions of the real and can befriend the chaos and contingency of New York'[26]. O'Hara's celebration of chaos and contingency in the city's actualities, whilst avoiding the sense that his New York is an 'unreal city', makes his an urbanism which breaks away from that of past poetic traditions.

With post-war New York specifically as subject, with its fast-pace cosmopolitanism opening up to embrace a great diversity of cultures, a language and a poetry was needed that could accommodate the whole of its vitality without becoming lost, scared and alienated in the face of its vastness. In the introduction to O'Hara's Collected Poems, John Ashbery sums up this requirement:

What was needed was a vernacular corresponding to

[26] Peter Conrad, The Art of the City: Views and Versions of New York, p.126.

> the creatively messy New York environment...that kaleidoscopic lumber-room where laws of time and space are altered....
>
> (CP p.x)

Part of Ashbery's required urban vernacular must be shaped by the 'nightmares, delights and paradoxes of life in this city' (CP p.x). To encompass such wide-ranging experience, perhaps O'Hara looked to other arts for inspiration in representing the urban world. The cinema, with its montage and use of effects enabling it to 'approximate to the visual experience of being in a city'[27] plays an inspirational role in helping to create the shifts and cuts represented in O'Hara's poetics. These cinematic techniques do not try to occlude the essence of New York, rather, they embrace its eclecticism without bewilderment and with positive and exciting accuracy.

An inspirational model for O'Hara's re-writing of the city can perhaps be found in the cinema. The cinema was perhaps the ultimate O'Hara could aspire to, as in 'Personism' (CP p.498) he declares that 'only Whitman and Crane and Williams, of the American poets, are better than the movies'. Indeed, many of his poems borrow freely from the images and personae of the cinema - famous film scenes such as the shot of Marilyn Monroe standing above a grate with her skirt blowing up actually becomes part of the scene of an O'Hara poem ('A Step Away From Them' [CP

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[27] Michael Minden, 'The City in Early Cinema: "Metropolis", "Berlin" and "October"', in Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art, Eds. Edward Timms and David Kelley, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p.203.

p.257]), and O'Hara has written several poems just about the cinema and the experience of going to the movies, which always is made to seem magical and essential:

> it's true that fresh air is good for the body
> but what about the soul
> that grows in darkness, embossed by silvery images.
>
> (CP p.371)

Apart from the cinema being important as subject matter in his poetry, it also provides a model for technique. Edward Timms suggests that 'the cinema may be more successful than any other art forms in conveying the dynamics of the city'[28], and O'Hara has harnessed this success, adapting the properties of film in the form of language. Constantly rolling film has the ability to capture any and every encounter, while the techniques of cutting and editing can focus attention on the rapidly changing and overlapping of city experience. In addition, the experience of watching a movie is one of constantly moving in the present tense. Unlike a painting, which can be taken in in one look, seen in its entirety, a film is a constant encounter with experience as process; each section of footage is engaged with as it unrolls, allowing for any possible experience or encounter, and each part is experienced in the present. It functions just as a walk

[28] Edward Timms, Unreal City: Urban Experience in Modern European Literature and Art, p.10.

through the city - it does not reveal all in one view, but addresses each encounter as it arrives, and promises any possibilities yet to be met.

Michael Minden's claims for cinematographic techniques could apply equally well to O'Hara's poetics for portraying the urban environment:

> where the juxtaposition of moving images is not subordinated to a plot, and where the cuts are apparent, rather than hidden in the folds of a flowing narrative, the effect can be like the subjective experience of the city, namely a succession of different images and angles constructing a perception in strong contrast to the unifying and uniform perception of a village or landscape; a perception more rapid and less continuous than that encouraged by the traditional forms of literature, sculpture and painting. [29]

Minden rules out literature as being a 'traditional' form of art and presumably unequipped to deal with the inconsistencies, rapidity and heterogeneous qualities of the city. O'Hara's work, like film itself, self-consciously foregrounds the methods it uses to become part of the finished product. In 'Personal Poem' the focus on snatches of conversation acts in the same way as cuts in a film, producing and focusing in on an exact effect without having to explain or elaborate on the idea. In 'On The Way To The San Remo', even the design of the poem, the shape it forms on the page, serves to emphasise the zooms and cuts of the language:

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[29] Michael Minden, 'The City in Early Cinema', p.203.

The cross-eyed dog scratches a worn patch of pavement
his right front leg is maimed into the shape of a V
there's no trace of his nails on the street a woman
cajoles

She is very old and dirty
she whistles her filthy hope
that it will rain tonight

The 6th Avenue bus trunk-lumbers sideways
it is full of fat people who cough as at a movie
they eat each other's dandruff in the flickering glare

The moon passes into clouds
so hurt by the street lights
of your glance oh my heart.

(CP p.205)

The initial mention of the old woman is as part of a street scene, but is followed by a literary zoom shot as the language narrows its focus to the old woman up close. This zoom shot of the old woman is even in a different format on the page, from the wider view it has previously taken in and then returns to as the focus widens to capture the '6th Avenue bus'. O'Hara even reflects the image of the cinema back into the scene, so that the people on the bus 'cough as at a movie / they eat each other's dandruff in the flickering glare'. He builds his own audience into this cinematographic panning - a living audience who participate in his real movie, in a New York whose atmosphere even has the 'flickering glare' of a cinema in use. New York in effect becomes a huge cinema playing out its films which are the real and everyday life of the city, and whose inhabitants make up both the audience and the

cast.

In 'A Step Away From Them', this manifests itself more forcefully, as the actual landmarks and daily routines of New York become the setting for actual scenes from existing films and movie publicity shots:

> It's my lunch hour, so I go
> for a walk among the hum-colored
> cabs. First down the sidewalk
> where laborers feed their dirty
> glistening torsos sandwiches
> and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets
> on. They protect them from falling
> bricks, I guess. Then onto the
> avenue where skirts are flipping
> above heels and blow up over
> grates. The sun is hot, but the
> cabs stir up the air. I look
> at bargains in wristwatches. There
> are cats playing in sawdust.
>
> On
> to Times Square, where the sign
> blows smoke over my head, and higher
> the waterfall pours lightly. A
> Negro stands in a doorway with a
> toothpick, languorously agitating.
> A blonde chorus girl clicks: he
> smiles and rubs his chin. Everything
> suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of
> a Thursday.
>
> Neon in daylight is a
> great pleasure, as Edwin Denby would
> write, as are lightbulbs in daylight.
> I stop for a cheeseburger at JULIET'S
> CORNER. Giulietta Masina, wife of
> Federico Fellini, e bell' attrice.
> And a chocolate malted. A lady in
> foxes on such a day puts her poodle
> in a cab.
>
> (CP p.257)

The opening of the poem leaves no doubt that this is a description of a real event in real time in a real place -

the first line is bare and unambiguous in its statement of fact, to the point of being mundane - this is just a lunch hour in a normal working day. The poem unfolds like a process, matter-of-factly, detailing a walk through the city at lunchtime, promising to provide a personal account of a lunchtime walk, a portrait of the city captured barely and purely through its adherence to actualities. Here, O'Hara shows the influence of William Carlos Williams and his stark portraits as the poem unfolds.

Within this structure, the scenes and personae of the cinema are superimposed onto a real setting, not to throw into doubt the reality of the city, but as a suggestion that the reality of New York does not need to be adapted into something it isn't - it is its own stage and screenplay, a multi-casted extravaganza, where the mundane sight of labourers working in the street can be shot as something wonderful. O'Hara's depiction of the labourers is not on the men as individuals, but as bodies, utilitarian, part of the working machinery of the city, their 'dirty / glistening torsos' in focus; because the labourers are feeding their torsos, rather than themselves as a whole, it is not to fulfil any hunger, but as a fuel to fire their bodies.

O'Hara's portrait avoids turning the men into just cogs in the city machine, echoing, yet opposing the image that Fritz Lang used in Metropolis. In Lang's film, Minden suggests that:

> the human body does figure as part of the realisation of the city-as-machine...humans are either themselves PART of the machine, human cogs and pistons...or else..themselves fuel.. for the great industrial monsters.[30]

O'Hara's labourers ARE part of the working city, but there is a sensuality in their description - their bodies are 'torsos', sounding medical or biological and therefore throwing emphasis onto their warmth, life and flesh, whilst concentrating focus onto their upper bodies, solid and sinewy, rather than on straggling limbs. The word is also suggestive of sculpture and statues, making the labourers seem vaguely heroic and Greek. That they are 'dirty' and 'glistening' makes them both machine-like, but also very fleshly, sweating with physical exertion and heat, so that paradoxically, the machinery and hard construction of the city is also something sexual and alive - a gay sensibility at work.

There is no sense of these labourers as people, individuals, becoming victims of the city machine, lesser than the city itself as in Lang's portrayal; O'Hara does not even suggest individuality or personality and therefore avoids internalising the image or opening the possibility of its exploitation. He does not want to explore their psyches, but is interested in them as part of this street scene, their function and purpose as part of this New York day, what they are doing at this exact moment in the present.

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[30] Michael Minden, 'The City in Early Cinema', p.194.

Later in the poem O'Hara writes:

> There are several Puerto
> Ricans on the avenue today, which
> makes it beautiful and warm.

This observation stands alone in the poem, connected only by being part of the street events. O'Hara does not choose to comment or explain his judgement, and the Puerto Ricans are only in shot for their warmth and beauty; that they add this to New York is reason enough for their mention, and they function as another sensual, aesthetic splash of life, part of New York's show. The inclusion of the 'Negro' and the 'blonde chorus girl', which could so easily be a cliché of pimp and prostitute is less a comment on 'immoral' New York than a celebration of vibrant, diverse New York, attractive in its tantalising seediness, and providing a sexuality to the concrete setting.

Marilyn Monroe, of course is also a sex symbol, and is here at home in the streets among the labourers and the Puerto Ricans. Monroe's name is not up in lights in the poem - she is not mentioned by name at all; rather, like the labourers, it is her purpose that is important. Her scenes are not detached from the rest of the landscape, O'Hara follows his description of the labourers with a linking device - 'Then', suggesting a progressive and logical move through one scene to the next:

> onto the
> avenue where skirts are flipping

above heels and blow up over
grates

Later in the poem this is followed by:

A lady in
foxes on such a day puts her poodle
in a cab.

The famous images are directly placed in the poem as part of the events and the surroundings. They remain classic scenes, but also function as possible happenings in the cityscape. O'Hara is perhaps suggesting that on street level, all appear to be stereotypes.

Working America in the form of the labourers, glitzy America in the shape of Monroe, seedy subculture in the prostitution, and the cosmopolitanism in the form of the immigrants all cohere by their being choice of shot in O'Hara's lunch time city scene. The montage is film-like by its quality of unrolling, its processual nature, and therefore more alive, immediate. The 'series of cuts and dissolves' which Marjorie Perloff noted that O'Hara used in a poem like 'Music' to provide 'an aura of intense animation', was, she suggests, the result of his 'adapt[ing] the techniques of film...to a verbal medium'(PAP, p.124). In this case, with O'Hara's poetry being read as verbal cinema, Michael Minden's comment on Walter Ruttman's 1927 city film, Berlin is perhaps just as apt a piece of criticism for O'Hara's poem:

> its true subject is not only Berlin itself, but, and perhaps more prominently, ITSELF SHOWING BERLIN. Each choice of image, duration of shot, each camera angle and each montage juxtaposition reveals and shows ITSELF, at the same time as it records a moment in the life of a busy Berlin day.[31]

O'Hara is not using the language as a transparent device through which the city can be portrayed. In his notes on Second Avenue, O'Hara stated that he wanted 'the poem to BE the poem, not just about it'(CP p.497), and by drawing attention to the poetry's methods, it is the poem as a linguistic artform that is foregrounded. 'A Step Away From Them' functions like Minden's description of Berlin in that the running together of different images produces an aesthetic affect which allows the language, as its medium, to be as much the subject as the city itself, rather than retreating invisibly behind an idea. O'Hara acts as the director in this poem, albeit with a walk-on part; there is a feeling that he is definitely behind the camera, at the other side of the view, a step away. Yet this does not mean that he soars away from reality or participation in the life of the city. Life and art do not have to be disparate.

LOVE IN THE CITY

Integration of life into the environment moves the poetry away from a purely inner life, and this

[31] Michael Minden, 'The City in Early Cinema', p.201.

phenomenological position makes the word 'habitat' central to the urban poetry of O'Hara. Habitat suggests natural environmental surroundings; it signifies at-homeness, and also goes beyond its signification in Britain today by becoming the catchword and brand-name of the chain of stores whose products provide the ultimate consumer way to build a lifestyle. In both these senses, New York is definitely O'Hara's habitat.

For many writers the city proves to be a hostile environment. Burton Pike has suggested that in much literature, cities serve to 'devitalise'[32] human passions and points to Prufrock, the secretary in The Waste Land and the characters in the boarding house at the beginning of Kafka's The Trial as examples of how human relations become hollowed out in the same routines of boredom, individuals merely reaching out in the vain hope of any sort of connection in the face of alien and alienating surroundings.

O'Hara is celebratory. This allows his poetry to cross the boundaries of genre - some of his poems being love poems and city poems simultaneously. For him it engenders and vitalises relationships. Love and sex are not some desperate attempts to cling to the natural human bonding which is rent by the city's alienation; rather the city humanises for O'Hara, it is a way of bringing people together. The upbeat 'Steps' (CP p.370) finds positive and

[32] Burton Pike, The Image of the City In Modern Literature, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p.104.

inescapable ways for citizens to relate to each other, thrown together by overcrowding and crime:

> and even the traffic halt so thick is a way
> for people to rub up against each other
> and when their surgical appliances lock
> they stay together
> for the rest of the day (what a day)...
>
> the apartment was vacated by a gay couple
> who moved to the country for fun
> they moved a day too soon
> even the stabbings are helping the population
> explosion...

The city even appears to be consciously masterminding events to make opportunities for joy and pleasure:

> and the little box is out on the sidewalk
> next to the delicatessen
> so the old man can sit on it and drink beer
> and get knocked off it by his wife later in the day
> while the sun is still shining

New York seems to be acting as one big movie, providing warming comic scenes for the amusement of its citizens who also happen to be its audience and its cast. Here the city even provides a lesson in love: the comedy in the scene is based in the unspoken but very evident solidity of the couple's relationship - in this environment love can flourish.

Holding the diverse elements together, the poem as a whole is a love poem, and it is the city which allows it to come to fruition. Strangely, the poem is even addressed to the city - in the way that someone would tell a friend of

the feeling of happiness that love engenders - while being played out within the city's time scale and features - its way of ordering life. The city underpins every corner of the speaker's life in this poem. Perhaps O'Hara writes the city as an act-of-will - he wants New York to be a benign network of support, and, in this way, re-writes it.

Similarly, poems such as 'Having A Coke With You' (CP p.360) and 'Poem Read At Joan Mitchell's' (CP p.265) celebrate love, and are firmly set within an urban framework, the latter tracing out his friends' love along the geographical paths of the city, celebrating the sentimental route of their courtship - 'past Cooper Union where we heard the piece by Mortie Feldman with "The Stars and Stripes Forever" in it'.

O'Hara's occasional poetry, with its prolific use of names and places, acts not to estrange people but to draw them together. He does not exclude in his references, but opens up to every inhabitant of the modern urban world a new possibility of community and shared experience, creating a city language which is part of its own environment, shaped in it and by it, rather than taking on the language of a detached observer. A 1951 article in The Kenyon Review by Paul Goodman which impressed O'Hara[33] talked about the effect of alienation, and suggested that the new direction of the avant-garde must be one of

[33] Mentioned in O'Hara's biography by Brad Gooch, City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara, (New York: Knopf, 1993), p.187. Gooch states that O'Hara wrote to Jane Freilicher: 'The only pleasant thing that's happened to me since you left gal is that I read Paul Goodman's current manifesto in Kenyon Review and if you haven't devoured its delicious message, rush to your nearest news-stand!'.

bridging that gulf left by the effects of the horrors of war. Goodman advocates the use of occasional poetry, of writing for and of a close circle:

> The essential present-day advance-guard is the physical reestablishment of community. This is to solve the crisis of alienation in the simple way: the persons are estranged from themselves, from one another, and from their artist; he takes the initiative precisely by putting his arms around them and drawing them together. In literary terms this means to write for them about them personally..the advance-guard action helps create such community, stating with the artist's primary friends. The community comes to exist by having ITS culture; the artist makes this culture.....As soon as the intimate community does exist -..and the artist writes for it about its members, the advance-guard at once becomes a genre of the highest integrated art, namely Occasional Poetry...it is clearly an act of love, embarrassing in its directness, for to give one's creative attention to any one is an act of love;[34]

Goodman's ideal would create a real 'home' of the city, and epitomises O'Hara's poetry - tantalising references to New York life and to the social life of his coterie, an endless sense of involvement rather than a retreat into the solitude of the confessional. That New York life was the natural way of living for O'Hara is evidenced by the number of poems which he wrote in the first half of 1956 - a period when, according to Gooch, O'Hara was absent from the city[35] - 'On A Mountain'(CP p.243); 'Poem(And tomorrow morning at 8 o'clock in Springfield, Massachusetts)'(CP

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[34] Paul Goodman, 'Advance-guard Writing, 1900 - 1950', The Kenyon Review, Vol 13(3), (Summer, 1951), 357 - 380, pp375 -377.

[35] Brad Gooch, City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara, pp274 -277 mention O'Hara's loneliness and homesickness, while he took up a six month's Fellowship to the Poets Theatre in Cambridge, Mass.

p.244); 'Returning'(CP p.246); 'Like'(CP p.246); 'Four Little Elegies'(CP p.248) - all focus on death, loss and coldness. Life and the city are interconnected for O'Hara.

THE NATURAL CITY

Susan Holohan has written that 'O'Hara does not write about the city; he lives in it.'[36] To make this distinction is to realise that O'Hara does not take the pose of an observer of the urban environment; his consciousness and vernacular are urban. Eliot's The Waste Land has been described as making:

> the 'unreal' hallucinatory city a catchword of urban experience, turning the poverty of the language into an authoritative strategy for discussing the modern urban tradition.[37]

In relation to this, O'Hara's city poetry marks a reversal in city writing. Eliot's poem is teeming with disembodied voices, and with bodies - live, dead and skeletal - devoid of voice. Eliot's city is the primary instance for disconnection in human lives - cities are 'unreal', making redundant the primary natural images of religion, nature, the seasons. The move away from nature as a base for life is occasion for lament. This idea is alien to O'Hara, who,

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[36] Susan Holohan, 'Frank O'Hara's Poetry', in American Poetry Since 1960: Some Critical Perspectives, Ed. Robert B.Shaw, (Cheadle Hulme: Carcanet, 1973), 109-22, p109.

[37] William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, 'From "Great Town" to "Non-place Urban Realm": Reading the Modern City', p.14.

in 'Meditations in an Emergency', the title poem of one of his anthologies, states:

> I have never clogged myself with the praises of pastoral life...
> No. One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes - I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy or a record store, or some other sign that people do not totally regret life..
>
> (CP p.197)

The pastoral, the old, natural order does not provide the touchstone for defining the city in O'Hara's writing. The city is not a finite, confinable encounter, as it is for Wordsworth in 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3rd 1802' where:

> This city now doth, like a garment wear
> The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
> Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
> Open unto the fields, and to the sky,
> All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.[38]

London is set upon the wider natural landscape and can be read only in terms of it. O'Hara, conversely, is firmly rooted in the streets of New York - in one poem, the sun has to remind him 'I know you love Manhattan, but / you ought to look up more often.' (CP p 306). O'Hara's view of the city from the level of the streets stands out as a different way of urban writing, when compared to a poem

[38] William Wordsworth, Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, Ed. E. de Selincourt and H. Darbishire, (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), p.38.

such as Ginsberg's 'Sunflower Sutra' (Howl, p.35). Ginsberg's poem opens:

> I walked on the banks of the tincan banana dock and sat down under the huge shade of a Southern Pacific locomotive to look at the sunset over the box house hills and cry.

Here, the poet actively seeks out the sun, looking for the natural, and leaves the city below him. O'Hara's New York is nearly always seen at street level so there is no sense of there being an outside of the city, no sense of its being finite and therefore reducible to something which is contained by the wider natural landscape. Yet Ginsberg's San Francisco is somewhere he can retreat from, and in the vast face of the city it is a sunflower that he focuses on, albeit with a coat of man-made grime:

> all that dress of dust, that veil of darkened railroad skin, that smog of cheek, that eyelid of black mis'ry, that sooty hand or phallus or protuberance of artificial worse-than-dirt - industrial modern - all that civilisation spotting your crazy golden crown -

That this grime is 'artificial worse-than-dirt' is telling, in that dirt, being a natural by-product has to be superior to the oil and smog, which is 'worse' just by being 'artificial'.

For O'Hara, nature is the odd intruder, the city being the habitat of men. Unlike Eliot, whose fear is that the city is somehow a sterile force, removing the power of

nature and the seasons, undoing that reproductive power and sense of fertility and health, leaving only aridity and decay, O'Hara reconstructs the seasons in new, urban terms:

> dreary February of the exhaustion from parties and the exceptional desire for spring which the ballet alone, by extending its run, has made bearable.....
> and the only signs of spring are Maria Tallchief's rhinestones and a perky little dog barking in a bar...
>
> (CP p.266)

O'Hara leaves the seasons intact, but there has been a change of priorities - the seasons no longer govern the way the world is - instead, it is the events of the city which define the season: February is dreary not because of the weather or the light, but from the tiredness from attending so many parties, and the signs of spring are no longer flowers and buds, but the jewellery worn by a dancer - and, significantly, the gems are not precious stones, natural minerals, but 'rhinestones' - man-made costume jewellery. The grandeur of a Wordsworth has been replaced by a camp tone and imagery which seems once and for all to put Nature in its place. The natural is present, but is now defined by an urban world, which becomes the ultimate new order.

O'Hara's is an urban consciousness, characterised by a sense of belonging, an at-homeness in his landscape - a capacity to find a sense of the sublime in the very features of the city that other poets see as markers of decay and corruption - indeed, as Brand has pointed out,

'the idea that peace of mind can only be attained in the modern world by fleeing the city, by abandoning any responsibility towards it' prevails; 'In the modernist tradition of American urban literature...the city is not something you're supposed to reach an accommodation with. It makes you worse. It's what's bad about modern life.'[39]

URBANIZED / DE-INDIVIDUALIZED

The city acts as the new nature in O'Hara's poetry, de-alienating man from the city and replacing it as the new natural habitat. How does urbanisation and the full integration of self into the urban environment affect the role of the individual in O'Hara's poetry? If O'Hara's is an urban consciousness, what are the consequences for self in the city, which, in its phenomenological relationship with the environment, must be composed of and informed by the manifold ingredients of the urban surroundings?

By embracing the communal elements of the city, does O'Hara create a sense of consciousness that is less necessarily individual? Is individuality - the sense of a centred self - at risk of becoming displaced, as integration with the city must mean taking on its multiplicity? Must urbanisation mean de-individualisation?

In 'Memoir of Sergei O ...' O'Hara scrambles and de-characterises any sense of place:

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[39] Dana Brand, The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth Century American Literature, p.192.

My feet have never been comfortable
since I pulled them out of the Black Sea
and came to your foul country
what fatal day did I dry them off for
travel loathsome travel to a world
even older than the one I grew up in
what fatal day meanwhile back in France
they were stumbling towards the Bastille
and the Princesse de Lamballe was
shuddering as shudderingly as I
with a lot less to lose I still hated
to move sedentary as a roach of Tiflis
never again to go swimming in the nude
publicly little did I know how
awfulness could reach perfection abroad
I even thought I would see a Red Indian
all I saw was lipstick everything cov
-ered with grass or shrouds pretty
shrouds shot with silver and plasma
even the chairs are upholstered to a
smothering perfection of inanity
and there are no chandeliers and there
are no gates to the parks so you don't
know whether you're going in them or
coming out of them that's not relaxing
and so you can't really walk all you
can do is sit and drink coffee and brood
over the lost leaves and refreshing scum
of Georgia Georgia of my heritage
and dismay meanwhile back in my old
country they are renaming everything so
I can't even tell any more which ballet
company I am remembering with so much
pain and the same thing has started
here American Avenue Park Avenue South
Avenue of Chester Conklin Binnie Barnes
Boulevard Avenue of Toby Wing Barbara
Nichols Street where am I what is it
I can't even find a pond small enough
to drown in without being ostentatious
you are ruining your awful country and me
it is not new to do this it is terribly
democratic and ordinary and tired

(CP p.433)

The emphasis is on disorientation, brought about by shifting and renaming. Familiar places, and with them, a sense of reality, are displaced by language. This poem

works in a different way to 'Personal Poem', whose run-together snatches of language serve not to alienate, but to orient and familiarise. 'Memoir of Sergei O...' links language and place more directly. O'Hara uses a persona for this poem, a character with a name, by which he is identified. The speaker himself attempts to define his surroundings by naming places, suggesting that he can only mark out a coherent reality through assigning names to it.

The poem opens with a reference to 'my feet' - here is a real, solid, singular person; yet as the poem progresses, 'my' and me become more difficult to delineate, as the places, ideas, and dreams that Sergei O defines himself by, are slipping away and shifting through the very language which is used to pin them down. Consequently, the 'memoir' as an item in itself becomes meaningless, as '..they are renaming everything so / I can't even tell any more which ballet / company I am remembering with so much pain'.

Sense of place becomes an ever shifting, and as such, disorienting effect on the individual, as the speaker seems to be grappling with an imposed language scheme which has removed itself from his familiar reality, and which seems to be pointing to nothing more substantial than names. The emphasis on and recoiling from the 'renaming' process tears at the heart of an idea of the self, as the speaker loses himself in the realm of language, which he cannot separate from his hopes or his memory. It seems that Sergei O's memoir is nothing more than a melting pot of names - names which are now dissolving - and so he has to lose the

reality behind them, because with them goes the means to articulate his memories and evoke a sense of place.

Where does this leave Sergei O himself, now that the environment in which he locates and thus orients himself has been scrambled? Perhaps this poem is as much about language as about place or self. In the urban environment language exists and bombards as an external commodity; in the modern city, words forms part of the new landscape, as O'Hara recognised by utilising overheard speech and names of restaurants, shops and brand-name products as part of the aesthetic structure of his city poems. Modes of language - advertising slogans, radio chat, different languages overheard in conversations, different accents, architectural, legal, monetary jargon; street signs, warning signs - are at once easily categorised within their own spheres of use, and at the same time are all part of the larger realm of language which forms the world which people inhabit.

For Sergei O, the hope 'I even thought I would see a Red Indian' accommodates various areas of language - it speaks of the image of America, its huge plains and its heritage; it speaks of the Hollywood Westerns and their portrayal of America; and it speaks of the naive foreigner's expectations, now rudely shattered, and a new, streetwise tone - the original hope qualified by that cynical 'even'. Language associated with history, with heritage, with street maps (ironically, agents of orientation), and with Hollywood image all inhabit the same

short memoir. Language has been given the status of a useable object in a city environment, its use going beyond that of the referential. Instead, language is codified, used to sell, segregate, decorate - Mondrian once reputedly commented upon the aesthetic attraction of the neon signs. In such ways, language has become detached from its source as a means of human communication and, as part of the environment must inform and shape the urban consciousness. Does the use of language, now as an object in its own right, serve to undercut the claims for individual consciousness? Is the urban consciousness less importantly individual, and necessarily more integrated into that of the wider community and its products?

The line between orientation and disorientation has been blurred in this poem. The city, both in memory and in the speaker's present environment, still has its landmark parks, streets and ballet companies - features by which it is recognised; yet at the same time, the familiarity of these landmarks has been shifted, so the effect is one of a strange déjà-vu. O'Hara muddies the means of delineation between what is old and new, so that 'Georgia Georgia' could be a cry for the old Georgia in Russia, or perhaps the Georgia of the New World - a New World which is full of cities named after older, already existing places and therefore strangely parallel to the old. It could also be a reference to both cities, literally superimposing them within the text, a running together and fusing of old and new. Within these cities, which could now almost be each

other, even the street names, the means of direction and location, serve to confuse as they are run into one another, a stream of words, devoid of any precise signification or definition.

The feeling of disorientation is so different to most of O'Hara's city poems, where the character of New York stands out so clearly, and the 'I' narrating the poems is enhanced and informed by its very environment. Yet this poem may not be so different in its latent understanding of cities as his other urban lyrics. Here the 'I' is a deliberately adopted persona, a fictive character, packaged as a whole person with a past and a life story, as opposed to the 'I' of poems such as 'A Step Away From Them' and 'Rhapsody', where the speaker is not clearly defined within a linear time scale of life, but taken to be the speaker (Frank O'Hara?) who is at that point living and experiencing a participation in the events of the city.

In 'Sergei O' the eponymous persona becomes a singular self, an autonomous entity, attempting to separate his idea of a life from the time and surroundings he inhabits. The panic and vertigo from which the persona suffers is due to his inability or refusal to be fully integrated into the here and now - into the time and place which contains him. The insistence on an internalised 'I' leads only to the breakdown of all that is familiar, and a pathetic clinging to fond ideals or memories, which in turn can only be substantiated by language. When this proves to be a shifting force, it leaves only a maelstrom of words.

O'Hara's other city poems imprint such a vivid picture of New York with all its unique aplomb that this vague could-be-anywhere sense running through Sergei O is shocking in comparison. Here, for example, is the opening of 'Steps':

> How funny you are today New York
> like Ginger Rogers in SWINGTIME
> and St. Bridget's steeple leaning a little to the
> left.
>
> (*CP* p.370)

In its warmth and familiarity, it is opposite to the sense of vertigo in 'Sergei O..':

> ..and the same thing has started
> here American Avenue Park Avenue South
> Avenue of Chester Conklin Binnie Barnes
> Boulevard Avenue of Toby Wing Barbara
> Nichols Street where am I what is it.

There is an ease in the voice of the narrator of the first extract, addressing New York 'today', engaging fully with the city moment by moment. It is only in 'Sergei O...' that disorientation in the city becomes an issue, and even then, O'Hara distances himself from it by expressing it through a fictitious character. In the main body of his city poetry, O'Hara promotes urban collectiveness as the new natural way of life, and his poetry takes on an urban voice, a consciousness submerged in the city, totally familiar with the urban vernacular, the landscape and the structures of city life. These are filtered through the

poetry by the speaker's total sense of being-at-ease in this setting, through the PARTICIPATION in the city's activities. For O'Hara, the city's random, eclectic nature is vital and enlivening.

The multifarious nature of the urban environment is also harnessed in contemporary poetic treatment of urban life, and its effect on individuality. Ron Silliman's What[40] recalls O'Hara's use of the everyday urban surroundings. In Silliman's poem, however, the rapid shifts seem brutal. The poem utilises O'Hara's treatment of random city elements, yet O'Hara includes displaced features of urban life - snatches of conversation in 'Personal Poem' for example - in order to create familiar incoherence and positive jumbling of the city. Silliman also places city elements out of their context and directly into his poem, but the effect is aggressive, almost violent, and yet the rush of sentences draws the reader in, drug-like, suggesting that this is how life is now, fast and barely comprehensible. Silliman's poem refuses to convey coherence, and yet within the parameters of the poem there is a strange feeling of recognition and familiarity in the flow.

Silliman's poem provides a sense of total submergence in an urban environment. In this way What recalls O'Hara, who creates an urban space at street level, rather than portraying a city as seen from a distance as a finite and

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[40] Ron Silliman, What, (Great Barrington: The Figures, 1988).

therefore reducible other against the larger nature which contains it. What utilises this view - for the purposes of the poetry, there is no beyond, the city becomes boundary-less, and this has implications for the perspective of the poems. Pike writes of:

> The city as... both the image of a map and the image of a labyrinth: figures by which characters orient, but can also lose, themselves.[41]

The double role of the city suggested by Pike is echoed in a strange duality of familiarity and disorientation for both O'Hara and Silliman: the voices in 'Personal Poem' are both a touchstone for location and yet entirely strange, and Silliman adapts this mode of perspective in What to produce the uncomfortable sensation of half-familiarity in disorientation - a sensation which Michael Heller has called 'the déjà-vu dadaism of the Language Poets'[42].

Silliman's verse is more frantic in its disorienting use of the city's elements than O'Hara's, yet there is the same sense that the city is the poet's habitat, rather than a scene of completely alien displacement - a feeling which is suggested by the ease of certain passages of urban vernacular. Silliman seems to possess the right accent and manners for his setting, is in step with the out-of-step-

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[41] Burton Pike, The Image of the City in Modern Literature, p.121.

[42] Michael Heller, 'The Cosmopolis of Poetics: Urban World, Uncertain Poetry', in City Images: Perspectives from Literature, Philosophy and Film, Ed. Mary Ann Caws, (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1991) p.96.

ness of the whole poem. O'Hara's poems have a natural use of city vernacular: 'worker-outers at the West Side Y (*CP* p.370)...It's my lunch hour / First down the sidewalk / where laborers feed their dirty / glistening torsos sandwiches / and Coca-Cola.(CP p.257)'. This ease with the city vernacular is echoed in Silliman's 'I don't "do" Dallas (What p.14)....Kid pulverizes / shard of glass on sidewalk with tip / of umbrella, then strums / air guitar (What p.15)...Turning / the tape in her Walkman over / as she jogs (What p.34)..Pages of Xerox / in dimestore binder.(What p.51)' Silliman has assimilated O'Hara's vernacular into a more immediate catalogue of associations, by removing the connectives which root the language in any coherent sense of reality.

Language becomes as decentred as the environment, which in America has evolved as sprawling 'non-place urban realm'[43]. Yet Silliman shows his assimilation of America, and Americana, as, among the disjointed snapshots, there is evidence of an ear for the natural diction of street language, written in shorthand note form, denoting rapidity and disconnection. He incorporates urban slang - which serves to exclude those not familiar with the culture and to include those that are - in a kind of mutual code. This echoes back to the O'Hara of 'The Day Lady Died' or 'Poem Read At Joan Mitchell's' with its assumptions of belonging, writing for and of city dwellers.

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[43] Sharpe and Wallock, 'From "Great Town" to "Non-place Urban Realm"', passim.

The strange sense of familiarity in What, with its all-inclusiveness, is different to Ginsberg's Howl, in which the old feelings of horror, of the city as corruptive, of a dilution of wholeness and wholesomeness, still exists and it is hallucinatory, directly 'unreal'. Ginsberg introduces the awareness of boundaries, between self and other, inner and outer, real and unreal, even though they are blurred and sometimes imperceptible, with the urban environment at the centre of these, penetrating all. Yet the main focus of the poem is personality, the 'best minds'(Howl, p.9) are at the heart of the poem - Ginsberg speaks for a generation, underlining the importance of self, even if it sometimes is collective self, Whitman- style, at the core, with the city acting as a foil.

Silliman turns in a different direction and removes any sense of person or personality - instead of dilution of individuality, he produces a linguistic concentrate of a consistency which bombards the reader, removing any lasting sense of self, and obliterating even the need for self behind or in the poem. Language takes over and instead of a clear route to representation, the reader is stopped at the level of the words themselves. There are coherent flashes of narrative:

> ..The woman in the yellow raincoat sits
> on a bench at the end of the schoolyard
> while two small children race
> across the asphalt plaza.
>
> (What, p.7)

These coherent passages function only as pieces of narrative chopped up and put in a shifting context, serving as familiar scenes in a different, new world, where language is its own ruler. The perception of the environment has no definite markers - not even the sort of hallucinatory flowing coherence of Howl, but appears as random outcuts in the form of words.

The city is constructed of and by language:

> The boulevard as a kind of free verse,
> big noun skyscrapers, until the freeway
> blew out the margin.
> (What, p.8)

Here, language is open to play; sentences seem randomly placed. The sentence 'Baseball cap / with the bill worn to the side or back', which follows directly from the lines above, is only linked to anything else by its presence in the poem. It functions as part of the poem, but also as a statement, autonomously; it is part of the poem's many disparate sentences, and yet it is also a recognisable image of modern urban youth with all its connotations of culture - music, race, and, ultimately, as a symbol of modern America.

Silliman has stated:

> There can be no such thing as a formal problem in poetry which is not a social one as well.[44]

[44] Ron Silliman, The New Sentence, (New York: Roof Books, 1987), pp.173-174.

Do Silliman's concerns succeed from those O'Hara is addressing in poems such as 'A Step Away From Them' with its placing of icons amongst the other images on the street? O'Hara cuts 'Coca- Cola' and the 'skirts flipping above heels and blowing over grates' image of Marilyn Monroe into the scenes of labourers working and cats playing in sawdust, and hints at sub-culture with 'the Negro' and 'the chorus girl' - playing with the stereotypical (and also real) picture of pimp and prostitute, all set in a geographically 'real' New York.

In the use of iconic images of America, perhaps O'Hara's poetry did anticipate today's urban writing. In an essay about urban literature of the 1980s, Sharpe and Wallock note that:

> as the panorama gives way to the zoom shot, the descriptions of locales ...of the past have been supplanted by passing reference to totemic bits of mass culture[45].

O'Hara constructs the actual city and its locales. He starts a section of the poem with 'On / to Times Square' - yet juxtaposes these with cultural icons in the form of the Marilyn Monroe images and 'Coca-Cola' in a way which makes them as 'totemic' as Sharpe and Wallock suggest, by detaching them from their rightful place in films and advertisements and blowing them up like literary inflatables, real and yet there to be utilised, consumed.

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[45] Sharpe and Wallock, introduction to Visions of the Modern City: Essays in History, Art and Literature, p.26.

In creating these idols anew, they are taken from their contextual pedestals in order to re-instate them with renewed reverence as literary effigies to urban consumerism, yet at the same time making them part of the street with no superior properties or importance. Thus, interlaced with scenes of bare description, inspired by William Carlos Williams, these re-worked icons loom out of the text, only to retreat back into it at the next encounter with the next experience.

Both O'Hara and Silliman mix mundanity and dailiness with a use of iconography, to create a busy and sharply cut bombardment upon the reader, in the same way that immense amounts of information bombard the citizen of the modern urban environment. In What, 'Taking my glasses off, sensing / the muscles in the eye / flex as they refocus' (What, p.9) echoes what the reader has to do with each new line of the poem. Refocusing is inevitable part of the poem:

> Small physical detail
> enlarged (enraged)
> refocuses the whole room
> in the midst of the banquet.
> (What, p.9)

Small details make up the large body of the poem, (which is indeed a verbal feast that the reader consumes to the point of engorgement), there is a constant effort to refocus, which inevitably leads to weariness and, being overcome or overawed with it all, the reader has to accept and view it at surface value in order to survive it. Clashing

eclecticism provides the energy and serendipitous nature of urban life in O'Hara's poems too, but is given more force in Silliman's work; here, it is more dense and aggressive, but city life now is more hectic. Cities are bigger, and seem to spread ever outwards, no longer even having a centre, instead forming huge conurbations - especially in America - so even the individual nature of place is becoming blurred into one huge America of urbanism.

Silliman, like O'Hara, uses the present tense so that there is a constant encounter with experience rather than a more selective, secondary past account. In this way, he follows O'Hara in a direction away from most city writing, which adopts a stance of voyeurism, by taking on a role of flâneur - a tradition dating back to the nineteenth-century French poetry of Baudelaire. Pike suggests that it is only possible to write about city life by being slightly detached from it:

> 'observer' is a slightly awkward term to use...since it indicates a person who is, with some awareness, looking at the city from a detached viewpoint. 'Observer' applies better to the writer and the narrator than to the citizen. In daily life most urbanites go about in the city concentrating on their immediate business; they swim in the urban ocean without being particularly aware of it.[46]

Pike makes the distinction between citizen and writer, and therefore assumes one must be separate from the other, yet O'Hara's poems seem to deny any such distinction. If most

[46] Burton Pike, The Image of the City in Modern Literature, p.9.

celebrants of city life are too busy living it and enjoying it, perhaps for O'Hara, part of that living was writing - epitomised by a writing which appeared to be produced on the spur of the moment (for example '[Poem] Lana Turner Has Collapsed'[CP p.449] is said to have been written on a ferry crossing on his way to a poetry reading and subsequently performed there). O'Hara's poems give the impression that they are a direct product of his environment, emerging from the process of the on-going flux; he is celebrating the city by writing it as he lives it, rather than as a detached observer.

Silliman harnesses the earlier poet's intertwining of life and language, building on O'Hara's poetics from within the flow; writing poetry stems from the world around him:

> Eyes stain the world,
> giving life to pigment,
> the lie to nature. I spy:
>
> (What, p.65)

The poet necessarily refracts reality through his own ability to express it, and so the language takes precedence. The colon at the end of Silliman's sentence here suggests that everything following it, the rest of the poem, is what he sees, and therefore what he writes. However, 'I spy' is also a word game. Perhaps the reader has to ask which of these meanings of 'I spy' - if any - is the definition of what is doing in the poem? Later Silliman writes:

Eye sees
what the mind says should be there.
I seize what I can.

(What, pp. 77-78)

Perception is linked - although not infallibly - with mental preconceptions. 'Eye sees' followed by 'I seize' brings the two interpretations together in one identical verbal sound, underlining the language's arbitrariness, and consequently, both its power or its powerlessness of description and referentiality. Language can be manipulated or manipulative. Referentiality, and thus a sense of reality, can be in the foreground and the background. Thus recognisable, decipherable and coherent sections advance and then recede into the background - perhaps this is his 'refocusing' in action; language acts as both signifier and as impenetrable text.

Silliman's poetry seems to be a celebration of both language and the environment's ambiguous qualities, and conversely, as an expression of bewilderment at the prospect of communicating a sense of modern urban life, its speed and its multivalent nature. Silliman intentionally interrupts coherence, stating:

> Disrupting chronology is a defense against the reduction of poetry to 'mere' autobiography[47]

Coherent self - the sense of an individual - is

[47] Ron Silliman, The New Sentence, p.175.

deconstructed into non-being, centreless like contemporary cities themselves. There are no true landmarks - either real or metaphorical - to cling to, as an anchor to truth, reality and order. Everything is in a constant state of erosion; in poetry of the 1980s, the individual once more becomes rootless in the city surroundings.

In What, the lines 'Eye sees / what the mind says should be there' initially suggests that there is actually a 'mind' behind the text, which acts as governing principle, but even this is ambiguous, as what the mind 'says' is the final definer of what is perceived - language even defines perception. Language is not a direct route to an objective reality, and, as it is a shared medium, it cannot come from a sole individual - the very use of it undermines the idea of closed-off individual being - and so expression is fragmented amongst the various discourses which make up the multifarious environment of the city.

For Silliman the idea of the individual and the crowd no longer is a problem - both the mass and the single personality are all but eradicated, as everything is consumed in snapshot-sized throwaway poetry portions. O'Hara's poetry, however, allows both the possibility of community, and a place for the individual in the city. His poetics provides an urban consciousness and a city environment which is open to human connection.

ART

Recent scholarship has settled on the consensus that O'Hara's poetics parallel the methods and the ideas of the abstract expressionist painters of the New York School, with whom he was so closely involved. O'Hara's poetry is often described as 'painterly'[1], and his poetic relationship with the visual arts can be typified by J.D. McClatchy's brief biographical summary of O'Hara, in a book entitled Poets on Painters: Essays on the Art of Painting by Twentieth Century Poets. McClatchy's comments serve as the introduction to O'Hara's monograph on Jackson Pollock:

> Frank O'Hara was the quintessential Poet Among Painters. The group that came to be known as the New York School of Poets - a misleading term meant to designate not a school's fixed idea but a network of poet-friends whose work took off, in several different directions, from that of painters - owes everything to his examples and energies. He not only moved in the circle of the liveliest artists of his day, but seemed their epicentre. [2]

The view that O'Hara's work 'took off...from that of the painters' is one almost universally held, yet it begs serious questions concerning O'Hara's poetic connection with the visual arts. McClatchy's statement implies a

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[1] see for example, Fred Moramarco, 'John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara: The Painterly Poets', Journal of Modern Literature, Vol 5,(3), (Sept 1976), 436-462. Also PAP, pp.63,70.

[2] J.D. McClatchy, '"Jackson Pollock" by Frank O'Hara' in Poets On Painters: Essays on the Art of Painting by Twentieth Century Poets, Ed. J.D. McClatchy, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), p. 195.

continuation and development of the same work that the painters in New York were producing, making O'Hara's poetry seem dependent on and subordinate to this visual art. Yet perhaps it is in the theorising by critics, that the vocabularies surrounding the painter's art and the poet's art become confused.

McClatchy's description of O'Hara certainly points to similarities and shared influences between painting and his particular poetry, but does not explain what these are or how they operate. This chapter will examine the problematic designation of O'Hara's work as 'painterly': Can poetry do what painting does? Can a poem 'take off' from a painting? Is O'Hara a pseudo-painter? What, then, is the function of visual art in O'Hara's poetry and what is its importance? Does O'Hara's work offer anything new in the age-old debate about the relationship of the sister-arts of poetry and painting?

DEFINING THE PAINTERLY POET

The first step in answering these questions is to define if and how O'Hara's poetry is painterly. What does this designation mean? Definitions of painterliness appear to be varied. McClatchy suggests closeness to the circle of painters allows O'Hara's poetry to 'take off' from their work. Does this mean in method? In effect? In both? Perhaps, as O'Hara had lovers, friends and colleagues who were painters, he was close to their views and their ideas. Yet this closeness does not necessarily mean he tried to

use words like the painters used paint. It is not possible for words to take on the properties of paint; a poet cannot paint with words. The term 'painterly' must thus be ambiguous in its definition, pointing to a congruency of method and technique between the use of words and of paint, rather than ascribing the properties of one medium to another.

Yet is it possible to 'do' similar things with words and paint, if the two have such different properties? The finished works cannot be alike in their effect. Is it the poet, and not the poetry that is painterly? Can a poet produce the effects of a painted canvas? Is the definition settled more in the aim than in the effect?

O'Hara knew he was a poet, someone who worked with words: 'I am not a painter, I am a poet'(*CP*,p.261). He produced poetry, not paintings. Whether or not he was consciously trying to turn the methods of the abstract expressionists to a verbal medium or not, the outcome is the poetry itself. Is IT painterly? How can it be described as such? The question hinges not so much on the methods that the poet used, as on the ability of the words to take on a painterly quality. Carmel Friedman has suggested that:

> the desire to experiment with words as painters were experimenting with paint became a primary preoccupation among the New York poets.[3]

[3] Carmel Friedman, 'The New York School of Poets', (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 1984; abstract in Dissertation Abstracts International, vol.45(6) p.1751A) p.3. Further references to this work will be noted in the body of the text as 'Friedman'.

She defines these parallel experiments which she calls 'connections'(Friedman, abstr.) between the poetry and the painting in numbered characteristics, and her thesis is dedicated to establishing the relationship between the effects and techniques of the painters of the New York School and the poetics of their literary counterparts. She has even produced what she terms an 'operative vocabulary' (Friedman, p.154) that can be applied to both the painting and poetry to prove that:

> the process of creating this poetry is akin to the process of creating this form of painting.
>
> (Friedman, p.154)

Note the word 'akin' which Friedman chooses, to denote that the painting and poetry are not only alike, but descended from, in direct relation to each other. By Friedman's analysis, the poetry - in its form and structure, rather than its subject - would not exist as it does without springing from the painting.

Friedman's idea pigeonholes O'Hara's work as 'painterly' in two ways: first, it suggests that O'Hara's whole structural poetics is dependent on the painting, effectively removing any of the poetry's claim to its own genetic autonomy and ascribing it to a shared pool of attributes innovated by painters. Secondly, by casting the 'shared' characteristics in stone, she generates a narrow reading of the poetry: her charts compiled by listing both

poems and paintings under headings such as 'Abstraction', taken from her 'operative vocabulary', aim to show exactly which canvases and texts have properties in common. Yet in practice, Friedman's 'vocabulary' confuses without even touching on either the poetry or the painting, as in her statement that:

> Various shades of abstraction, from light to deep, are one of the most important 'enormous preferences' of the New York School.
>
> (Friedman, p.70)

Friedman's imposition of a shared vocabulary moves attention away from engagement with the works themselves as individual pieces or even as bodies of work, and into vague generalisations, fitting around her critical vocabulary. Her scheme illustrates its weakness through its limitations; it does not leave space for the differences or contradictions, either between the poems and the painted canvases, or even between the poems themselves or the paintings themselves. Friedman's method of reading the poems tries to specify and categorise the essence of the work, and in so doing creates the kind of theorising that moves away from the works themselves and becomes enmeshed in its own vocabulary and classifications.

Perloff's critical monograph on O'Hara is subtitled Poet Among Painters, effectively placing the singular poet in the world of the painters' art before the book is even opened. Her juxtaposition and comparison of O'Hara's poem,

'Second Avenue' with a description by Larry Rivers of his painting 'Second Avenue with THE', makes a case for the possibility of a methodological equivalence between the two arts. Perloff takes this passage from O'Hara's 'Second Avenue':

> Candidly. The past, the sensations of the past. Now!
> in cuneiform, of umbrella satrap square-carts with
> hotdogs
> and onions of red syrup blended, of sand-bejewelling the
> prepuce
> in tank suits, of Majestic Camera Stores and Schuster's,
> of Kenneth in an abandoned storeway on Sunday cutting
> even more
> insinuating lobotomies of a yet-to-be-more-yielding
> world
> of ears, of a soprano rallying at night in a cadenza,
> Bill, of
> 'Fornications, la! garumph! tereu! lala la! vertigo!
> Weevy! Hah!'
> of a limp hand larger than the knee which seems to say
> 'Addio'
> and is capable of resigning from the disaster it
> summoned ashore.
> Acres of glass don't make the sign clearer of the
> landscape
> less blue than prehistorically, yet less distant, eager,
> dead!
> (*CP*, pp 146-7)

Perloff then quotes the following extract from O'Hara's interview with Rivers, which she says 'makes clear the close affinities between Rivers' painting'(PAP, p.94) and the poem:

> What you see is a view from a studio on Second Avenue - a top floor studio - looking across from the buildings opposite. The canvas shows a selected few of the multitude of objects I could see from where I stood. The rectangles are reflections from glass windows across the street. The dark vertical lines

> are the studio floorboards. I looked down, saw them and painted them. The horizontal lines are the window sills. The semi-circles on the right are the rims of a drum. The line of little white squares are the white keys of a piano I had there in the studio. And the rocket woman figure, she was in the studio too, a statue which was in my field of vision. That little shape up there by the letters THE - just to the left - that's a woman leaning out of a window opposite.[4]

Perloff believes that:

> O'Hara is thus the ideal interpreter of Rivers' work..[as] a painter who rejects pure abstraction on the one hand and straight representational painting on the other...[because] both artists explore the expressive potential of commonplace objects.
>
> (PAP, p.95)

Rivers elucidates further on the inspiration for his painting:

> I see something ..and I'll use it.. but I don't want to interpret..I feel free to use the appearance of a thing...without assigning any special meaning to it as an object.
>
> (AC.p.118)

Rivers' comments here appear to back up Perloff's suggestion, and point to a parallel with what O'Hara does - both can use whatever they like in their works without having to explain it as being anything other than present and included. Perloff interprets thus:

> Rivers takes recognisable objects..and displaces

[4] Larry Rivers, 'Why I Paint As I Do', in Art Chronicles 1954-1966, Frank O'Hara. (New York: George Braziller, 1990), p.118. Further references to Art Chronicles will be noted in the body of the text as AC.

> them, creating a new tension between illusionistic detail and abstract configuration.
>
> (PAP, p.94)

She likens Rivers' use of his surroundings to O'Hara's use of 'Second Avenue' images, and what she terms:

> [his] cutting, distorting and reassembling [of images], so that his finished composition retains no more than 'traces' of that which is being represented.
>
> (PAP, p.94)

Yet surely if this were the case, O'Hara's poem would be a list of visually descriptive passages, albeit distorted and reassembled. O'Hara's treatment is actually very different. Perhaps both artists have the same aesthetic preoccupations, spurred by the New York environment:

> [the] momentary convictions, instances of tension and uncertainty..the nearly untenable aspects of... the city's potential infinity of contents.[5]

In this way, it is possible to see similarities between how each artist interprets and handles his material, yet the tools each chooses to work with - one being paint and canvas, the other being the language system - prevents any closer parallels than that of intent. Both

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[5] Michael Heller, 'The Cosmopolis of Poetics: Urban World, Uncertain Poetry', p.96.

O'Hara, and, here, Rivers, acknowledge that to work with either medium entails knowledge of their basic properties, to utilise the possibilities and also to recognise the limitations in both. To suggest that O'Hara used words as the artists used paint is to ascribe to language the properties of paint.

Rivers starts his description of his painting by suggesting 'what you see is a view from a studio on Second Avenue'. Immediately the emphasis is on seeing. Note the emphasis in Rivers' words: 'visual arts..what I see...the view from a studio....looking across at'. O'Hara himself has written that Rivers is 'inspired directly by visual stimulation'(In 'Larry Rivers: A Memoir' CP p.514). On the other hand, O'Hara's found images, his given 'views', to use Rivers' words, are used in a much more complex manner: 'Second Avenue' was the only poem for which O'Hara wrote any notes, and in these he explained that the poem is built from things which:

> either happened to me or I felt happening (saw, imagined) on Second Avenue.
>
> (CP, p.497)

This is much more than just a re-interpreted 'view', or, again, to quote Rivers, 'a selected few of the multitude of objects I could see from where I stood'. Is it possible for a phrase such as 'cutting even more insinuating lobotomies of a yet-to-be-more yielding world / of ears' to be a verbal equivalent of white squares representing piano

keys or dark vertical lines being studio floorboards?

The two pieces are linked, factually, only by name, and were not created with the other in mind. It is in this distinction that confusion can creep in. Both artists are using Second Avenue as their inspiration, NOT the poem or the painting ABOUT the street. The fact that any similarities in style - the sense of disconnection of images, the half-familiar features, may perhaps have been influenced by the shared SUBJECT seems to be overlooked by Perloff in the quest for proof of congruence of technique. To add to the difficulty in this type of reading of the poem, Anthony Libby suggests:

> Second Avenue is clearly a consciously painterly attempt to create an artifact like [De Kooning's] Excavation without specific referential value.[6]

Libby's suggestion negates Perloff's reading of O'Hara's work as similar to Rivers' semi-figurative work, instead stating that the poem is a 'literal...attempt at a painter's abstraction'[7], and equating it with a different painting altogether.

Both critics are applying a reading of one poem as verbal equivalents of two different paintings in order to make a case for painterly methodology. This is where

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[6] Anthony Libby, 'O'Hara on the Silver Range', first published in Contemporary Literature, 17(2), (Spring 1976), 240-62. Reprinted in Frank O'Hara. To Be True To City, Ed. Jim Elledge, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 131-55, p.136.

[7] Anthony Libby, 'O'Hara on the Silver Range', p.137.

interpretation of O'Hara's work as painterly becomes problematic. In theory, ideas and techniques can be made to correspond, but, when actually faced with a poem alongside a painting, can poetry really begin to strive for the aesthetic effects of painting, of figure and ground - visual depth, shape and colour? Does it even want to?

O'Hara, as a poet, acknowledges that he works with words, which have meanings attached to them, however ambiguously - in fact, this ambiguity allows an even wider set of meanings to be inherent in words, and even in how the words are linked. His notes on 'Second Avenue' point out:

> ..the obscurity comes in here, in the relationship between the surface and the meaning, but I like it that way since the one is the other (you have to use words).
>
> (CP, p.497)

Conversely, the only way to take in a painting is to SEE it, engage with it through sight. Can words really achieve this immediate presence? Creating and also of viewing a painting is predicated on the sense of vision, so is it really possible to read an O'Hara poem as painterly?

De Kooning's paintings, like the paintings of other abstract expressionist artists, are huge canvases which engage the whole range of vision - in effect, new city vistas, on the same scale as the eye sees reality. In the total occupation of the sense of sight by the painting, the impact and power of the work manifests itself. These vast

areas of canvas inspire awe. Sheer size is impressed upon the viewer, and in this size, the space that the canvas occupies, the movement, colour, texture and shape are the primary properties which are engaged with. The sense of purely visual engagement is almost primitive. The importance of the action of the works being painted is outlined in the emphasis of the movement engendered in the actual paint.

The paint does not become an almost invisible medium in the manifestation of a realistic picture by the artist. Instead, attention is arrested by the paint itself, filling these huge areas as a working documentation of the movement of the painters. Physical movement is an inherent part of the work. That shapes and images within the paintings are not fully definable or totally figurative, makes the accent in the work thrown back onto the paint and the canvas. These are painted pieces, not an attempt at a literal representation of an objective reality. In the significance of the paint in these works, a primitive, or at least a primary force is felt. The viewer is left to engage with the colours, shapes and textures. Along with their size, this makes the paintings stimulate the basic sense of sight, unmediated by any complicating factors of analysis or interpretation. Sight has primacy. One of the basic senses is allowed unfettered play over the canvas. It is a purely visual aesthetic.

THE LANGUAGE OF CRITICISM

Yet O'Hara himself, as well as critics such as Perloff and Libby use terms such as 'surface' to talk about his poetry - terms usually used for discussion of the visual arts. Friedman's thesis lists eight characteristics [(1) abstraction (2) expressionism (3) juxtaposition (4) palpability (5) inscaping (6) collage (7) parody (8) surrealism] (Friedman, abstr.) which can be applied to both the painting and poetry, a vocabulary she says:

> [is] culled from the terminology developed by art critics and poets serving as art critics.
>
> (Friedman, abstr.)

Friedman's adaptation of the vocabulary of the visual arts also suggests that O'Hara's work is painterly. The use of allusion to painting's terminology to point out textual properties of O'Hara's work, such as references to the surface texture of the poetry and the lack of or distortion of perspective is valid, because it does point to the actual poetry:

> O sole mio, hot diggety, nix 'I wather think I can'
> come to see Go into Your Dance on TV - HELEN
> MORGAN!? GLENDA FARRELL!?
> 1935!?
>
> (CP,p.367)

The opening to this poem cannot be anything other than a concentration on the surface of the text. The words are in

no way symbolic of anything beyond or behind their references. Similarly, the text in O'Hara's 'Second Avenue' is definitely complicated and busy. There is no sense of any symbolic message hidden within the poem or its images. The images are there simply because they are included in O'Hara's thoughts, sights and imaginings as he walked along the street. There is no deeper sense behind the text.

The poem's all-inclusive wordiness must mean that it has to be confronted at face value, at surface level, so to speak, as the poem does not provide any artificial structures of time sequence, subject or object, addressee. The language, and thus, the sense, is forever shifting, undermining the reader's ability to impose a sense of structured reality in which to understand and assimilate the poem. In this way, it can only be read at surface level. So, to speak of the poem as having a busy surface is logical and legitimate, without suggestion it must now be in the realm of abstract expressionist painting's methodology or effects.

In other poems, such as 'A Step Away From Them', the city street is more overtly the subject of the poem than in Second Avenue - the poem is more obviously 'about' the cityscape - and yet it can still be talked of in terms of its surface properties, the sense of a retreating and advancing figure and ground:

> ...First down the sidewalk
> where laborers feed their dirty

> glistening torsos sandwiches
> and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets
> on. They protect them from falling
> bricks I guess. Then onto the
> avenue where skirts are flipping
> above heels and blow up over
> grates. The sun is hot, but the
> cabs stir up the air.
>
> (CP p.257)

The famous screen image of Marilyn Monroe, listed as a street scene along with labourers and taxicabs, allows certain images to loom out of the text, only to retreat back into it at the next one. What is the focus on here? The iconic movie images become the figure one minute, but return to being part of the ground, the landscape at the next. Is this similar to what de Kooning does with his Women paintings, or similar to something like Jackson Pollock's The Deep, a painting which seems to be ambiguously presenting figure and ground. In The Deep, does the darkness in the centre advance from the rather smoky white, or is the white in the foreground, a solid, with a darkness emerging like a smoke beyond? These paintings indeed make figure/ground ambiguous, play with the very possibility of visual depth. But is this done in the same way as O'Hara's poetry?

O'Hara's surface is a verbal representation of a city street, where, indeed, what does catch the eye and become centre stage one minute, be it a stereotypical image, an iconic name or the reality which can merge both, does retreat into the background of the street as the next thing is encountered. O'Hara's is a verbal medium. He has

worked this into a perfect urban vernacular, creating poetry that allows the language a freedom to keep up with the environment it also helps to create. The sense of a shifting figure/ground in O'Hara's work, is surely more to do with his adaptation of language to the city environment than to adapting abstract expressionism to a verbal medium. The environment in the city is shaped by constant encounters with people, places, language, signs. It is a constant engagement with whatever the present moment holds. In the same way, both O'Hara's poetry and the visual work of the abstract expressionists is an engagement with a moment in the present.

Michael Davidson, writing about the language of post-modernism, has pointed out that 'what happens in a given moment structures the shape of the poem'[8]. Is this moment-by-moment structuring of the artwork an aesthetic reaction to the age of urban living? De Kooning has said that 'whatever I see, becomes my shapes and my condition', stating that the subjects of his paintings 'were what happened to be around'[9]. In a similar way, O'Hara's 'Statement' for The New American Poetry 1945 - 1960 says:

> What is happening to me, allowing for lies and exaggerations which I try to avoid, goes into my poems. I don't think my experiences are more clarified or made beautiful for myself or anyone else, they are just there in whatever form I can find them.[10]

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[8] Michael Davidson, 'Languages of Post-Modernism', The Chicago Review, 27(1), (1975), 11-22, p.12.

[9] Willem De Kooning, Collected Writings, pp133-134.

[10] Frank O'Hara, The New American Poetry 1945 -1960, Ed. Donald M. Allen, (New York: Grove Press Inc, 1960), 419-20, p.419.

Both visual artist and poet have stated a similar way of approaching their work, emphasising that the work's genesis, structure and subject is built on engagement with the moment and the present environment. Friedman has interpreted this as being:

> the common cord holding New York abstract painting and poetry...the painters' and poets' preference for process as primary to conception.
>
> (Friedman,p.70)

The common aesthetic style appears to be attributable to the city environment; this does not necessarily mean O'Hara was trying to do with words what a de Kooning was doing with paint. Both artists were dealing with the city's hectic environment through their work, one with textuality, the other with paint. To claim that O'Hara is using words like the artists use paint, and more specifically, that O'Hara's poetry in this way stems from abstract expressionism, crosses the fine line between allusive comparisons and the actual yoking together of two different art forms.

WJT Mitchell has discussed the 'language of images'[11] as meaning three different things:

> (1) language ABOUT images, the words we use to talk about pictures, sculptures, designs...the interpretive discourse a culture regards as appropriate to its image systems; (2) images regarded AS a language; the

[11] WJT Mitchell, The Language of Images, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p.3.

> semantic, syntactic, communicative power of images to encode messages, tell stories, express ideas and emotions, raise questions, and 'speak' to us; (3) verbal language as a system INFORMED BY images, literally in the graphic character of writing systems..figuratively in the penetration of verbal languages and metalanguages by concerns for patterning presentation, and representation.[12]

Discussion about O'Hara's poetry falls between a mixture of the first and third of Mitchell's categories. The emphasis on HOW O'Hara uses the language, and the references to cuts, distortions and collage, mean that his work is read at surface level, AT THE LEVEL OF THE PAGE. To see the poetry as a system of images - as words upon a page, densely patterned and structured in certain ways - suggests that it is natural that the first use of the language of images - Mitchell's 'language about images' - can be used to describe it. That this vocabulary is also the vocabulary concerned with the visual arts means that O'Hara's poetry necessarily shares the vocabulary of paintings to describe and assess them, if not the same methods and effects.

Is it legitimate, then, to assume that O'Hara's painterliness of method can be ascribed to a poverty of the vocabulary of criticism, rather than to any inherent sense of having painted with words in the way of the abstract expressionists? O'Hara can be described as painterly by seeing the words as purely separate from their use as communicators, storytellers and signifiers. But is that

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[12] WJT Mitchell, The Language of Images, p.3.

their function? In 'Second Avenue', the words certainly do not run in conventional coherent form. There is cutting, snatches of imagery and thought and a general lack of sense - in its coherent meaning - or even of subject.

Yet the detachment comes not from the words, from their meanings, but from the inherent scenes, conversational extracts, stories half-told, and subversions of other pieces of literature from any locatable context. It is experimental to make the context only cohere by the title and the actual space of the poem, framed by beginning and end, just as it is experimental to make the surface of the paint the subject of a painting, displacing conventional need to see its representation of a woman or a studio interior as primary and fundamental to its being painted at all. But to be experimental with the media you are using, and to play with and rework convention does not necessarily mean a parallel method is used to produce work which then is labelled as a stylistic equivalency.

O'Hara has written that a de Kooning Woman painting 'influenced' (CP, p.497) the way he described a woman in 'Second Avenue' - does this in itself mean that the actual method he uses to describe, the form his words take are used in the same way that de Kooning has used to paint the woman, or to ape the effect de Kooning has achieved? Or does it mean that O'Hara's description of a woman in the text is really a description of de Kooning's woman, and so de Kooning's woman as a finished painting, a separate piece of work, is being made present in the text by O'Hara? In

O'Hara's poetry, such an ambiguity arises time and again. Is his poetry painterly through methodological parallel with painting, or is it the presence of painting within the poem as a different artform - the highlighting of the differences between the two, rather than the similarities - that makes his work so powerfully about art?

De Kooning's Woman I 1950-2 is a massive painting of oil on canvas. The immediate sense is of the size, followed by the staring eyes and grinning teeth - there is not actually a mouth, but the teeth appear on the face as though the mouth has been pulled back to reveal this grin. The woman stares out of this huge painting like a woman staring out of a billboard advert high over a city street. The facial features appear to be almost superimposed onto the paint, although they are formed out of it. They could be features from anywhere, in a sense, collaged, taken from another context and placed here to denote 'mouth' and 'eyes'. The effect is that the face has an almost horrific impersonal stare of non-individuality, montage-like.

Yet the painting is entitled 'Woman', not 'person', and in a way, the most important part of the painting are the two circular brush strokes that represent the breasts. These huge breasts provide sexuality in a few brush and paint strokes. She is definitely a painted woman. What makes it a painting, and what makes it a woman are one and the same thing - the thick use of paint. It is the paint which is primary; the woman - the womanliness - is literally two round strokes of paint. So is it figurative

or abstract? The multi-coloured and multi-layered paint strokes of the background also make up the woman - figure and ground are composed of the same. The coloured background acts as an aura and yet also defines the woman.

Can there then be a figure and ground? If so, which is which? The viewer is presented with an overall image of vitality and sexuality, but it is the paint, and the actual action of it having been painted, the movement of the artist over and through his materials that provide the sensuality.

In Woman as a Landscape 1954-55, the woman has become both figure AND ground. Her figure is almost obscured by an editing-by-paint, brushed out by the top layer of paint, and yet it is also the paint which is the creating material of the woman. Teeth and eyes still emerge, and the rest becomes paint strokes of flesh, pink and red. The black, which has acted to outline the shape as 'woman', now acts as a black form of censure or erasure, and so the womanliness, even more so than in Woman I, becomes more difficult to pin down as the figure, and is even named as ground - it is a picture of a woman, but a woman as landscape - she becomes the setting as well as the foreground. Emphasis is thrown onto the paint, and the methods and process of painting itself. Visual depth becomes eroded in favour of the movement on the flat surface of the canvas with the oils.

Can any poetry do this? 'Second Avenue' is certainly a poem full of movement and change - even the lines of the

poem are long and densely packed with words; there is little space and silence. Aurally, it is an impressive bombardment of words. Yet, unlike the paintings' appeal to the sense of sight, a poem's words are more than just sounds which engage the sense of hearing. It is not music, it is poetry. Words, then, are more than a collection of sounds. They also convey meaning, and as such, are always linked to a more complicated understanding than the primary one of sound, or, as a written word, than that of sight. In a similar way, although 'Second Avenue' is large in scale for a poem, it is a LONG poem, not a BIG poem. The poem is linear, it follows the pattern of writing and speech. Even calligrammes must follow some linear pattern in order to be read, and avoid becoming random, meaningless letters on a page. This suggests that to choose to work with words, entails the acknowledgement that there will be some kind of deciphering on the part of the reader.

O'Hara's description of the woman in 'Second Avenue' seems to be more of a secondary encounter with images than de Kooning's Women. To describe the sight of someone, is to add a middle man to the experience of engaging with the person being described. The act of seeing has an intermediary. Where de Kooning creates a woman for viewers to feast their eyes on, O'Hara's woman can only be seen in the mind, a re-creation through language. O'Hara is not a painter. He cannot produce images directly for the sense of sight with the power of immediacy that the visual arts have.

Here is O'Hara's description of the de Kooning woman in 'Second Avenue':

> You remained for me a green Buick of sighs, o
> Gladstone!
> and your wife Trina, how like a yellow pillow on a
> sill
> in the many-windowed dusk where the air is
> compartmented!
> her red lips of Hollywood, soft as a Titian and as
> tender,
> her gray face which refrains from thrusting aside the
> mane
> of your languorous black smells, the hand crushed by
> her chin,
> and that slumberland of dark cutaneous lines which
> reels
> under the burden of her many-darkly-hued corpulence of
> linen
> and satin bushes, is like a lone rose with the sky
> behind it.
> A yellow rose. Valentine's Day.
>
> (CP p.147)

O'Hara takes the woman and makes her his own. This is not a poem about a piece of work by de Kooning - it is INSPIRED by it. There is a distinction to be made here. De Kooning's woman becomes O'Hara's woman in the context of the poem - The poet has taken the idea of her, and not the painting itself, and incorporated it into his work. Thus, O'Hara allows de Kooning's talent for the visual creation of the woman to remain intact, but also allows her to become a personality in his poem, partly given a story and a life: 'your wife Trina....that slumberland of dark cutaneous lines...is like a lone rose with the sky behind it ./ A yellow rose. Valentine's Day..' All the physical descriptions are in terms of the painted image - 'like a

yellow pillow...her gray face..dark cutaneous lines...' yet the woman is now also fictionalised, given an invented story and background. De Kooning's women paintings have been described as:

> [taking] their place in a line of images of woman as goddess or idol, whether savage or benevolent, which goes back to Cycladic figures, Sumerian idols, and the even more ancient Paleolithic fertility figures such as the Venus of Willendorf.[13]

In this sense, de Kooning's paintings have something powerful in their silent immediacy. They come from a long line of silent, yet forceful tradition of representations of women. The painted women can, through this power, achieve a kind of mythical status. O'Hara's woman here has a first name - therefore familiarised - a husband and a description. She still has a pedigree or heritage - 'red lips of Hollywood, soft as a Titian', but in its depiction, its spelling out, some of the spell is broken. She has become analysed, verbalised, mentally assessed rather than taken in through the eye, and thus, in knowing more about her she ceases to hold us spellbound. Words hold a different power to that of sight.

The world of words make up O'Hara's 'Second Avenue', rather than the visual aesthetic of a de Kooning or a Rivers. According to O'Hara's notes, there are within the poem:

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[13] Simon Wilson, 'Women and Urban Abstractions 1950-55', De Kooning, Tate Gallery Exhibition Guide, (London, 1995).

several scenes with characters...a little Western
story....a newspaper clipping report...a true
description of not being able to continue this
poem..and..a talk with a sculptor.

(CP, pp. 495-6)

Note the terms 'scenes...characters...story...report... description...talk'. Whatever Rivers chose to do with his 'sights', or despite de Kooning's shapes being formed from 'whatever I see'[14], O'Hara's priority is to deal with the tools and methods of writers, and it is their traditions he rewrites, rather than artists' traditions which he adapts and redraws; he writes emboldened by the power of the long line of writers he follows:

....I
put on my warm corduroy pants, a heavy maroon
sweater,
and wrap myself in my old maroon bathrobe. Just like
Pasternak..
lacking the master's inspiration , I may freeze to
death
..I could have left
the window open last night? But that's where health
comes from! His breath from the Urals, drawing me
into flame
like a forgotten cigarette. Burn! this is not
negligible,
being poetic, and not feeble, since it is sponsored
by
the greatest living Russian poet at incalculable
cost.

(CP p.239)

[14] Willem de Kooning, Collected Writings, p.133.

What Perloff terms as O'Hara's painterly cuts and distortions are really explorations of language. Expression via language, NOT the sense of sight is O'Hara's artistic realm. In the section of 'Second Avenue' quoted earlier, O'Hara breaks down speech, confuses and therefore complicates communication - 'lala la...tereu..' in a mockery of Eliot, only to make it into part of the huge realm of words, so there is an intertextuality operating within the surface busyness, which seems to move it so far away from Rivers' 'views'. O'Hara himself makes a similar point in his 'Statement for Paterson Society' in 1961:

> you can't have a statement saying 'my poetry is like Pollock, de Kooning and Guston rolled into one great verb..'.what would poetry like that be? It would have to be.. the paintings themselves..impossible.
>
> (CP, p.510)

Time and again, O'Hara himself is quoted as referring to these painters as influential, yet it is their 'spirit' he emulates ('Larry Rivers: A Memoir', in CP, p.513) rather than their method, their sense of adventure and experimentation with their own media which drew him, a sense he felt absent in the poetry available in America at the time[15].

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[15] See, for example, O'Hara's comments in his interview with Edward Lucie-Smith: 'I think the example of certain of the abstract expressionists in particular and then later on other artists in New York and in Europe gave me the feeling that one should work harder and should really try to do something other than just polish whatever talent one had been recognized for, that one should go further', in Frank O'Hara, Standing Still and Walking in New York, ed. Donald Allen, (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1983)p.3. Further references to this work will be noted in the text as SS+W.
See also O'Hara's comments on contemporary poetry in 'Rare Modern', in SS+W

In the lithographs on which he collaborated with Larry Rivers, Plate 1 (1957-60) has O'Hara's words pointedly announcing:

Poetry was declining

Painting advancing

We were complaining

It was '50.

It was with the tools and the inspiration of the writers - most notably Whitman, Williams, Reverdy, Apollinaire, Pasternak, Mayakovsky - that O'Hara's poetry was created, buoyed along by the sense of excitement and experimentation that the New York painters engendered - a sense O'Hara felt was missing in the literature of his day:

> It could be argued..that O'Hara's poetry, viewed in the context of the 1950s formed a severe reaction against the 'academic' poetry then in the ascendency... It was only in the plastic arts that development seemed steadily exciting, that the forms had not set and the gestures had not been stilled. Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning and other abstract expressionists were the only American artists as interesting as the Continental giants of the early years of the century. You simply had to sidestep the current literary scene in the States, a plunge not backward to recover something lost or fading, but a jig sideways to pick up the floating currents in other forms. The poetic idiom available to O'Hara was not so much depleted as simply irrelevant.[16]

(Cont..)p.73: 'Among contemporary painters there is a great distaste for academicism. But, judging by much recent poetry, this is not true of the poets.'

[16] Charles Molesworth, '"The Clear Architecture of the Nerves': The Poetry of Frank O'Hara', in The Fierce Embrace: A Study of Contemporary American Poetry, (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1979), 85-97, p.93.

O'Hara's poetry becomes painterly through the vocabulary of the critics, applied via abstract expressionist painting. The emphasis on similarities between the two art forms is picked out and enlarged to take over the works themselves.

'I THINK I WOULD RATHER BE A PAINTER': PAINTER AS ALTER-EGO.

Although O'Hara was not a painter of words, the visual arts and the art world did play a major part in his life and his poetry. The importance of the visual arts in his poetry lies in their role as subject matter, rather than in a focus on a supposed methodological equivalency between the two arts.

His affinity with painters was complex; a relationship of both hero worship and power. As poet, a hanger-on to the art scene, he was the lesser artist in market terms. As curator and critic he was powerful and influential over their works' reception, and consequently whether they were viewed and assessed. In response, his poetry specifically about the art and artists is ambiguously powerful. How is this relationship reflected in his poetry about art? The pamphlets of O'Hara's poetry selling in the galleries alongside the paintings made only a few dollars - nothing compared to the money and acclaim the painters were receiving. Yet, O'Hara managed to be a part of that scene, and to make his work a part of that scene, and so linked to the triumph and success of the American avant-garde in a way that other contemporary poets - Lowell, Ginsberg,

Creeley were not.

Ginsberg's elegy for O'Hara recalls how he 'mixed with money'[17] - he was both in the circle of painters, sharing their fame and glory, and also apart - he was a poet, poorer, less well known:

> The sad thing about life is
> that I need money to write poetry
> and If I am a good poet
> nobody will care how I got it
> and If I am a bad poet
> nobody will know how I got it
>
> (CP p.323)

To be the poet means a smaller slice of money, commercial success, fame. Yet O'Hara was in there, he was a part of the art scene, always seen at gatherings of artists. Brad Gooch suggests that he 'lived aesthetically under the umbrella of the Cedar painters, who had coined the phrase "New York School"'(Gooch, p.202). How does a poet come aesthetically under the 'umbrella' of painters? He was a writer, and yet he is so closely linked with painting. Even O'Hara's close friends and contemporaries are unsure as to the extent and importance of the artworld in O'Hara's work. In his introduction to O'Hara's Collected Poems, John Ashbery suggests that:

> This art absorbed Frank to such a degree, both as a critic for ART NEWS and a curator at the Museum of

[17] Allen Ginsberg, Collected Poems 1947-1980, (London: Penguin, 1987), p.458.

> Modern Art, and as a friend of the protagonists, that it could be said to have taken over his life. In return it gave him a concept of art as process which, if not exactly new....still had never been before applied in America with such dramatic results.
>
> (CP p.viii)

As a footnote at this point in the introduction he adds:

> James Schuyler takes issue with my estimate of the role of painting in Frank's work. He says in a letter to me, 'I think you are hampered by a feeling of disapproval, or irritation (also felt by others - Schuyler, Koch..) for Frank's exaltation of the New York painters as the climax of human creativity, as something more important than his own work and talent. Perhaps the kindest (and it may even be true) way of seeing it would be along the lines of what Pasternak says about life creating incidents to divert our attention from it so that it can get on with the work it can only accomplish unobserved'.
>
> (CP p.ix)

The two differences of opinion on the extent to which the artworld dominated O'Hara and his work illustrates the ambiguity of the role both the artwork and O'Hara as artist himself take within the poetry. Are the two purely separate art forms linked only by O'Hara the man, and then only in his lifestyle rather than his literary output?

In a way, it was perhaps an honour for O'Hara to be able to discuss the paintings and the painters he loved so much. Hero-worship seems to have been important to him:

> when Larry introduced me to de Kooning I nearly got sick.. Newman was at that time considered a temporary silent oracle...Meyer Schapiro a god...Elaine de

> Kooning was the white goddess.. we all adored (and adore) her.
>
> ('Larry Rivers: A Memoir', in CP p.512)

That O'Hara was a fan of the painters as well as the paintings is obvious. Yet alongside this fandom is an element of power. O'Hara's work at the Museum of Modern Art enabled him to have a voice in the exhibitions, and therefore, the reception of these artists' work. Friedman suggests that:

> As art critic and as director of the Museum of Modern Art exhibitions, O'Hara had the power to comment on and control acceptance or rejection of American works of art.
>
> (Friedman, p.31)

Perloff describes O'Hara's occupation as curator as his 'other role'(PAP, p.76), one which provided him with much inspiration for his poetry. This duality of role, poet and curator, has been noted by critics, but not developed to show how O'Hara's textual dealing with the role of both poet, and as influential curator, and mentor and friend to the painters, allows O'Hara to become powerful, as artist, in the paintings' own reception.

O'Hara claimed that whatever was happening to him went into his poems. As so much of his professional and private life was bound up with the art world, then surely it seems natural that this must become part of the poetry. Yet is that the only way the art functions in the text - as part

of the raw data of O'Hara's life? Discussing poems on painting, Werner Senn draws attention to:

> deeply artistic pre-occupations that may determine the writer's choice of such a subject: the fascination with the material already formed through an artist's imagination or, conversely, the writer's desire to assert and prove the superiority of his or her own art over that of the visual medium.[18]

O'Hara certainly was fascinated by the artworks ('sometimes I think I'm "in love" with painting' [CP, p.329]). Yet Grant F. Scott has noted the 'competitive nature of ekphrasis'[19], and he describes the relationship between the poem and the painting as 'disturbingly parasitic' (Scott, p.302). For O'Hara the relationship starts not at the level of the works, but at the level of the artists themselves. In Gooch's biography, many of the painters refer to O'Hara's presence as both guru and fan:

> 'He used to just love being around the studio and he would come and help me stretch my canvases, which was like a great privilege to him,' says [Jane] Freilicher....'When he posed for you it was about the drawing,' says Rivers..'It was about you and your art. He was available. He was a professional fan'.
>
> (Gooch, p.206)

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[18] Werner Senn, 'Speaking the silence: contemporary poems on paintings', Word and Image, Vol.5,(2),(April- June 1989), 181-197, p.182. Further references to this work will be noted in text as 'Senn'.

[19] Grant F. Scott, 'The Rhetoric of dilation: ekphrasis and ideology', Word and Image, Vol.7 (4), (Oct-Dec 1991), 301-310, n.6, p.301. Further references to this work will be noted in the text as 'Scott'.

Gooch calls O'Hara's frequent presence at artists' studios 'enthusiastic loitering'(Gooch, p.206). His presence meant that O'Hara almost inevitably became the subject of many of the artists' works, further entrenching him in the world of the visual arts as more than just a commentator. Gooch's description of O'Hara's loitering - a negative term, being then qualified as enthusiastic, gives the impression of a need or a desire to be involved in an area which really should have been out of bounds to him. O'Hara was making himself present at the conception and on-going creation of the works, forging a link with the artists as more than mere commentator on a finished piece.

When asked to take part in a panel discussion on Abstract Expressionism along with painters Jane Freilicher, Grace Hartigan, Larry Rivers, Al Leslie, and Joan Mitchell, Gooch suggests that the poet's 'delight that evening had to do simply with having been taken up as an equal by the painters'(Gooch, p.216). O'Hara's biographer also talks about the 'mutual absorption'(Gooch, p.213) of O'Hara and painters such as Grace Hartigan. Rather than mere fandom this suggests that O'Hara's link with the painters seems to veer toward a kind of collaborative artistic personality:

> O'Hara, as he did with many painters, male and female, helped articulate Hartigan to herself. '..Frank was like her wings of language,' says Kenneth Koch. 'He did that for a lot of people, painters especially'.
> (Gooch, p.213)

That O'Hara had a say in the articulation of the painter, rather than just in the interpretation of the work, allowed him power at the point of creation, at the point of being the artist. In an interview with Kenneth Koch, Friedman quotes Koch as stating that O'Hara 'had more effect on painters than painters had on him or us'(Friedman,p31).

Why did O'Hara exert such an influence on the painters? Does O'Hara fantasise about being the artist, painter as alter-ego? Did he use his poems about the art world to gain some influence on the paintings, in effect, to be in there with the creative success of the new American painting? What are the consequences of this sort of involvement with the artist and their work - does this lead to re-alignment of the power in the poet-painter relationship in the New York school?

In a commentary on O'Hara's interview with Larry Rivers for Horizon in September 1959, Perloff briefly mentions the role taken by O'Hara, suggesting it is an ambiguous role:

> The interview ...is, like all of O'Hara's interviews, notable for the poet's self-effacement...On the other hand, the Rivers presented in this interview consistently sounds like O'Hara himself, so that, in a second, more devious way, the poet is present after all.
>
> (PAP, p.92)

Perloff is referring to the interview with Rivers, 'Why I Paint As I Do'(AC, p.106), in which she believes that

Rivers's relation of his methods of painting are parallel to O'Hara's way of writing. O'Hara is recognisable through Rivers, whilst talking about the creation of his work - not in the finished pieces. Rivers is sounding like O'Hara in the articulation of the creative act. That Perloff has used the word 'devious' suggests that O'Hara's presence coming through Rivers' voice is purposeful. Who is the artist? Perloff's observation hints that in O'Hara's criticism and writing about art, he indeed showed a kind of fantasising about himself being the artist.

Perhaps O'Hara's collaborative visual works with Larry Rivers and Norman Bluhm brought him closer to this ideal. In his collaborative lithographs with Rivers, he writes the words 'Poetry belongs to me, Larry, and Painting to you'. (Stones, plate 1, 1957-60) among the cartoon-like faces of O'Hara drawn by Rivers. Yet O'Hara's words and Rivers' pictures are all on one surface, constitute one artwork. In the final piece, what belongs to whom? What does it take to be the painter? Here O'Hara has managed to actually be part of a work that is also Larry Rivers' work, a visual piece of art shown in a gallery. The Stones series are true collaborations, not merely illustrations of words, or, conversely, words describing paint. Rivers has said that O'Hara was 'as important as myself in the overall visual force of the print'[20]. O'Hara has been responsible for a visual work, a collaborative work.

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[20] Larry Rivers, Drawings and Digressions, (New York: Clarkson N. Potter Inc, 1979), p.115-6.

THE PAINTERS' INSERTION INTO THE TEXT

How does this hint of desire to be a painter and yet also be a poet manifest itself in the text? O'Hara has worked on collaborations with visual artists in a form that was a mixture of both text and images. He has also extended and crossed the boundaries of the role of poet into the visual setting of an art gallery. Brad Gooch writes:

> Following Grace Hartigan's exhibition [at the gallery], O'Hara managed to make his own appearance at Tibor de Nagy...O'Hara's was the first in a Tibor de Nagy series of books by poets with artists' drawings.
>
> (Gooch, p.213)

O'Hara's pamphlet was illustrated by Larry Rivers, again linking the two art forms into one product. Yet it is within the poetry itself that O'Hara takes on the creative products of the painters, and makes them into something of his own creation. In 'On Seeing Larry Rivers' Washington Crossing the Delaware at the Museum of Modern Art', a collaboration is also going on, yet it is one created by O'Hara alone. The poem reads as a reaction to Rivers' painting:

> Now that our hero has come back to us
> in his white pants and we know his nose
> trembling like a flag under fire,
> we see the calm cold river is supporting
> our forces, the beautiful history.
>
> To be more revolutionary than a nun

is our desire, to be secular and intimate
as, when sighting a redcoat, you smile
and pull the trigger. Anxieties
and animosities, flaming and feeding

on theoretical considerations and
the jealous spiritualities of the abstract,
the robot? they're smoke, billows above
the physical event. They have burned up.
See how free we are! as a nation of persons.

Dear father of our country, so alive
you must have lied incessantly to be
immediate, here are your bones crossed
on my breast like a rusty flintlock,
a pirate's flag, bravely specific

and ever so light in the misty glare
of a crossing by water in winter to a shore
other than that the bridge reaches for.
Don't shoot until, the white of freedom glinting
on your gun barrel, you see the general fear.

(CP p.233-4)

When compared to Auden's reflections on a painting seen in a gallery - 'Musée des Beaux Arts' - it is possible to see how differently O'Hara handles the subject of the painting - how he breaks in at the level of creation, of being the artist, different from that of being purely observer or even interpreter:

In Brueghel's ICARUS, for instance: how everything
turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun
shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the
green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have
seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.[21]

[21] W.H. Auden, The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic writings 1927

Auden's poem is definitely 'about' the painting. It tells the tale of the fall of Icarus as Brueghel painted it - unmistakable as any other representation of the story due to the details - 'the ploughman...white legs disappearing into the green water...the expensive delicate ship..'. The poem is a reading of the painting. Is O'Hara's poem a reading of Rivers' painting in the same way? There is no description of the painting itself. References to the actual physical details of the painting are used - 'his white pants...the calm cold river.....ever so light in the misty glare..', and yet these are not only specific to Rivers' Washington, but to the Washington of history, legend, and, of course of other paintings. O'Hara does not stand outside the painting as a commentator or observer. He doesn't make himself a third party, separate from the painting or its artist, except in the title.

Suzanne Ferguson suggests that O'Hara is:

> coming to the image of Washington by way of Rivers and the Museum of Modern Art.....The poem is even more explicitly than the painting an inquiry into the truthfulness of patriotic images and a revision of the Washington myth.[22]

In this case, O'Hara's poem is not merely a commentary on the painting, as Auden's is in the last section of his

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- 1939, Ed. Edward Mendelson, (London: Faber, 1988), p. 237.

[22] Suzanne Ferguson, 'Crossing the Delaware with Larry Rivers and Frank O'Hara: the Post-modern Hero at the Battle of the Signifiers', Word and Image, Vol 2(1), (Jan-March, 1986), 27-32, p.31.
Further references to this work will be noted in the text as Crossing.

poem, but is an active participation in the working-into-art of the famous Washington tale. That the poet is tackling it not directly via the facts or the interpretations of a history book, but through Rivers' painting, means that the painting is not apart from the observer - O'Hara - but becomes the subject and participation in a dialogue. O'Hara's poem is not about ANY factual or conventional Washington, nor is it, like Auden's, a description of a painting and how the artist has chosen to interpret it. O'Hara takes on Rivers' Washington not in mere description, but to become part of his own work. Ferguson believes that:

> these parallel works can be used as set pieces for examining the ways visual and verbal art have in common for constituting and deconstructing the signs and meanings of the social institutions reflected in their subjects.
>
> (Crossing, p.27)

Yet the two are not 'parallel works'. This is a basic misinterpretation. O'Hara's work here springs directly from Rivers', rather than running an equivalent verbal course, generated entirely from an investigation into how convention reworks history and myth into art. Rather, O'Hara's poem is an adjunct of Rivers' work - it relies upon the painting for its very being, and although Rivers' painting does not have the same dependence on the poem, it is given an extra resonance, a verbal dimension perhaps, by O'Hara, as he draws it into his own poem.

Ferguson says that both poem and painting are 'speaking to us from a shared heritage of signification' (Crossing, p.32), yet O'Hara's Washington is also, at some level, Rivers' Washington - he is utilising Rivers' imagination and artistic representation in his work. The Washington in O'Hara's poem is, of course, also the Washington of heritage, of history, and can be read so, independently of Rivers' painting. Yet the conception of the poem springs directly from a Washington painted by Rivers. That moment of creation for O'Hara was inherent in Rivers' painting. Rivers' Washington, as opposed to any other representation of him, is the base upon which O'Hara's Washington was created.

O'Hara is using Rivers' artistic skills as part of his own text, so that his own poem is not merely about the portrayal of Washington, but about Rivers' Washington - the poem becomes linked with the painting, not as a descriptive reflection, like that of Auden on Brueghel's Icarus, but in the presentation of what Ferguson calls a 'new Washington' (Crossing, p.32).

O'Hara's version of the president accesses the man directly, yet is also, through the title of the poem, inextricably linked with Rivers'. Ferguson has to describe both Rivers' and O'Hara's Washington - ostensibly two different creations - as simply one 'new Washington', and so the critic feels bound to see one 'new' portrayal of a man (with all the attendant history and myth) in two different media representations. The poem becomes so bound

with the painting that there are not two views of Washington, or even a view of a view of Washington, but a single figure or image. The image of Washington has almost become a collaborative effort, and yet O'Hara's poem is written after seeing the completed painting hanging in a gallery. Ferguson sums up by describing the figure they conjure up as:

> demythologised but nonetheless a creature of myth, he is a Washington reinterpreted for our time, still conventional but also, in his post-modern representation(s), still compelling.
>
> (Crossing, p.32)

The final image for this critic is of one representation of Washington. She has to bracket the 's' to acknowledge that there are literally two people's interpretations at work, and yet O'Hara has managed to make himself as much a creator of this new Washington as Rivers. He has inserted himself and his work at the level of the artist creating the painting.

How does this affect the relationship between painter and poet, and between painting and poem? Ferguson suggests both works speak of their respective creators, but adds that the poem also 'speaks of the painting'(Crossing, p.32). In what way? The poem is not a straightforward visual description. It doesn't mention the painting as an 'it', an inanimate other, but seems to address an audience on behalf of the poem and the painting - or perhaps on

behalf of the poet and the painter. Washington is 'our hero' and the first section of the poem is spoken as though from a plural viewpoint - 'we know his nose...we see...our forces..' Is O'Hara blatantly talking as a joint-artist, linking his words with Rivers' paint to give a re-inforced figure of Washington? Who 'pull[s] the trigger' on the redcoats? The poet could be speaking about the artists with their reinterpretations. He could also be referring to the historians with their versions of the truth, or the troops themselves. O'Hara leaves it ambiguously open.

The poem focuses in and out of the actual representation of Washington, and what appears to be the act of representing Washington:

> .....Anxieties
> and animosities, flaming and feeding
>
> on theoretical considerations and
> the jealous spiritualities of the abstract,

O'Hara does not reveal who is jealous of whom. Perhaps it is the poet's jealousy of the potential of the visual artist, who can reach such "spiritual clarity[23]" with his medium, who doesn't 'have to use words'. O'Hara is perhaps textually utilising the artist's creativity, to link it with his work at the point of creation of this particular poem. He is certainly not coming to the painting as a

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[23] Frank O'Hara in 'Jackson Pollock', spoke of the artist's work as having properties of 'immediate impact and spiritual clarity', a state which he believes is 'the total engagement of the spirit in the expression of meaning'. AC, p. 25.

describer, as Auden does. The 'Dear father of our country' in the poem is not purely a Washington of O'Hara's making, but a figure accessed through all the existing historical and artistic representations - the primary one being Rivers'. If Ferguson can suggest that both O'Hara's and Rivers' portrayals form a singular, 'new' Washington, then surely the figure looming out of Rivers' misty painting can now, in the light of the poem, also be partly attributed to O'Hara.

If the artist is the person who creates the work which affects the viewers' visual experience of it, then O'Hara has managed to take on this role, as:

> The poem's interpretation of the painting is so forceful in itself that it has influenced at least one very perceptive critic - Marjorie Perloff - to see the painting as embodying 'irreverence and amused contempt' for its subject, an interpretation that is certainly present in the poem, but not so clear in a visual experience of the painting - naive or informed - or in Rivers' own comments on it.
>
> (Crossing, p.31)

If O'Hara's poem really is an interpretation, it is so in the sense that he also interpreted the artist himself:

> O'Hara quickly settled into the role of Rivers' artistic and ethical director, constantly giving him advice on his career...'Larry has never been as good a person, or an artist, or a mind as when Frank was running herd on him, keeping him in order, checking him, making sure he did the best and insulting him when he didn't,' says Hartigan, on whose life and art O'Hara had a similar effect.
>
> (Gooch, p.231)

O'Hara directed the artist's own sense of himself. Thus Perloff sees in Rivers' painting - through O'Hara's poem - something that the visual experience alone does not allow; it is only to be seen after reading O'Hara's poem. In this sense the poet has contributed to the visual effect of the painting through his text.

O'Hara's poems on paintings thus really have some effect on the process of the artwork being experienced, entering into its effect on viewers. If this is the case, can O'Hara be said to be trying to gain some of the power of the painters themselves? How does this manifest itself at the level of the text - in O'Hara's own work?

In O'Hara's poem 'Why I Am Not A Painter'(CP, p.261), he appears to go to great lengths to make differences between himself and the visual artists, only to provide no firm differences at all. In an interview with Edward Lucie-Smith, O'Hara had to refute the idea that he was a painter[24]. He was linked to the art world so strongly that he had to defend his occupation as a poet. Yet the poem he wrote which seems to be a response to that often-asked question serves only to make the relationship ambiguous. 'Why I am not a painter' almost becomes 'how I can get in on the painting act'. The ambiguity is evident not so much in the poem's subject in itself, but in how the poet handles the relationship of the poem to the picture within the text. The poem works on a double level:

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[24] see SS+W, p.21. Lucie-Smith asks 'Have you ever hesitated between being a painter and a writer?', to which O'Hara answers, decisively, 'No, I can't say that I have'.

I am not a painter, I am a poet.
Why? I think I would rather be
a painter, but I am not. Well,

for instance, Mike Goldberg
is starting a painting. I drop in.
'Sit down and have a drink' he
says. I drink; we drink. I look
up. 'you have SARDINES in it.'
'Yes, it needed something there.'
'Oh.' I go and the days go by
and I drop in again. The painting
is going on, and I go, and the days
go by. I drop in. The painting is
finished. 'Where's SARDINES?'
All that's left is just
letters, 'It was too much,' Mike says.

But me? One day I am thinking of
a color: orange. I write a line
about orange. Pretty soon it is a
whole page of words, not lines.
Then another page. There should be
so much more, not of orange, of
words, of how terrible orange is
and life. Days go by. It is even in
prose, I am a real poet. My poem
is finished and I haven't mentioned
orange yet. It's twelve poems, I call
it ORANGES. And one day in a gallery
I see Mike's painting, called SARDINES.

(CP p.261-2)

The opening line is a bold statement of fact. The poem then goes on almost to negate this fact. The constant repetition 'I go and the days go by...I go..Days go by' to describe the work and process of both his own poetry and Mike Goldberg's painting, seems to hint that both are in fact at the same task. The fact that both works described finish by bearing no trace of their original idea and title, adds weight to the idea that being a painter and being a poet are really one and the same; both are artists. O'Hara says of his poem 'It is even in / prose, I am a real

poet.' Poetry isn't prose, but here it defines O'Hara as poet. Mike Goldberg's painting is entitled Sardines - it is based on a word within the painting, and the painting is then defined by that word, even though SARDINES is no longer in the poem.

O'Hara plays with the definition of art, of what constitutes the different arts, and even whether there is a difference between them. By the end of the poem, the initial statement appears to be undermined, and by calling the poem 'Why I Am Not A Painter', he then gives an explanation which explains nothing of the kind. His answer is ambiguous. Yet the poem is indeed an answer to Edward Lucie-Smith's question.

The similarities O'Hara appears to have spelled out in the poem, are actually undercut by the existence of the poem itself. The poem has become the chronicle of a work in progress much more than any painting could ever hope to achieve. It explains, it gives histories of other times and events in relation to those of the poem. More than all that it helps shape the making of Sardines, much more clearly than the picture itself can do. In this alone it makes clear the power of language in relation to that of paint. Ferguson suggests that:

> humans have habitually relied upon one art form to respond to and interpret the other.[25]

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[25] Suzanne Ferguson, '"Spots of Time": Representation of Narrative in Modern Poems and Paintings', Word and Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry, Conference proceedings, (Jan-March, 1988), 186-194, p.186.

There is almost no interpretation of Goldberg's painting in the poem, rather a kind of preview of what Sardines became. O'Hara leaves the painting intact, but manipulates the viewer into having had a sneak preview of its creation. He does not distort or re-interpret the work itself, but manifests its history - it is known to us through a poem.

Language can be used to define and name things, and here O'Hara has utilised that power to make a history of the creation of a certain painting, which, although separate from the painting itself, also becomes part of its history and its effect. O'Hara has contributed to the reception of Goldberg's painting, not through direct participation on the canvas, but through creating a shared history, and also intercepting the total engagement of the viewer with the painting, and filtering it through the O'Hara version of the creation of Sardines. The poet does not re-interpret the painting, which in fact is, in its finished form, absent from the poem. Instead, O'Hara has harnessed the exposure of the painting - it is relevant that it is seen 'in a gallery' - open to the public, on display - and his poem is linked to that exposure. The fame and the glamour of the painters is his by proxy.

The power of poetry to affect the experience of seeing a painting has been proven by Timothy Cage and Lawrence B. Rosenfeld in their study, published in 1989[26]. Cage and

[26] T. Cage and L.B. Rosenfeld, 'Ekphrastic Poetry in Performance: An Examination of Audience Perceptions of the Relationship between Poetry and Painting', Text and Performance Quarterly, vol.9(3), (July, 1989), 199-206.

Lawrence's study aimed:

> to define the relationship between poetry and painting as it appears in four ekphrastic poems by Frank O'Hara... Respondents completed a series of semantic differential scales to indicate their responses to O'Hara's four ekphrastic poems ('Why I Am Not A Painter'; 'Digression On NUMBER 1,1948'; 'On Seeing Larry Rivers' WASHINGTON CROSSING THE DELAWARE At The Museum Of Modern Art'; 'Having A Coke With You'.) and/or their corresponding paintings....Comparisons were made of the responses to the poems and paintings alone and in combination.[27]

In the introduction, they claim that:

> the poet's perspective often enables the reader / viewer to see the paintings better, more fully...Frank O'Hara, as a poet inextricably linked to the New York art world of the 1950s and 1960s, provides access to this world through his ekphrastic poems. The ekphrastic poems, in part, are instruments that focus on and permit the discovery of this art world as they speak to, for, or about particular works of art.[28]

This sets O'Hara up as intermediary for the reception of the work. The power of language, to 'speak to, for, or about' works involves a power which is outside the painting and yet links the poems to its work. In this link, there is an acknowledgement of the differences between the power and effect of each art form. Language's power to speak for paintings also suggests that between artists themselves - the painters and the poet - power is given to the poet, or

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[27] Cage and Rosenfeld, 'Ekphrastic Poetry in Performance', pp199-201.

[28] Cage and Rosenfeld, 'Ekphrastic Poetry in Performance', pp200-201.

perhaps taken from the painter, to allow the poet to give more clarity and understanding to the painting. In essence, for the poet to have some influence in the initial and immediate perception of the painting. What implications does this have for O'Hara's poetry on painting?

Cage and Rosenfeld refer to the 'affective possibilities'(p.201) of the poems, - the ability of the poems to influence the reader - and their conclusions show that the respondents did actually see the paintings more clearly and with greater appreciation when viewed alongside a reading of the poems(pp203-204). They conclude that:

> The integration of the poems and paintings created an engaging experience that increased the saliency of familiarity.(p.205)

To see Goldberg's Sardines, then, alongside a reading of O'Hara's 'Why I am Not a Painter', enhances appreciation and clarity of both works. Yet, Goldberg's work stands alone as a piece supposedly independent of any other. O'Hara's, on the other hand, takes as its subject another work of art. Once both works have been encountered, appreciation of the two is deepened, through the link. This is a link that O'Hara has forged. His poem has affected the reception of Goldberg's painting. That Goldberg's painting also affects the reception of the poem, is a bonus of O'Hara's making, as the poet made the link within the poem in the first place: O'Hara as artist gains

both ways - he has had a hand in the experience of many viewers of a Goldberg painting, and has also used the Goldberg connection to give a power through synthesis to his own poem:

> When the relationship between the poems and the corresponding works of art is recognised and acknowledged, the 'affective possibilities' of the poems - their emotional, intellectual, and unconscious effect on a reader - are extended to new dimensions; the poem encompasses more and there is more to respond to simply because another art form is incorporated into the literary text.[29]

Although 'Why I Am Not a Painter' is more literally ABOUT the painting it talks about than 'On Seeing Larry Rivers' Washington Crossing the Delaware at the Museum of Modern Art', O'Hara has not interpreted the painting, or described it in its finished form, so isn't separately trying to be a third party with an opinion on it. Instead, O'Hara the artist and Goldberg the artist become almost indistinguishable. The parallel structures of creation - 'The painting is finished...My poem is finished..', are backed up by the repetition of the words - 'Days go by..the days go by...'. Even the I/we parallels in the poem serve to merge the actions of the two men so as to be indistinguishable. That O'Hara accomplishes all this with words finally underlines his identity as poet, but also hints at the power he has to be involved in the act of the creation of the whole experience of a painting, and in its

[29] Cage and Rosenfeld, 'Ekphrastic Poetry in Performance', p.201.

visual reception by an audience.

'A FINE DAY FOR SEEING': ABOUT VISUALITY

The present section of the chapter will examine how O'Hara utilises the works of art that are the subjects of his poetry, what effect they have on the link between poetry and art, and how he creates an innovative way of writing ekphrastic poetry.

That O'Hara was involved at personal and professional level, in both poetry and the visual arts, perhaps allowed him, more than anyone else, to understand the links and the differences between the two. Moving away from an examination of the formal considerations that link O'Hara's poetry to the art world, and instead looking at HOW art functions - as a subject in the poetry - and how THIS affects textual considerations, is vital in assessing the importance of the visual arts to O'Hara's poetics. O'Hara's use of art as subject matter will also be examined to assess where his poetry stands within the genre of ekphrasis.

In 1991 Scott defined ekphrasis as:

> both a poetic device and a literary genre...[but] may be defined more narrowly as the poetic description of a work of art, 'the verbal representation' as W.J.T. Mitchell has written, 'of a visual representation'.
>
> (Scott, p.301)

Are O'Hara's poems verbal representations of visual representations? Ferguson discusses O'Hara's poems about paintings by suggesting that 'none is ..[a] straight forward reading of an artwork' (Crossing, p.31). Yet Cage and Rosenfeld's study relied upon an interpretation of O'Hara's poems about paintings as being ekphrastic poems. How does O'Hara represent - textually - the visual medium of painting? What part does the painting play within the text? A comparison of two poems on paintings helps to illuminate how such verbal representations of the visual object operate. First is O'Hara's poem, 'Radio':

> Why do you play such dreary music
> on Saturday afternoon, when tired
> mortally tired I long for a little
> reminder of immortal energy?
>   All
> week long while I trudge fatiguingly
> from desk to desk in the museum
> you spill your miracles of Grieg
> and Honegger on shut-ins.
>   Am I not
> shut in too, and after a week
> of work don't I deserve Prokofieff?
>
> Well, I have my beautiful de Kooning
> to aspire to. I think it has an orange
> bed in it, more than the ear can hold.
>   (CP, p.234)

Compare with William Carlos Williams' poem, 'Landscape with The Fall of Icarus':

> According to Brueghel
> when Icarus fell
> it was spring
>
> a farmer was ploughing

his field
the whole pageantry

of the year was
awake tingling
near

the edge of the sea
concerned
with itself

sweating in the sun
that melted
the wings' wax

unsignificantly
off the coast
there was

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning.[30]

Both poems render the experience of the painting. Yet do they? Williams' descriptive poem appears to be more about an actual artwork than O'Hara's - his whole poem is an unfolding description of the painting - the details, the tone of the painting, with Icarus' tragic death only just mentioned on the last line in the same way that his death in the painting is 'a splash quite unnoticed' while the world carries on with its daily business.

O'Hara's poem, on the other hand, appears to be focused on the daily drudgery of work, and the painting itself only appears in the last three lines. Even then, there is no description or rendition of the painting, save his 'I think it has an orange bed in it' - a basic visual

[30] William Carlos Williams, from 'Pictures from Brueghel' Selected Poems, (London: Penguin, 1976), p.212.

observation devoid of any descriptive elaboration. Yet it is at the mention of the de Kooning that the poem lights up, that O'Hara is allowed the 'little / reminder of immortal energy'. Once the de Kooning is introduced, the other details are peripheral to the experience; they function as antithesis to the sublimity of viewing the painting, and therefore are outside the experience of engagement with the work of art.

If engagement with the work of art is the ultimate focus, where does this leave the poem? Is the painting, coming at the end of the poem, more important than the words, and hence more important than the poem itself? It cannot be - this, after all is a poem. The final phrase of the poem: 'more than the ear can hold', effectively points to the painting having a power or a language that goes beyond verbalisation. Visuality has something more than words can ever contain - a different kind of language or communication. At the point in the poem where the text ceases, the painting's silent visual impact makes its force felt, literally, beyond words. In the focus on the antithesis between words and visual image, the power of the poem is felt. There is a separation and also a merging of word and picture within the text. The end of the poem transforms the first section by throwing its impact backwards on events, and thus makes the whole poem 'about' the painting.

In Williams' poem the painted image is reproduced in words. Through the poem, Brueghel's painting is no longer

the painting itself, instead becoming Williams' interpretation of it. In this way, the actual, original painting loses its impact and presence through its textualisation. Recent studies in ekphrasis point to this problem in rendering the image into words. Senn's 1989 study about contemporary poems on paintings centres round his findings that:

> It is clear that the total, instantaneous impact of a picture can never be adequately rendered through the linear sequence of verbal discourse.
>
> (Senn, p.181)

This 'impact' is explained in more depth in Mitchell's The Language of Images as 'the silent, wordless immediacy and presence of the art object'.[31]

How important is the nature of silence and the immediacy of effect of a painting in its transferal to a verbal medium by way of a poem? Can a painted image ever really be rendered successfully through words? Senn suggests that a painting - a visual object, created to be looked at - must lose some of its power when translated into a literary medium through its depiction in words. Senn believes that it is the visual impact of a painting that has to be its ultimate power, something which cannot be translated into words. By losing its visuality through verbal description, he suggests that a painting also loses

[31] W.J.T. Mitchell, The Language of Images, p.2.

its 'silent, wordless immediacy'. Literally - by becoming verbalised - the silence is removed.

Senn's article on ekphrastic poems is entitled 'Speaking the Silence'. Can a poet speak the silence of a painting without breaking that silence, and thus the painting (as an object which in essence is purely visual) itself? By the verbal conversion of a visual work - the translation of it onto the page through words - the painting itself is deconstructed and recreated through a different artist and a different medium. It no longer has the same impact or effect - it is no longer the painting. The exact translation of images to words is not possible - one would have to become the other.

Williams' poem seeks not to BE Brueghel's painting in words, but to convey some of its essence, some of its tone, as well as the subject matter, hence the bathetic, almost casual mention of Icarus - a little scene in the overall description of the surroundings into which he falls. In this way, the painting now becomes Williams'-version-of-the-painting; Brueghel's work has been re-created. Scott believes:

> Any observation or description of an object cannot avoid being inflected by the viewer's identity and cultural background.
>
> (Scott, p.304)

Thus Williams' poem about Brueghel's painting in fact deals with the painting as filtered through William Carlos Williams. His very depiction of it alters the original

painting within the boundaries of the poem.

In O'Hara's 'Radio', de Kooning's painting, coming as it does at the end of the poem, is not actually recreated by O'Hara within the text. Yet the impact of the painting within the poem is all-consuming. What does this say of O'Hara's ekphrasis? Scott's article on ekphrasis concludes by asserting the possibility that:

> images may have their own language, that they do work on us in much different ways than words, and that their effect is powerful and lasting in a way we have as yet failed fully to theorize.
>
> (Scott, p.310)

In 'Radio', O'Hara does not use verbal language to reproduce the painting. The painting itself takes over at this point in the poem. By its presence, and by the absence of a literal description in the text, O'Hara has acknowledged and harnessed the painting's 'own language', one far more powerful in rendering the experience of the painting than a second-hand account.

The differences between the two arts is often overlooked when studying the poems about paintings by O'Hara. Many studies of O'Hara focus on the similarities between (especially abstract expressionist) painting and O'Hara's poetics. Ferguson's reading of O'Hara's 'On Seeing Larry Rivers' Washington Crossing The Delaware at the Museum of Modern Art' alongside Rivers' painting, opens with the suggestion that the two are:

> parallel works (which) can be used as set pieces for examining the ways visual and verbal art have in common for constituting...the signs and meanings..reflected in their subject.
>
> (Crossing, p.27)

The key phrases here are 'parallel works', 'set pieces' and 'the ways visual and verbal art have in common'. Emphasis is geared to the similarities between both media , the likenesses are studied, and Ferguson designates O'Hara's poetics as 'verbal equivalencies' (Crossing p.31) of the painter's techniques. The difference in the ways that words and images work, referred to by Scott, tend to be neglected, perhaps as obvious, in favour of drawing out similar aesthetic achievements.

Yet in the 1950s and 60s, O'Hara was writing poetry about paintings that dealt with art in just the way that Scott, writing in 1991, has recognised. O'Hara comprehends that the differences between painting and poetry could be used to give extra power and resonance. Whereas Williams' poem is a translation into words, of Brueghel's painted rendition of the tale of Icarus, O'Hara's stops at the point of ekphrasis. He does not translate or describe a painting, but seems to let it take over as if independently at that point in the poem. The painting is entered into the poem, but not in a different form, not verbalised. It enters intact - a presence of its own, separate from the words, and yet part of the poem.

As the painting does not actually occur in the text,

new ways of reading it are not occluded; O'Hara has not set down a prescribed reading of the painting, and as such it maintains its silent power to speak in its own way, unmediated by the poetry. O'Hara has harnessed the power of visuality to his poetry. He has not disempowered de Kooning's painting through textualising it; instead he has allowed the two powers - of words and of the visual arts - to be present and at work within the textual framework of his poem.

O'Hara understood the importance of visuality, of 'seeing' in the power of the visual arts. It is this visuality he has incorporated into the poems about art, which makes for an innovative form of ekphrasis - one which stops at the point of description and yet can render the experience of seeing a painting; seeing as present-tense engagement with the work of art.

Seeing is important as a theme, as a word and as an action in 'Digression on NUMBER 1, 1948', NUMBER 1 being the title of a Jackson Pollock painting O'Hara encounters on a lunchtime stroll through a gallery:

> I am ill today but I am not
> too ill. I am not ill at all.
> It is a perfect day, warm
> for winter, cold for fall.
>
> A fine day for seeing. I see
> ceramics, during lunch hour, by
> Miro, and I see the sea by Leger;
> light, complicated Metzingers
> and a rude awakening by Brauner,
> a little table by Picasso, pink.
>
> I am tired today but I am not

too tired. I am not tired at all.
There is the Pollock, white, harm
will not fall, his perfect hand

and the many short voyages. They'll
never fence the silver range.
Stars are out and there is sea
enough beneath the glistening earth
to bear me toward the future
which is not so dark. I see.

(CP, p.260)

Perloff points out that the contradictory conditions which here constitute O'Hara's 'fine day for seeing', reflect his need to escape monotony, and why this, in its turn, explains O'Hara's love of 'art forms that capture the PRESENT rather than the past, the present in all its chaotic splendour' (PAP, p.21).

Emphasis on the present tense is reflected in the repetition throughout the poem of the phrase 'I see', the phrase becoming the final sentence of the poem. That the poem finishes with this simple two word phrase, a subject and a verb, suggests that no further language is needed - no elaboration or description; the action of the 'I' is now concentrated on the painting, and no more VERBAL language is needed. Here, at the end of the poem, the end of the words, the picture's language comes into force; its silence is powerful within the poem. Words cannot share this experience - all that is required is the 'I' and 'see'.

The first person, present tense use of the verb suggests total engagement with the painting, letting the sense of sight take over from any mediating words. The

visual impact of the Pollock in the shape of the silence at the end of the poem, following the final 'I see', in its own way speaks volumes. 'I see' not only emphasises visuality, but is also suggestive of a sense of understanding. Thus O'Hara's engagement with the painting allows him access to a sense of meaning, implicit in the work, which is indescribable in verbal language. Using Scott's terminology, O'Hara acknowledges and taps into the painting's 'own language', so that there are two kinds of power at work - O'Hara's words, and the power of the painting harnessed within the poem, which, again, to quote Scott, can 'work on us in much different ways than words'. O'Hara's is a use of the power of the works of art as an acknowledged difference to the power of poetry, a 'seeing' in all its connotations.

The cursory references in the poem to the works of the artists mentioned on his stroll around the gallery - 'light, complicated Metzingers..a rude awakening by Brauner..a little table by Picasso, pink' - are only depicted in the most brief and general way, as though to acknowledge that an attempt to render them in words more descriptive would be impossible. Scott has suggested that 'critics seem reluctant to comprehend ekphrasis as anything more than a dubious trompe l'oeil' (Scott, p.309). O'Hara avoids this possibility by not attempting to reproduce the artworks.

At the point where he exclaims 'There is the Pollock', the poem takes on a different tone, and the words become

apparently more descriptive - 'white...the many short voyages' - a reference to colour and also perhaps to the rapid movement and direction of the paint on the canvas through the artist's 'perfect hand'. Yet this cannot be said to be a literal description of Pollock's painting. Perhaps it is a reaction to it in language. The 'short voyages..silver range...stars...sea...glistening earth..' are all suggestive of a sense of freedom. Pollock's painting does not actually depict any of these features, and yet at the sight of the Pollock, these words appear, rapturous, not truly comprehensible when compared with the earlier part of the poem. It seems as though to try to render the experience of the painting is impossible in a language which will allow only metaphor and approximations. Coming at the end of the poem, this section of rapture demonstrates that to reach the painting's power and effect - the visuality - the poet has to stop his words and let sight and silence take over.

'Digression on Number 1..' is more effective in its rendering of the impressive impact of a painting than, for example, 'Blue Territory'(CP p.270) or 'Poem (The eyelid has its storms..)'(CP, p.223). Perloff has described these poems as 'meditations on particular paintings with the intent of "translating" the tone of the paintings into a verbal medium' (PAP,p.82). It is in the translation that they lose their impact. Perloff's notes on 'Blue Territory', suggest that:

> seeing Helen Frankenthaler's large abstract painting by that name in the Whitney gave him the idea for the poem, though he didn't quite know why.
>
> (PAP, p.210 n8).

The uncertainty over why the painting inspired him to write this poem is perhaps telling. It is not, like 'Digression' or 'Radio', a poem expressly about the experience of seeing a painting. The poem seems more like a past-tense reflection; how the painting affected him, how it worked on his psyche. In this sense, a verbalisation of a mental experience is rendered - different from the rendering of an actual visual object AS SEEN. Thus 'Blue Territory' reads a little like the end section of 'Digression on Number 1...' in its language, with its half-allusions to colour and texture, yet filtered through a mental experience, the EFFECT of the poem on the viewer, rather than the textualising of the painting itself as object:

> .....and the mountains
> never quite sink, all blue, or come back
> up, de-
> sire, the Father of the messness of all
> cut the glass
> and make it grass
> under teat and horn, it's not moss
> it's turf
> get back on the boat, Boris! we love you,
> you
> don't have to stay...
>
> ...Here I am!
> blue, blue
> whoops! the gull is making a pomander
> pouring pestilence of hollow sweet smells

no, I'm drinking
sweat and piss, yum yum, signed
'The human Briar'

(CP, p.270)

Perloff suggests that Frankenthaler's painting's 'curvilinear shapes, vibrant colours, and shimmering surfaces carry minimal suggestions of an ocean landscape'(PAP,p.82). O'Hara's references in the poem to the 'blue', the 'grass..moss...turf...' and 'the mountains' are all suggestive of some sort of landscape, together with the open, unstructured lines. Yet the insertion of an 'I' throughout, along with sections of dialogue, 'get back on the boat, Boris!' suggest that this is a mental landscape - not a rendition of a painted one - a vivid, abstract scene suggested by having seen the painting. The poem is not however, a representation of the seeing of a painting - not an ekphrastic poem, but a new experience. 'Blue Territory' is only INSPIRED by the painting, not meaning to represent the painting itself, or even a version of it by O'Hara.

O'Hara himself wrote - in his monograph on Pollock - about the distinction between the actual experience of seeing, and the possible connotations that this then has within the viewer's own mind and subsequent reflections. Writing about the all-over paintings of Pollock, he suggests:

> [his work is] not about sight. It is about what we see, about what we CAN see. In the works of this period we are not concerned with possibility, but

> actuality. Number 1 could not but HAVE exactly what it HAS. It is perfection.
>
> (AC, p.32)

O'Hara explains the difference between the actuality of seeing, and further possibilities that the sight engenders. The painting is the actuality - in this is its power and impact. Everything else, all the possibilities of what can be seen in or around the physicality of the paint comes outside the reality of the painting - are part of the viewer, not of the work of art. In O'Hara's poetry, no explanations or elucidations are presented - the paintings are left to speak for themselves, literally.

The differences between the way O'Hara deals with the art works in his poetry and in his criticisms highlights his perceived differences between the powers of word and image. O'Hara's art criticism DESCRIBES works:

> The strokes become larger and more affectionately aggressive in many of these paintings, the forms expand. A series of small oils further enlarge and space out the color-forms on the plane, as if abstract figures were almost emerging in a verdant landscape of arbitrary color reflecting some non-existent season.
>
> (AC, p.138)

It also talks about technique:

> There has never been enough said about Pollock's draftmanship that amazing ability to quicken a line by thinning it, to slow it by flooding...
>
> (AC, p.32)

The kind of explanation present in his art criticism is absent in the poems about art. As art critic, O'Hara uses the language of description to illustrate, IN WORDS, how the paintings work. He describes in detail the way the works look, the technical skills and techniques employed by the artists - in a way, he is de-mystifying the art, giving its silence a voice. By so doing, by explaining, the works are interpreted - the painting as viewed by the critic.

The rendering of the art object in the poem by O'Hara is not through an attempted re-creation or a description. He utilises the clearly different properties of the two media; by acknowledging the purely visual painting as essentially different to verbal form, O'Hara can evoke the effect of the painting within the textual space of the poem. Unlike the above poems of Auden and Williams, O'Hara does not change the verbal-visual relationship into one of translation and adaptation. Rather, his ekphrastic poetry acknowledges a firm separation of the two arts, while allowing the silent, visual power that a painting has on a viewer, to be invoked within a textual framework.

Senn suggests there is a need to:

> understand more clearly the interface of text and picture, word and image in poems on paintings.
>
> (Senn,p.184)

For O'Hara this interface is based on his acknowledgement of the differences between the powers of image and of word.

O'Hara strives to capture the silent power of paintings within the poem, so that the experience of engagement with the art is not mediated. Instead, the impact of the painting is felt within the silence.

Howard Nemerov believes that ekphrastic poems should be:

> about the silence of the paintings; and where a poet was lucky his poem will speak the silence of the painting.[32]

O'Hara's poems do speak the silence of the painting, yet it is not through luck that he manages to do so. It is by attending to the paintings' own language, embodied in the visual impact, and allowing this non-verbal impact space within the poem. He does not have to speak 'about the silence of the paintings' - to do so would be back in the realm of description.

If O'Hara does not attempt a description of the painting he is writing about, how does he write ekphrastic poetry? Does his poetry constitute a bringing together of the two arts in a natural way, or does the painting never really enter the poem, always remaining outside, separate from it? Scott's definition of ekphrasis, stated earlier, claims it to be 'the poetic description of a work of art' and '"the verbal representation" as W.J.T. Mitchell has written "of a visual representation"'. O'Hara has shown

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[32] Howard Nemerov, 'On Poetry and Painting, with a Thought of Music', in Figures of Thought: Speculations on the Meaning of Poetry and Other Essays, (Boston: David R. Godine, 1978), p.95.

that these two interpretations have different meanings; his poems on paintings are able to represent the visual by including the paintings, intact, WITHOUT description. That the silent presence of the paintings can have such dramatic impact within the verbal framework of a poem means that ekphrasis does not necessarily include the poetic description of a work of art; representation of a seen object is not automatically rendered through description. O'Hara has captured the silent, visual impact of the painting.

WAYS OF SEEING: WORKS OF ART AS MOMENTS OF EPIPHANY

Ferguson has pointed out that, of O'Hara's poems about art:

> None is the kind of straightforward reading of an art work that we find, for example, in Auden's 'Musee des Beaux Arts' or Randall Jarrell's 'The Knight, Death and the Devil'. Many are 'lunch poems' - poems written on or after walking through the museum (or the streets of New York) at lunch time - or other poems written on the occasion of seeing a particular work.
>
> (Crossing,p.31)

How do the poems fail to qualify as straightforward readings of art works? Is it because the poems are more than descriptions, more than verbal versions of a painted image? Do the artworks serve a purpose in O'Hara's poetry, rather than their inclusion being an end in itself? Digression on NUMBER 1, 1948' is not called 'NUMBER 1, 1948', it is the digression that is the poem's point. The poem is a rendition of seeing a Pollock painting on that

particular lunch hour. If these poems are ABOUT the artworks they include, they are about them not in a purely objective manner; the paintings function as more than just an artistic reproduction within another medium. Rather, the paintings act as a powerful effect upon the occasion and consequently, the written observations of the poet. As discussed earlier, there are two powers at work in O'Hara's art poems - those of words and of painting. The two are not combined in a hybrid form of verbal re-image-making. Rather it is the two separate art forms working within one textual space that creates the powerful effect of these poems; the effect lies in recognition and utilisation of the fact that one cannot convey what the other one can.

O'Hara does not merely render the experience of the paintings. They are invoked to make something within his own life more resonant; the paintings have a purpose. Ferguson has called O'Hara's poetry about paintings 'lunch poems' or poems 'written on the occasion of seeing a particular work'. In both these categories, the poems tell us something about the function of the art within them. That these ekphrastic poems are also poems about a lunch hour suggests that the relation of the paintings to THAT particular occasion is paramount, rather than just a portrayal of the painting without context - mental OR physical.

The poems written on the occasion of seeing a particular work are as much about the occasion as about the work. The meaning of the work for <u>that moment</u>, the

grounding of a sense of the present with all the physical and mental awareness that it contains, through the painting, makes the poems what they are.

O'Hara finds it more illuminating to explore certain feelings and needs through the silent and powerful language of the paintings, acknowledging Scott's belief that they 'work on us in much different ways than words, and that their effect is powerful and lasting'(Scott,p.310). What is it that O'Hara finds in painting that he can not use in language for the portrayal of certain sensations?

Some of the answers lie in his critical writing about art. O'Hara has written that Pollock's paintings reached the 'state of spiritual clarity'('Jackson Pollock',in AC,p.25). He explains this as 'the total engagement of the spirit in the expression of meaning', meanings declared with 'astonishing fluency, generosity, and expansiveness'. He also writes that 'at last' art speaks 'with unimpeded force and unveiled honesty'(AC,pp 25-26).

Importantly, O'Hara ascribes to the paintings qualities usually linked with words - 'fluency...meaning...speak'. It is clear that O'Hara is convinced of the clarity with which paintings can convey certain meanings, and in a manner which is beyond that of the power of words. His notes on 'Second Avenue' refer to the 'obscurity' that comes with the use of words, 'in the relationship between the surface and the meaning' (CP,p.497). In PAINTING the surface, the visual impact IS the meaning. The obscurity and ambiguity of words cannot

achieve the pureness of meaning he attributes to painted image, which can 'dissolve its signs in a lyricism of immediate impact and spiritual clarity' (AC, p.25). The phrase 'spiritual clarity' is suggestive of a divine moment, a revelation. O'Hara calls this a total engagement of the spirit, giving the impression of consciousness swept up in direct contact with an expression of meaning, of clarity beyond the norm; an epiphanic moment.

James Roy King defined the experience of moments of epiphany as 'sudden awakening of consciousness...suddenly aware of...being alive...the abstraction makes sense'[33]. O'Hara employs a vocabulary within some of his art criticism which verges on the religious, to explain certain artworks - a vocabulary which certainly corresponds with King's criteria for moments of epiphany in literature. Does this sense of revelatory, spiritual experience he conveys in his art chronicles also emerge in the poetry about paintings? In 'Radio', he sets the scene of a dreary working day:

> .....when tired
> mortally tired I long for a little
> reminder of immortal energy?
>
> (CP,p.234)

O'Hara is 'mortally tired'. The drudgery of the world of

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[33] James Roy King, The Literary Moment As A Lens on Reality, (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1983), p.16.

work is catching up with him, and in this phrase is the suggestion of the work-until-I-die mentality, a trapped within the rat race feeling. The poem abounds with words to describe the condition of O'Hara the working man: 'dreary...tired...trudge...fatiguingly...shut in...work'. The trap of routine is enough to weary a person. To offset this, he longs for a 'reminder of immortal energy'. This comes in the form of a Willem de Kooning painting.

For O'Hara, the painting embodies immortal energy - timeless, everlasting, free of the chains of human work which cause his tiredness; it is the antithesis of tiredness. The words 'I think it has an orange bed in it' point to the strange energy of the painting. The bed would suggest sleep, lack of energy, and yet it provides O'Hara with the energy he needs to negate the weariness of work. The painting functions as a rejuvenation, and also as a 'reminder', like a flash of knowledge, of spiritual energy. The painting opens a moment of higher consciousness within the dreariness of life; it is a spot of immortality within the mortal. The 'little reminder of immortality' O'Hara finds in the de Kooning painting in 'Radio' certainly allows him the sense of 'awakening' and 'aliveness' that King has specified as defining moments of epiphany.

In 'Radio', the painting functions for O'Hara as a revelatory experience, touching deeper emotion and spirituality. It allows the poet to have a glimpse of sublimity within the space of the poem, lets him grasp a sense of deeper, richer life, while still being able to

refer to the painting as an object in his reality which he encounters. O'Hara uses the painting in the way that Barnett Newman wants people to understand the paintings of modern America:

> The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history.[34]

The idea of a painting embodying revelation and sublimity, and also being available, 'real and concrete', for the use of anyone who really knows how to see it, is put into practice by O'Hara.

In one way the artworks function as pieces of raw data for O'Hara's poetry, like the bank tellers and shopfronts he encounters, and which then become part of his poems, as Ferguson has pointed out. In 'Digression on NUMBER 1...', the art is encountered on a visit to a museum on a lunch hour break, where 'a fine day for seeing' is one in which he is 'tired' and 'ill'. Art as rejuvenation, perhaps. O'Hara uses the artworks as ways of accessing feelings - feelings of joy, pain, love - major emotions Perhaps he believed that words were not able to fully convey these sensations, afraid that he would produce 'confections', work which, he believes, does not fulfil the criteria for truth, in which poets make:

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[34] Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime Is Now', Tiger's Eye, vol.1 (6), (December, 1948), 51-53, p.53.

> themselves more elegant, more stupid, more affectionate or more sincere than the words will allow them to be.
>
> (SS+W,p.14)

O'Hara evidently believes that words only 'allow' a poet to express certain things without appearing false and forced. He takes up Barnett Newman's idea of the painting as at once revelatory and real, and borrows the sublimity for his own ends. The sense of sublimity embodied within the painting-as-object is explored more deeply in 'Having A Coke with You', a poem which manages to be an art poem, a love poem and a city poem simultaneously:

> HAVING A COKE WITH YOU
>
> is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irun,
> Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne
> or being sick to my stomach on the Traversa de Gracia
> in Barcelona
> partly because in your orange shirt you look like a
> better happier St. Sebastian
> partly because of my love for you, partly because of
> your love for yoghurt
> partly because of the fluorescent orange tulips around
> the birches
> partly because of the secrecy our smiles take on
> before people and statuary
> it is hard to believe when I'm with you that there can
> be anything as still
> as solemn, as unpleasantly definitive as statuary when
> right in front of it
> in the warm New York 4 o'clock light we are drifting
> back and forth
> between each other like a tree breathing through its
> spectacles
>
> and the portrait show seems to have no faces in it at
> all, just paint
> you suddenly wonder why in the world anyone ever did
> them
> I look

at you and I would rather look at you than all the
portraits in the world
except possibly for the Polish Rider occasionally and
anyway it's in the Frick
which thank heavens you haven't gone to yet so we can
go together the first time
and the fact that you move so beautifully more or less
takes care of Futurism
just as at home I never think of the Nude Descending
a Staircase or
at a rehearsal a single drawing of Leonardo or
Michelangelo that used to wow me
and what good does all the research of the
Impressionists do them
when they never got the right person to stand near the
tree when the sun sank
or for that matter Marino Marini when he didn't pick
the rider as carefully
as the horse
it seems they were all cheated of some
marvellous experience
which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I'm
telling you about it.

(CP, p.360)

O'Hara uses the paintings to portray, vividly, his feelings for his lover, Vincent Warren. Warren is addressed directly: the poem is an expression of feeling from one lover to another, and yet it is also an art poem. O'Hara is using ekphrasis to evoke the works of art, and, by the act of doing so, serves to extol the allure, the beauty and the sexuality of his lover: 'at home I never think of the Nude Descending a Staircase or / at a rehearsal a single drawing of Leonardo or Michelangelo that used to wow me'. The implication is that Warren now 'wows' O'Hara, and yet the poet chooses to express the quality of that feeling through an evocation of the artwork. There is no descriptive passage to detail the beauty or mystery of the

paintings, rather it is their power that is used.

Jacqueline Ollier has pointed out that William Carlos Williams' poem 'To A Solitary Disciple' was written on seeing Duchamp's Nude Descending A Staircase[35]. O'Hara also uses this painting within the poem. The two poems could not be more different, and yet both verbalise the effect of the same painting:

Rather notice, mon cher,
that the moon is
tilted above
the point of the steeple
than that the its color
is shell-pink

Rather observe
that it is early morning
than that the sky is smooth
as a turquoise.

Rather grasp
how the dark
converging lines
of the steeple
meet at the pinnacle -
perceive how
its little ornament
tries to stop them -

See how it fails!
See how the converging lines
of the hexagonal spire
escape upward -
receding, dividing!
- sepals
that guard and contain
the flower!

Observe
how motionless
the eaten moon
lies in the protecting lines.
It is true:

[35] Jacqueline Ollier, Poetry and the Fine Arts, ed. J. Ollier and R. Hagenbuchle, (Regensburg: Pustet, 1989), p.13.

in the light colors
of morning

brown-stone and slate
shine orange and dark blue

But observe
the oppressive weight
of the squat edifice!
Observe
the jasmine lightness
of the moon.[36]

Williams' poem is constantly imploring the reader to 'observe' - the observation is then delineated by William's descriptions. The poem is full of the colours and shade - 'shell-pink ... turquoise ... dark ... light colours.... orange... dark blue... brown-stone ... slate'. The poem also points out shape and line - 'point...converging lines...hexagonal...protecting lines...'. Williams' poem is a plea to observe what Williams wants the reader to observe, and it is all description.

O'Hara's reference to the painting is fleeting. Is O'Hara's poem actually <u>about</u> the painting, as is Williams'? O'Hara's verbalisation of Duchamp's painting is to invoke it by name, and all observations of colour, contrast, light, shade, and shape are left unexpounded, held only in the work itself, rather than teased out verbally into the poem. If this is not the case, is the art the subject of this poem? Is Warren? Or is it love? The poem is not explicitly <u>about</u> Warren any more than it is about each individual artwork, and thus it is the emotion of love

[36] William Carlos Williams, <u>Selected Poems</u>, pp31-32.

which becomes the constant in the poem. The emotion is expressed, to Warren, through the artworks. The specific paintings, unnamed drawings and artistic movements, are all brought into this love poem to help articulate how the poet feels for Warren.

Alice Parker suggests that O'Hara uses the language of art through which to sublimate gay messages - the 'secret smile' in Having A Coke With You has to be secret to hide the homosexuality. Parker argues that O'Hara can openly express his feelings for another man through the art; the painting becomes a medium for the expression of a forbidden love, which is sublimated through the artworks.[37] The works of art certainly help to articulate how O'Hara feels for Warren. But he does not choose to do so through the medium of art, just in order to avoid talking overtly about homosexual love. O'Hara does not flinch from the erotic description of gay love in other poems, such as 'Poem (Twin spheres full of fur and noise)', (CP,p.405), and makes no secret of his sexuality in 'At The Old Place'.(CP,p.223). 'Having A Coke With You' is, above all, a love poem. Its subject is love, the emotion, devoid of sexual orientation.

Yet Parker is right in suggesting that O'Hara uses artworks to convey feelings other than through words. The art, which becomes the main focus in the second half of the poem, does not stand for anything else. It is not symbolic

[37] Alice C. Parker, The Exploration of the Secret Smile: The Language of Art and Homosexuality in Frank O'Hara's Poetry, (New York, 1988), passim.

of Warren. It is not used as metaphor. The art remains as itself, in all its power, its clarity and its meaning. O'Hara does not try to translate the painting into words within the poem to gain his effect. Rather, he harnesses the actual paintings into the text, to transplant their effect there intact. Scott has written that:

> Ekphrasis frustrates linear progression and offers an alternative poetics of space and plenitude.
>
> (Scott, p.303)

Within the processual, linear structure of the poem, the paintings - at the points in the poem in which they are mentioned - expand within the space of the poem, to allow all the immediate, visual impact, and the power that this entails, to have its space and its effect within the poem. The evocation of the paintings provides a timeless stasis set in the constant movement of the rest of the poem.

Within this visual space, which in turn is held within the text, the properties of the visual arts are given full play. Here lies their power and their function in the poem. The artworks do not function as metaphor, which would dilute the directness of the sensation O'Hara is creating in the poem, by filtering it through something else. They are used to show that Warren, whom O'Hara would now 'rather look at', is so important, that he has taken over their power to affect O'Hara. This is love. That this love also highlights the defects of 'the Impressionists' and 'Marino Marini' does not serve to

belittle 'Art'. Instead, the use of the paintings here highlights the sensation of love. He can only express the 'marvellous experience' by its relation to the most sublime earthly thing - art. That perfection of love highlights imperfections in art, does not diminish the art, but makes love all the more wonderful. To try to verbalise sublimity would be impossible. By using existent paintings, he can touch on the sublime and yet still be grounding his poetry and his words in the everyday. He uses someone else's beautiful object to illuminate his own feeling.

Through a direct engagement with works of art, the total sense of understanding, of revelation, of 'seeing' inherent in that engagement, is able to convey what words cannot. And yet the poem, which is a chronicle of O'Hara's emotion, of his love, ends by capturing the feeling, 'which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I'm telling you about it'. The poem ends by capturing something of the height of sublimity that certain paintings lacked. It is only through the evocation of the artworks that the height of feeling is reached. The poet has utilised the two different properties and effects of the two different media. Words and painted image combine to produce a wonderful expression of love.

Through the use of works of art as subject matter, O'Hara is able to express areas of life and experience more fully; he can get closest to any moment of epiphany in his poetry without having to make his language take on transcendent, mystical or symbolic qualities. The visual

arts allow O'Hara to achieve moments of epiphany in his poetry, by embodying experience into something aesthetic, exemplified by his admiration of the Greeks in 'In Memory of my Feelings':

> And the mountainous-minded Greeks could speak
> of time as a river and step across it into Persia,
> leaving the pain
> at home to be converted into statuary. I adore the
> Roman copies.
>
> (CP, p.254)

Here, History is made alive through the visuality of art. It is the visual pieces which have remained to allow us to see the past. Are the abstract emotions and experiences such as pain, love, time and history, more thoroughly understood, 'seen' more clearly through the visual arts in O'Hara's poetry? Ferguson's discussion of O'Hara's 'On Seeing Larry Rivers' WASHINGTON CROSSING THE DELAWARE at the Museum of Modern Art' suggests:

> the poem operates on a number of levels - it says something about Rivers as a painter, about O'Hara's view of George Washington and the history of the American Republic and about O'Hara's own attitude toward heroism and the possibilty thereof in a world seen from the Museum of Modern Art.
>
> (Crossing, p.31)

If O'Hara's world is indeed one 'seen from the Museum of Modern Art', then the visual arts are important in the articulation of events in that world. Ferguson's

discussion of the poem suggests it comments not so much on the historical event itself, as being a post-modern comment on Art, with its re-use of signs and conventions. Thus history, in this sense, for O'Hara is best accessible through art:

> Now that our hero has come back to us...
> we see the calm cold river is supporting
> our forces, the beautiful history.
>
> (CP,p.233)

History is qualified as 'beautiful'; O'Hara's sense of history is not bound purely in word, in fact, in recountable evidence. O'Hara has woven visual art into the area of the poem, allowing an even wider signification into the textual space. Visual art has become an integral part of the textuality. Ekphrastic poetry is no longer confined to words; it has become a way of seeing.

ELEGY

Reviewing O'Hara's Selected Poems in 1974, Gerald Burns suggests that the less of his work there is the better. This apparently detrimental judgement stemmed not from an adverse reaction to the quality of his poems, but because their sustained level of liveliness and jollity disturbed him:

> Allen's reduction of the Collected Poems to a Selected is a gain. A smaller book would be better, and where O'Hara really shines is a poem or two anthologized with strangers. Why is this? An O'Hara poem is fresh, cheerful and impudent. The line is alive [...] but a pound of O'Hara makes you wonder how frightful the solemnity is he's always chasing away [....] Such unrelieved gaiety calls up the sort of Paradise Lost he never wrote, full of broken bones and real pain.[1]

Burns' reaction highlights two important points for a reading of O'Hara's poetry. The first is the immediate sense of vitality - the sense that the poetry, in its every line is 'alive'. This might seem a strange, rather abstract word to convey the sense of written text, especially to describe a book of poetry - a Collected Works - by a poet now dead, and thus something which in itself must be a finished act, unable to be added to, amended or extended. The poems must be, by their very nature, the testimony to O'Hara's death; subordinate to the living, spoken word. Indeed, does not writing function as the

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[1] Gerald Burns, 'Portrait of the Artist as Charming', Southwest Review 59, (Spring, 1974), p.201.

recorded act of speech and thought? By its very nature it is deemed to be secondary to living language, breath and, therefore, life.

Yet words such as 'alive' and 'fresh' commonly describe O'Hara's work, pointing to the all-inclusive raw data that makes up his poetry. O'Hara's poems embody a busy dailiness, a non-selective flow that can only express the experience of living. Quick and constant movement of the language - shifts from subject to subject, lack of punctuation, non-sequiturs, jumbling of pronouns - mean that coherence is informed by movement, by the fact that his language is not static, dead:

> last night we went to a movie and came out,
> Ionesco is greater
> than Beckett, Vincent said, that's what I think,
> blueberry blintzes
> and Khrushchev was probably being carped at
> in Washington, no *politesse*
> Vincent tells me about his mother's trip to Sweden
>
> (CP p.340)

The initial line here promises some conventional, temporal coherence, yet such coherence is overturned in the following two lines, as O'Hara jumbles speakers. Who is making the judgement that Ionesco is better than Beckett? Vincent? The poet? The speaker? Who states 'that's what I think'? Where do the 'blueberry blintzes' fit in? These lines read like an authentic, unedited transcript of a conversation between a number of friends. The speech is not reworked, not turned into a secondary account; O'Hara could be embodying true gossip into his poetry, and yet he is

also standing back and narrating the scene at the same time. The allusion to Khrushchev and the inclusion of the word *'politesse'* point back to references earlier in the poem, and, apparently, earlier in the day, so the poem is not literally captured speech; it always refers back to the text, it is always consciously functioning as literature. The poem is always on the move, and won't be pinned down into one form, one time scale - even one speaker - or another.

Is this movement what constitutes the vitality in O'Hara's poetry, backed up by the poet's propensity to choose as subjects the unfolding events of routine life? The everyday experience which comprises being alive, and which makes O'Hara 'increasingly remembered as one of the poets of everyday life'[2] must lie in the celebrated trivia, the continuity of daily routines, and life's small-talk. Allen Ginsberg's elegy for O'Hara celebrates his life and mourns his loss as an important, vibrant character for the circle of New York artists and painters which revolved around him. In the closing lines of the poem, O'Hara's role as personality and as poet seem to merge, as Ginsberg leaves the final picture of him as the provider of 'a common ear / for our deep gossip'[3].

The word 'common' here suggests that O'Hara was the mouthpiece -or rather the ear - for all. It also suggests 'common' as in ordinary, regular, everyday, and thus

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[2] Andrew Ross, "The Death of Lady Day", in Frank O'Hara. To Be True To A City, ed. Jim Elledge, p.381.

[3] Allen Ginsberg, Collected Poems 1947 -1980, (London: Penguin, 1987) p.459.

Ginsberg leaves the echo of this word with all its connotations flooding through O'Hara's life and poetry. Appropriately, Ginsberg's poem seems to sum up, in a poem on the death of Frank O'Hara, his dedication to life, and his role as its herald through the medium of continuous 'gossip', the ultimate language of living.

Burns, however, sees in this ceaseless playfulness, a hiding - almost a sense of denial about what lies beyond. The gaiety he notes in O'Hara's massive body of work he qualifies as 'unrelieved', which suggests that it is a gaiety which must be strained; it is not relieved, cannot be let up. Burns' point is echoed by Charles Molesworth, who also notes a double edge to the poetry:

> The chatter registers the *frisson*, the stimulation, but it also hints at [a] shiver of fear.[4]

Molesworth and Burns, writing in the 1970s, recognised a doubleness to O'Hara's liveliness, a slight 'hint' at darkness, fear and morbidity. More recently, Geoff Ward has put forward a view with a more pointed recognition of darkness within O'Hara's poetry:

> the crux of an O'Hara poem is very frequently a quiet line or couplet whose implications, if dwelt on, spell the end of all the uncomplicated freshness and comedic energy to which the poems had seemed so able to lay an inexhaustible claim.[5]

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[4] Charles Molesworth, 'The Clear Architecture of the Nerves', p.85.

[5] Geoff Ward '"Why it's right there in the procès verbal.." :The New York School Of Poets", p.276.

Ward recognises the 'freshness' that Burns feels, and, like Burns, feels it to be 'inexhaustible'. Here, though, focus shifts from 'hints' of darkness, to the 'crux' of the poems being a darkness which floods out the light. Ward goes further, suggesting that:

> death would be, if not the apparent then the core subject of so many of the poems written in the later 1950s and early 60s...the more one reads O'Hara, the darker does his work become.[6]

Can something be the core-subject without being the apparent subject of a poem? If so, an ambiguity lies at the heart of the poetry, with life and death being the two terms called into question. Ward also believes that:

> O'Hara's poetry, so often written against the clock, strives to beat time at its own game.
> (SL p.60)

There is a struggle within the poetry between life and death - each is trying to bear down upon the other, and so the poet must try to 'beat time'. Here, Ward's reading of the poetry strongly echoes the subject as dealt with by Andrew Marvell:

> But at my back I alwaies hear
> Times winged Charriot hurrying near:
> And yonder all before us lye
> Desarts of vast Eternity.[...]
> Now therefore, while the youthful hew
> Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
> And while thy willing Soul transpires

[6] Geoff Ward, '"Why it's right there in the *procès verbal*.." : The New York School Of Poets", p.276.

> At every pore with instant Fires,
> Now let us sport us while we may;
> And now, like am'rous birds of prey,
> Rather at once our Time devour,
> Than languish in his slow-chapt pow'r.[...]
> Thus, though we cannot make our Sun
> Stand still, yet we will make him run.[7]

As Marvell puts it in this poem, the way to beat time is to live for the present moment, 'Now let us sport us while we may'. O'Hara's living-for-the-moment is more than a suggestion to be fulfilled outside the text; rather he embodies the moment, the absolute present, both in his language and within the space of the poem, albeit in self-conscious knowledge of his motives - 'There is no escape from temporality, but no escaping the attempt to escape it either.' (SL p.62) Ward points to several subjects and methods which O'Hara uses in the attempt to escape temporality. First, he suggests the use of the coterie as a method of cheating temporality:

> The coterie is still a humanist refuge against temporality, seeking by the mutual support of its members to stave off the negative impact of time on each individual subject.
>
> (SL p.61)

Ward also believes O'Hara's use of wit is a tool for beating time, describing him as a poet for whom:

> the comedy and wit [he] exhibit[s] so habitually is powered by pressures of mortality.
>
> (SL p.49)

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[7] Andrew Marvell, Poems and Letters of Andrew Marvell, 2 Volumes, ed. H.M. Margoliouth, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), Vol I, pp26-7.

Even his place at the forefront of the New York scene, is, for Ward, evidence of O'Hara's need to stave off the passage of time:

> commitment to the avant-garde [is] a way to cheat time by seeming to advance progressively, to change faster and more purposefully than others.
>
> (SL p.60)

Cheating time combines both a sense of living fully and the presence of death in the same focus. The knowledge of mortality would appear to be the main tension, this tension is worked out in the poetry, overshadowing the fun and the liveliness. Behind life, death lurks, meaning the gaiety, the vitality has no choice but to be 'unrelieved'. Ward's reading in some ways echoes earlier critics such as Charles Molesworth, who believed that O'Hara was:

> someone for whom any audience becomes the most charitable therapy; for as soon as the poems stop talking, stop chatting, their speaker will fall dead.[8]

Death itself, in this case, is less important in the poetry than O'Hara's apprehension and attempted postponement of it. The attempt to cheat time thus becomes more relevant than the concept and the placing of death itself. Thomas Shapcott suggests that O'Hara's poems are:

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[8] Charles Molesworth, '"The Clear Architecture of the Nerves": The Poetry of Frank O'Hara', p.85.

> as much sustained by an underlying pace that is elegiac, as by a surface of chatty immediacy, and their particular charm is in the counterpoint the poet makes between the two tensions thus implied.[9]

Again, this critique, from 1973, points out that the 'surface' of liveliness is underscored by elegiac currents. Shapcott suggests that the poems are actually 'sustained' by the elegiac, that this is perhaps the nourishment - a feast of life fed by a sense of death. He focuses on the 'counterpoint' between the sense of immediacy and that of elegy. Is this counterpoint manifested in O'Hara's trying to make the one outrun the other? Or does it imply that life and death must meet somewhere, that O'Hara's poems try to work with and within the complex relationship between the two?

The work presented here will examine the relationship between life and death in O'Hara's work. This chapter will go beyond an examination of how O'Hara tries to beat time; instead it will attempt to discover how the text creates meanings of mortality, and what relevance this has for O'Hara's poetry.

WRITING LIFE AND DEATH

If death really is at the core of O'Hara's poetry, does it make his poems elegies? Can his multi-genred work finally be settled into the category of elegy? The placing of death and darkness is ambiguous in O'Hara's poetry; according to Ward it is not the 'apparent' subject. Death,

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[9] Thomas Shapcott, 'From "Two Tombstones"', Frank O'Hara: To Be True to a City, ed. Elledge, p.53.

then, must be a deep subject of its own, lurking below the others. Is the obscurity of the subject purposeful? The degree of intention behind this obscurity must be important in assessing the placing and relevance of death in O'Hara's work. Why would the poet intentionally muddy the real subject he is addressing? Can an elegy, by definition, be ambiguous in its intent? Daniel Minock's research reveals that the elegy:

> has never been conclusively defined, and probably never can be (the term has been used to describe works which in any way resemble classical poems written in elegiac meter, subjective lyrics of longing or regret, and any poem about real or imagined death).[10]

A.F. Potts suggests, slightly differently that:

> elegy is...clear sounding form of passionate meditation,...the refinement of human understanding in a series of revelations about the nature of human life and human destiny.[11]

The terms 'subjective...meditation...refinement of human understanding...revelations...human life' all rely on a filtering of death through life; death as a subject read only in relationship to living persons, and in particular, to the poet. Elegy is summed up succinctly by Lawrence Kingsley thus:

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[10] Daniel Minock, 'Conceptions of Death in the Modern Elegy and Related Poems', (unpublished doctoral thesis, The Ohio State University, 1975; abstract in Dissertation Abstracts International, 36, (1975),p.1496-A), abstract.

[11] A.F. Potts, The Elegiac Mode: Poetic Form in Wordsworth and Other Elegists, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1976) p.73.

> the modern elegy is determined by the artist's self-definition in respect to loss[12]

By these definitions, elegy is concerned less with death itself, than with an individual's thoughts and feelings in relation to it; a subjective meditation, concerned with 'how the living apprehend loss'[13]. In the light of these definitions, do O'Hara's poems read as elegies? To answer the question, it is necessary to see firstly how death and loss are made manifest in the work, and then to assess O'Hara's 'self-definition' alongside them.

WHAT IS DEATH?

That death is an important occurrence, even the 'core-subject'[14] in O'Hara's poetry has been made clear by past critiques of his work. Yet what does O'Hara actually mean by death? Where does it occur overtly, and where latently? In 'Ode to Michael Goldberg('s Birth and Other Births)', death occurs in the middle of a poem about birth, about the apparent celebration of life. Death is openly discussed, yet introduced in a secondary way, as a way to illustrate sorrow, to explore that particular emotion:

> A couple of specifically anguished days
> make me now distrust sorrow, simple sorrow
> especially, like sorrow over death
>
> it makes you wonder who you are to be sorrowful

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[12] Lawrence W. Kingsley, 'The Modern Elegy: The Epistemology of Loss' (Unpublished doctoral thesis, 1973; abstract in Dissertation Abstracts International, 34, (1973), pp. 779 - 780-A, abstract.

[13] Kingsley, 'The Modern Elegy: The Epistemology of Loss', abstract.

[14] Geoff Ward, '"Why it's right there in the procès verbal..." : The New York School of Poets', p.276.

over death, death belonging to another
and suddenly inhabited by you without permission...

disbelieving your own feelings is the worst
and you suspect that you are jealous of this death.
YIPPEE! I'm glad I'm alive. (CP p.293)

The first line of the second section suggests an inward meditation in respect to loss and grief, yet, in the second line, as soon as the word death is mentioned, this whole section of the poem picks up pace. The word 'death' functions by creating excitement within the text; rather than gloom, the mention of death breathes life into the line. The effect of the repeated 'death, death' moves the poem in a new direction. At the mention of the word, death floods into the subject matter and takes it over, so that the sentence goes off at a tangent, extending the idea of death, and its meaning, with it.

Death is no longer an objective event, but is suddenly 'death belonging to another', as though it is an actual property of someone's life, and one fiercely guarded, a prized possession. Perhaps it is the ultimate possession. The idea of possession is backed up with the next line, which sounds accusatory - 'and suddenly inhabited by you without permission'. Here, the addressee has been accused of moving in on someone else's death. Is it possible to 'inhabit' death? To do so suggests death is a state that can be lived within. Yet at the same time, the poet is relating to the grief of losing a loved one to Death, which is also a possessor.

That the addressee can be 'jealous of this death',

obviously suggests that he is jealous of death for now possessing the loved one. Yet the specific nature of the word 'this' makes it more than just jealousy of death as an entity. Perhaps he wanted this particular death. The desire for death is backed up by the next line which is an exclamation - 'YIPPEE! I'm glad I'm alive'. In the context, such an affirmation of life rings hollow.

Context is important for defining - and avoiding defining - meaning. In the context of phrases such as 'belonging to another...inhabited by you...you are jealous..', death becomes an objective belonging, placed within the realm of living, rather than beyond and outside it. The loved one, the deceased, is only alluded to as 'another', and then only in relation to death's relationship with the addressee. The dead person is almost outside the relationship, and is definitely outside the text.

Earlier in the poem, the writer talks of his birth, and thus the beginning of life:

> I hardly ever think of June 27, 1926
> when I came moaning into my mother's world
> and tried to make it mine immediately
> by screaming, sucking, urinating
> and carrying on generally
> it was quite a day.
> (CP p.291)

The poem is an ode to birth, and yet appears to question what birth signifies. The speaker was born into 'my mother's world', a world belonging to somebody else, which he had to try to make his own; there is, literally, no

birthright. The speaker appears like an intruder into a life he does not own, which was, like the later experience of death 'suddenly inhabited by [him] without permission'. Life and death by these definitions could be identical. O'Hara does not set up boundaries between the two. They do not function as polar opposites; rather, they are like mirror images, partners, differing only in name.

The ambiguous definition of death means that as a subject it is as all-consuming as life - it has an identical scale which is the scale of O'Hara himself. Death is the flip-side of life, so that where there is O'Hara there is also non-O'Hara as the void mirroring the surface. Death inhabits O'Hara's poem like one of Reverdy's disembodied shadows, with its own strange autonomous existence, yet seen in the same focus as the solid matter to whom it belongs. Yet who really belongs to whom?

'Poem (And tomorrow morning at 8 o'clock in Springfield, Massachusetts)' opens with the announcement of a funeral. Death doesn't rudely intrude into the speaker's life, it is introduced as a fait accompli:

> And tomorrow morning at 8 o'clock in Springfield,
> Massachusetts,
> my oldest aunt will be buried from a convent.
> Spring is here and I am staying here, I'm not going.
> Do birds fly? I am thinking my own thoughts, who
> else's?

> When I die, don't come, I wouldn't want a leaf
> to turn away from the sun - it loves it there.
> There's nothing so spiritual about being happy
> but you can't miss a day of it, because it
> doesn't last.

> So this is the devil's dance? Well I was born to
> dance.
> It's a sacred duty, like being in love with an ape,
> and eventually I'll reach some great conclusion, like
> assumption
> when at last I meet exhaustion in these flowers, go
> straight up.
>
> (CP, p.244)

Death doesn't arrive in the poem, it is there from the start, and O'Hara announces this not with shock, or fear, or grief, but with pure acceptance. The opening line adopts the language of a small-ad obituary, the time and date of the funeral stated to produce a non-emotional fact. Using 'and' as the first word makes sure that death is not framed by the poem as a separate occasion from the rest of life, but a simple, ordinary link with whatever was happening before. Are there any borders between life and death. There is no crossing of the one into the other as this poem opens.

Yet in the third line, O'Hara switches away from the subject of the funeral and turns to life, to the here-and-now: 'Spring is here, and I'm staying here, I'm not going.' The repetition of 'here...staying here...not going' could be an affirmation of living - refusing to die, or to have anything to do with death. It is impossible, however, to have nothing to do with death, especially in a poem which is, ostensibly, revolving around a death. The statement, sounding profound and philosophical, is, at the surface of meaning, merely stating that he will not attend the funeral. O'Hara appears to leave meaning open to interpretation, in the full knowledge that 'here...

staying...going' can easily be read as euphemisms for living and dying. It is language itself which gets caught on the terms life and death - terms which by their very suggestion in text already begin to pull apart their own meaning. In the context of death, O'Hara's straightforward 'I'm not going' takes on different meanings. In the context of a literary work about death, the reader half expects that the concept of death will open up the language to ambiguity, as the writer attempts to hang definitions and meanings onto a single word which signifies such a metaphysical absolute.

The next line expands expectations about the effects of a death - 'Do birds fly? I am thinking my own thoughts, who else's?' When faced with death, it is inevitable that questions will be raised which cast doubts on the fundamental and apparently obvious facts about life. O'Hara's first question is ludicrous. Is he wildly questioning life, or is he just asking questions for questions' sake? Is such questioning what is expected? Why should he question life now? Death is accepted as part of life, or vice versa; O'Hara immediately follows with 'when I die', rather than 'if I die', thus signifying his acceptance of the sweeping process of life and death.

The central section of the poem is the only part to allude directly to death, in the form 'I die'. O'Hara uses death as verb, the active, first person 'die' underscoring the fact that here, death is not something outside - Death as a personification, coming to cut off life - but an integrated part of existence. The use of a verb also

escapes the need to pin a meaning of finality onto death - to die is the act, the active process of dying. Dying is also living.

Although this section of the poem focuses on the event of the poet's future death, the subject is life, and, in particularly, happiness - 'you can't miss a day of it because it doesn't last'. In explicit concern with dying, the subject is life. O'Hara here places value on savouring life, yet death is like a 'sacred duty'. If death is 'the devil's dance', the poet was 'born to dance'. He was born to die. Is death then the purpose of life? Within the poem, both life and death are escaping final definition. Even the 'great conclusion' alluded to in the poem does not necessarily mean an ending or termination. A conclusion can also refer to a settlement or solution, or even an opinion, which can never be pure fact. Again, absolute meaning slips away through the text's very attempt to define it.

In 'Poem (I don't know as I get what D.H. Lawrence is driving at)', O'Hara writes - following the practice of the novelist - using the vague euphemistic terms 'light' and 'dark', associated with good and evil, with sexuality, and of course, with life and death. As in the previous poem, when the poet urges the reader not to 'miss a day' of life, of happiness, here he appears to attempt to pin value on the 'light', against 'dark':

> of light we can never have enough
> but how would we find it
> unless the darkness urged us on and into it.
> (CP p.335)

The first line seems to be a straightforward affirmation, yet it is immediately undermined by the first word of the second line. The 'but' undercuts the confidence in the initial suggestion, and then goes on to place the reliance of light upon the darkness - the darkness acts as the spur, the reason and the source of the light. Not only do light and dark, life and death go hand in hand, but they also serve to define each other. In the word life, the word death is also inherent to some extent - 'how would we find it' without a nuance of one casting its shadow onto the other? One cannot be conceived without a Derridean 'trace' of the other inherent in the word. In life, death is both absent and present, a sliding presence, so absolute, fixed meaning is denied to both words in the text. They are each apart and a part of the other.

The whole poem hinges on meanings sliding away from certainty. The very opening is a double uncertainty, 'I don't know as I get what D.H. Lawrence is driving at' affirms that the speaker is not sure if he has grasped a meaning, and yet even the meaning he is trying to 'get' is only something Lawrence is 'driving at' - it isn't even a solid factual definition; rather it is one which is forever unattainable. Yet even this uncertainty is not certain, as two lines later, in answer to the comment 'I don't know as I get what D.H. Lawrence is driving at' he writes 'or do I'. The poem ends by O'Hara trying to place the 'I' in relation to the light and dark:

> and I am dark
> except when now and then it all comes clear

and I can see myself
as others luckily sometimes see me
in a good light.

The poet is able to state 'I am dark' as a fact, but it is then qualified with exceptions, and the poem ends where he is seen 'in a good light'. The final remark itself is rendered almost meaningless, as it moves beyond statement of fact, and into the realm of cliché: letting others see you in a good light amounts to putting on a front. Final definition is muddied beneath the confusion the words throw up in their very (apparent) attempt to define.

In this poem, however, 'light' is touted as the desirable state. The darkness, however, appears to come first; out of the void comes the life. Privileging of death and emptiness is echoed elsewhere in O'Hara's poetry. In 'To Hell With It', O'Hara places poems within the structure of the overall poem, the last being both a poem in its own right, and also the end of the main poem as a whole. O'Hara sends it off as 'ENVOI':

Wind, you'll have a terrible time
smothering my clarity, a void
behind my eyes,
into which existence
continues to stuff its wounded limbs...

(CP p.276-7)

Behind the eyes - traditionally the window to the soul - is 'a void'. Non-existence is at the core of the speaker, and existence is literally padding, dressing. Existence here is depicted in terms of physicality, bruised physicality,

matter that can rot away. Life, existence comes temporarily to the void, death, into which it must 'stuff' itself. Death is the originator of life, the major partner, and life is one of its properties. In this case the essence of all living is founded on a fundamental nothingness; non-being as the centre of being. Ultimately this includes the very concept of self as well as the language out of which it is formed.

DEATH AND IDENTITY

Where does the idea of non-being as the heart of being leave the textualised O'Hara and his 'self-definition'? It leaves him dead already - or at least with no core, no true presence. At his heart - a rhetorical device O'Hara makes much of in his poetry - is death, loss. The poem entitled 'My Heart' illustrates the illusion of self:

> I'm not going to cry all the time
> nor shall I laugh all the time,
> I don't prefer one 'strain' to another.
> I'd have the immediacy of a bad movie,
> not just a sleeper, but also the big,
> overproduced first-run kind. I want to be
> at least as alive as the vulgar. And if
> some aficionado of my mess says 'That's
> not like Frank!', all to the good! I
> don't wear brown and grey suits all the time,
> do I? No. I wear workshirts to the opera,
> often. I want my feet to be bare,
> I want my face to be shaven, and my heart -
> you can't plan on the heart, but
> the better part of it, my poetry, is open.
>
> (CP p.231)

The poem is a declaration that self, 'I', is not constant. Yet the text goes beyond the surface assertion, which, by

its very nature tries to define the sense of self, even if that self is one comprised of change. It is instructive to compare O'Hara's sense of 'I' with that of Sylvia Plath in her poem, 'Tulips':

> The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.
> Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed in
> I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
> As the light lies on these white walls, this bed,
> these hands.
> I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.
> I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the
> nurses
> And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to the
> surgeons[...]
>
> ..I have let things slip, a thirty year old cargo boat
> Stubbornly hanging on to my name and address.
> They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations.
> Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley
> I watch my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books
> Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.
> I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.
>
> I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted
> To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
> How free it is, you have no idea how free---
> The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
> And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.
> It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them
> Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion
> tablet[...]
>
> ...Nobody watched me before, now I am watched.
> The tulips turn to me, and the window behind me
> Where once a day the light slowly widens and slowly
> thins,
> And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow
> Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips,
> And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.
> The vivid tulips eat my oxygen [...]
>
> ...The walls, also seem to be warming themselves.
> The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous
> animals;
> They are opening like the mouth of some great African
> cat,
> And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
> Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
> The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,

And comes from a country far away as health.[15]

Both are poems which examine the self. As O'Hara tries to assert one, albeit one which is changing, 'as alive as the vulgar', Plath tries to undo a sense of self, 'I have wanted to efface myself'. Yet, in both poems, the apparent intention is undermined by the language itself.

In Plath's poem, the opening verse hangs on the declaration 'I am nobody'. Already the speaker appears to undermine a sense of self. Yet the declaration is a contradiction in terms; within the phrase, the smaller phrase 'I am' still exists. The appendages of 'name...day-clothes..history..body' have been surrendered, a move which Plath hopes will undo her identity, and yet this leaves pure consciousness, enough for her to proclaim 'I have never been so pure'. If identity is constructed by these 'loving associations', then the speaker has been freed from them. Yet does this make her any less existent, any less conscious of self? The answer must be an emphatic no.

The purity gained by stripping labels from an individual serves to throw the 'I' into greater relief, and actually emphasise life and identity; in expressing a desire to efface oneself, self re-enters and re-asserts itself as a strength. She even re-defines herself in terms of this pure, undiluted selfhood - 'I am a nun now'. The reclusive connotations register, but are not devoid of the associations of devotion and dedication - here Plath has chosen a description of self as someone with vocation, with

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[15] Sylvia Plath, Ariel, (London: Faber, 1965), p.20.

total, all-consuming purpose in life. The tulips serve as a necessary distraction to focus back on the 'heart', and it is with images of life that the poem closes. 'I' has not been effaced. On the contrary, its determination to live and to resist attempts to drift into 'numbness' and to be 'empty' control and inform the whole poem.

O'Hara's poem apparently appears to create a definite sense of self. Rather than attempting to efface self, he appears to want to express the complexity and vitality of the 'I'. Unlike Plath, his is not an 'I' searching for death, for numbness, loss of feeling or reclusiveness. Here is an 'I' who goes to the opera, talks of movies - a social being. Unlike Plath's speaker, however, there is no sense of centre, of complete and definite selfhood. When the speaker pronounces, with an air of confidence 'I / don't wear brown and grey suits all the time', it is undermined by the next line, the first words of which are 'do I?' The question may be meant as rhetorical, but it also functions simply as a question, whereby the speaker has to ask the readers to verify his own self. Does the reader know more about him than he does himself? The speaker is only a construct of the text - perhaps it is up to the reader to decide how to take the definitions the text offers.

In opposition to Plath, O'Hara tries to make a self out of what she terms 'loving associations' - the 'name..day-clothes...history' she discards, and so he tries to define self by hanging descriptions on the I - 'I don't wear brown and grey suits all the time [...] I wear

workshirts to the opera, / often'. By trying to appeal to the reader's sense and ideas of social behaviour - the wearing of suits, dressing for occasion - he exploits constructed ideas of identity and tries to define himself by these - albeit by the double bluff of trying to be rebellious and thus subvert them.

Underneath such constructions of identity, however, where is the 'I', the 'pure' self found in Plath's poem? O'Hara's poem works through layer upon layer of shifting selfhood, both created and undermined by the language. At one level the poet is trying to create an 'I' which will not be pinned down - 'I don't prefer one 'strain' to another' - yet all the time, the very 'I' who speaks is based on shifting meaning. Whereas Plath confirms a central figure in her poem at the expense of effacement, O'Hara consistently effaces a centred self, even while trying to describe one:

> ...And if
> some aficionado of my mess says 'That's
> not like Frank!', all to the good!

Here, the sense of self is doubly confounded. Who is the speaker? The incorporated quotation is attributed to 'some aficionado' and yet this person is really only a construct of the speaker's imagination, and hence comes from him. The reported speech is from the same source as the rest of the poem, yet also from someone non-existent. The speaker is thus reporting speech which has not yet been spoken, which does not exist, by another self who is not real.

Unlike Plath's speaker who also has the phenomenological sense of self in relation to others - the nurses, surgeons and anaesthetists - the only sense of other in O'Hara's poem is a vague, imaginary person, and therefore not separate from the speaker.

To add to the layering of the 'I', the quoted speech refers to the speaker as 'Frank'. Is the speaker really the poet, and not simply a persona? How can he be both? 'My Heart' is a poem, a piece of literature - surely its speaker is a textual construct and not the author himself.

Writing on the similarities of O'Hara and Byron, Ward states:

> They are writers for whom the simulacrum of their non-writing selves - not quite the same thing as autobiography - is vital. Yet in both cases this simulacrum is known to be a cover, holding at arm's length and yet in a painfully tight grip a knowledge of mutability alternately dark and explosive.
>
> (SL p.49)

Ward confirms that the poetry is not autobiographical, that the 'I' must be a simulacrum of the actual reality of the poet as person. Yet the mutability cannot surely be staved off by the creation of a textually reproduced 'I'; the very depiction of the textual 'I' is built on mutability, and therefore confirms that 'I' does not have a sense of presence. O'Hara's textual representation of self does not act as a 'cover' to hold off mutability, but is in fact its example.

In 'Dialogues' (CP p.240), the title itself, in the context of the poem, illustrates the undermining of any

sense of coherent two-way communication, exposing language, and selfhood as ambiguous and arbitrary:

1.
You find me tentative and frivolous, don't you?
and I don't own anything. Oh yes, you are in doubt.
Perhaps I own the snow, grown dirty and porous now
and disappearing from the feet of the trees
into the grey grasses, so dry in the bright air.

2.
You say it is to gain simplicity that I have stripped
all the useful faiths from me, leaf by leaf,
and I am nearly breathless. You call me Mr.de Winter
behind my back, smiling, not without gentleness.

3.
You have seen me standing beneath a bird
at midnight, staring at the moon's fullness.
I reminded you of a pot in which someone planted
a lot of hairs. And then a small cry! Is it me?
Or is it the pot where the nightingale's child lives?

4.
Make believe you are happy, for you are dining on my
image.

5.
There was a house, once. I told you about it
once when I was drunk. There, love reclined
beneath the pianos, and the river repeated
its odd little lyrics, and the mailman spoke French.

6.
I am not interested in good. It is all like looking
in the mirror mornings. You exclaim, good heavens,
I am handsome! and then, but not quite as handsome
as all the others, especially the dead.
Beauty,
description, finality, love, but never merely life.

7.
And there comes a dawn for you, too, comes one
like spring, like water in spring and merry birds,
where the heart feels openly as the eye sees,
ultimate place, an instant of this world's bloody
love.

The possibility of fixed identity is lost between the lines, the source or sources of utterance do not issue from one coherent centre, although there appears to be only one

speaker. Passages of lucid, recognisable conversation exist within the poem - 'There was a house, once. I told you about it / once', yet the house is one from a drunken tale, and is peopled by abstracts - 'love reclined / beneath the pianos'. In this realm of abstraction, who and where is the speaker? The only other speech in these 'dialogues' is from languages of different kinds to both that of the speaker and that of the poem. It is the river which 'repeated / its odd little lyrics' - not interactive language, but a repetitive round of strange words.

There is another person in the poem - the mailman - but even he is undermined as a possible 'other' to relate to, as possible communication. The mailman is the bringer of other people's words - words which are outside of this poem, and so only leave their deliverer, empty. He spoke French. His language is present only as a memory, not as an actuality in the poem, and even then, it is an alien one. Even the 'you' in the poem is not really present. The addressee is supposed to be part of the dialogue, but the speaker speaks on behalf of 'you': 'You say it is to gain simplicity that I have stripped....I reminded you of a pot in which someone planted / a lot of hairs'.

The dialogue is really a strange monologue, and yet it cannot even be that. 'I' is impossible to define, it is rootless, literally - a pot in which someone had planted hairs - and also in the sense of belonging - 'I don't own anything'. 'I' is too unstable. It is a temporary 'I' which changes too much ever to own anything, even a definition, and so the language must also be open to change.

Coherence is formed by language's own need to keep up with itself, and the 'dialogue' is a complicated half-attempt at self-definition, using a non-present 'you' as a medium through which to try to depict self: 'You find me tentative and frivolous, don't you?..You say it is to gain simplicity that I have stripped / all the useful faiths from me...You call me Mr de Winter...I reminded you of a pot in which someone planted / a lot of hairs..'. 'I' can be marked off as a separate consciousness, a different entity when faced with other.

O'Hara's placing of the 'you' within this poem, however, only serves to further undermine the presence of the 'I'. The 'you' functions here as a construct of the 'I'. There are not two truly separate presences within the text, and thus 'I' cannot be defined in relation to the other. O'Hara has subverted the term 'dialogue' - there are not two separate consciousnesses meeting here. Instead, there are paraphrased opinions from a non-present other, whose very words are only accessible through the 'I', and thus become the speaker's own words. 'I' is still not validated by other, as other in this poem is silent, absent, outside the text. 'I' is thus grounded in the very mutability which Ward suggests O'Hara is trying to hold off.

Even when 'I' stands proxy for the 'you', the descriptions given act to further remove any solid centred present for the speaker. The definitions are at once 'tentative' and 'frivolous' - 'I' is both silly, trifling and unstable, not permanent. Even the attempt to 'gain

simplicity' by the 'stripping' of attachments - an echo of Plath's attempts to gain purity by shedding markers of identity - leaves him bereft. Where Plath is left with a concentrated form of consciousness, an overwhelming sense of self-presence, O'Hara's 'I' is left 'nearly breathless'. Instead of the calmness which Plath's speaker attains, here the 'I' is agitated, spent. It is as though 'I' can only be made up of 'useful faiths'; he must be comprised of beliefs, blind opinions - these are 'useful' as ways of depicting self, in the face of the ambiguity at the heart of the words.

Unlike Plath, O'Hara allows no certainties at the heart of 'I' - the self cannot stand alone, but is a 'tentative' construction of rhetoric. Even when named, the 'I' is only given another's name, and even then it is 'Mr. de Winter', not only a fictitious character, another character built on the shifting language of a literary text, but a creation bounded in mystery, whose life and past cannot be pinned down. The poem deconstructs the idea of self; life and identity move away from fixed meaning even as definition is attempted.

In the last two 'dialogues', the tone of the poem changes. In another echo of Plath's 'Tulips', the winter scene at the start of this poem, with its 'snow, grown dirty and porous now / disappearing from the feet of trees' gives way to the hint of 'spring', with its 'water..merry birds / where the heart feels openly as the eye sees / ultimate place, an instant of this world's bloody love.' Is this the same reminder of life, of living as Plath's:

> ..I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
> Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me
> The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
> And comes from a country far away as health.

The terminology is almost identical. The words embody Plath's failure to surrender to death and nothingness. The awareness of the heart, the 'love of me..water..warm and salt..health' all contrast with the 'white walls...snowed in..swabbed..clear' of the opening of the poem. The sterile surroundings which open the poem make sure the speaker is almost ritually - or at least surgically - prepared for death, which she is to enter as if part of a religious ceremony - 'what the dead close on finally...shutting their mouths on it like a Communion tablet.' Into this setting, the end of the poem is a return to sensuality, to warmth, taste, colour. Plath's 'I' has failed to cross the border into death and is pulled back to living - the self is too strong to be effaced. How does the same terminology work for O'Hara?

O'Hara's 'I' is floundering from the start. Although the word 'I' is a constant throughout the poem, recurring like a motif, it is never the same, centred 'I' that is present in Plath's poem. The 'I' and 'me' devices in the poem do not hold together the sense of a life, a self behind the words: 'You have seen me standing beneath a bird / at midnight...I reminded you of a pot...And then a small cry! is it me?..Perhaps I own the snow...you are dining on my image..'. All these are disparate, not related by anything except the frame of the poem, the text itself. There is no border marking off 'I' from other, and thus no

border marking off life from death - there is no crossing over of one into the other.

The images of health, of recovery in Plath thus act differently for O'Hara. What function do they have? What is 'this world' for O'Hara's speaker? Life? Death? Why is it an 'ultimate place'? There are no other ultimates in the poem, everything is tentative. Again, in the penultimate section of the poem, there is attempted description, but this time of the 'you':

> I am handsome!... but not quite as handsome
> as all the others, especially the dead.
> Beauty,
> description, finality, love, but never merely life.

The addressee is physically compared to the dead and found wanting. In Plath's poem, by contrast, the dead are in a separate realm, away from health and life. For O'Hara, the dead are just part of 'the others' - the poet undermines life and identity; they are not presented as being totally apart from death. Again, the poem seems to be deconstructing life and death. O'Hara has taken apart the concept of opposites seen to be inherent in the words 'life' and 'death'. There is nothing absolute in the terms. He then lists 'Beauty, / description, finality, love'. What do these words mean in the context of the poem? Perhaps they are words O'Hara now hopes to pin on death - certainly, he has just claimed beauty for the dead.

All these words have equal weight, equal status. They remain unexpanded within the poem, and therefore pregnant

with potential and varied meanings. They all have the promise of absolute presence. Yet, in the context of death, the meaning of these words is disjointed, especially as he ends with the list with the only qualified word - life - 'but never merely life'. This does not act to separate life from the other categories; rather it puts it in a new context. Here life is not the 'ultimate place', it is qualified by being 'merely' related to the dead he has just referred to. In this mere-ness, life cannot be the ultimate, and thus the 'dawn', the 'spring' - traditionally signs of re-birth - do not function to restore life, as in Plath's poem. The place 'where the heart feels openly as the eye sees' is left as ambiguous. Is it death, couched in the traditional terminology of life? In these shifting contexts it is impossible to know.

Yet selfhood in O'Hara's work is more than an obviously fragmented 'I'. The main body of O'Hara's work does have an 'I' which appears to stand at the centre of the work, and one which does seem to be autobiographical:

> It's my lunch hour, so I go
> for a walk among the hum-colored
> cabs..
>
> (CP p.257)

> It is your 86th birthday
> and I'm sitting crying at the corner
> of Ninth Street and Avenue A..
>
> (CP p.321)

> It is 12:20 in New York a Friday
> three days after Bastille day, yes
> it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine..
>
> (CP p.325)

> It is almost three

I sit at the marble top
sorting poems, miserable..
(CP p.327)

It is 12:10 in New York and I am wondering
if I will finish this in time to meet Norman for
lunch..
(CP p.328)

I am stuck in traffic in a taxicab
which is typical
and not just of modern life..
(CP p.361)

These lines promise to chronicle a life, aim to set it out. The openings of the poems are like diary entries, accurate reportage, the language precise, charting exactness, as though desperate to make it authentic, actual. Is this so different from the poems such as 'Dialogues', where 'I' is shifting, without a core? How does 'I' in these poems function? O'Hara gives the selves a time and a whereabouts, he locates them, which may give the impression of stabilising them somewhat.

Yet this 'I' is a textual 'I', and is not the author. O'Hara still plays with the concept of selfhood and its depiction in language. The reports of life, with their close attention to detail and their diarist form provoke a contemplation of what it means to write the self. Diaries are often fictions, while meaning to be fact; the writer rewriting the self to fit his/her own idea. There is no direct source to truth, to a true self in its textual rendering. Even attempts at making the poems so much like accurate accounts of the poet's life, leads to an examination of the illusion of presence behind words.

'A Step Away From Them', written five months after 'Dialogues', deals with selfhood apparently as a unified presence. The 'I' functions as observer and participant: walking 'among the hum-colored / cabs', and the general worker's lunch hour, shared by the 'laborers' with their 'sandwiches / and Coca-Cola' is also 'my lunch hour'. Thus 'I' is part of the objective outer description of the city, as well as functioning as the subjective describer: 'There / are cats playing in sawdust....There are several Puerto / Ricans on the avenue today, which / makes it beautiful and warm'. Beauty and warmth here seem to signal life, vitality, vibrancy; life and happiness in the streets of New York. Yet in 'Dialogues', these words of description were used to embody the dead. Is O'Hara just choosing to use them in the more conventional context here? His decision remains ambiguous. Even in 'A Step Away From Them', in which 'I' appears to be constructed in a world which is recognisable, and which appears to point to a reality beyond and outside the text (even if it does seem to be shifting in and out of different focus - observer/participant), O'Hara reveals the difference inherent in what can be termed 'life'. Following directly from the description of the Puerto Ricans as agents of beauty and warmth, O'Hara again uses contexts to unsettle the meaning of subject matter:

> First
> Bunny died, then John Latouche,
> then Jackson Pollock. But is the
> earth as full as life was full, of them?

Death is suddenly present amongst the scenes, just as the speaker himself is a participant in this New York life. The suggestion is that Bunny, John Latouche and Jackson Pollock also made the city seem 'beautiful and warm', because 'life was full, of them'. At this point, the poem, which has seemed so clearly a chronicle of a single individual's city lunch hour, becomes a piece of text which is trying to fathom or create meanings. What happens at this point in the text? To whom does the speaker put the question 'But is the / earth as full as life was full, of them?' Even the meaning of this question is not definite. By 'the earth', does the speaker refer to the world, the global population, civilisation? Or does 'earth' refer, more basely to soil, to sod - to death and burial.

In this ambiguity of meaning, O'Hara manages to make the dead both absent and present in the world, and of course, as participants of his text, they are as much a part of it as the very-much-alive 'laborers' with their 'dirty / glistening torsos' - the epitome of health, vigour, sexuality, life. In thus making his dead present here, O'Hara also places them in the company of the non-real - famous movie images of Marilyn Monroe. These images - the 'lady in foxes' and the skirts 'flipping above heels' - are of an actress playing a scene, they are iconic, pretend, unreal. Monroe was also a real figure, famous as personality, and for adopting other personalities. Yet even the 'real' Marilyn Monroe is not the real thing. With her platinum hair and stage name, the core of the character - mousy Norma Jean Baker - is totally eclipsed. The

included images of Marilyn Monroe add to the problem of how to define life, the presence of a person, and self-identity.

'A Step Away From Them' at one level appears to be, as Ward terms it, 'clearly based in recorded acts of perception' (SL p.59). Yet perception, from the view from its 'I' cannot move beyond a recurring allusion to shifting reference, iconography, cliché (the Negro and the blonde chorus girl as pimp and prostitute). The 'I' and the sense of life it tries to convey is not standing in direct relation to the life beyond the text - it is comprised of self-conscious artistic constructs. Thus 'life' and death in this poem are full of textually created 'I's, including the speaker. The individuals in the poem do not need to be differentiated as dead or alive - they are all part of the poem's life, and exist only in the form of the text.

In 'Getting Up Ahead of Someone(Sun)', The 'I' is the one who writes poems and constructs other selves:

> ....I make
> myself a bourbon and commence
> to write one of my 'I do this, I do that'
> poems in a sketch pad.
>
> (CP p.341)

This poem seems to be so full of personal reference - to time, place, friendship, even chosen reading matter - 'I read / van Vechten's *Spider Boy*..' that it cannot be anything beyond a straightforward autobiographical poem, confessional even. Yet the inclusion in the poem of the

speaker's allusion to 'my "I do this, I do that" poems' makes the whole text reflect back on itself, like the reflection of a mirror in another mirror which seems to make the image recur perpetually. This poem itself is an 'I do this, I do that poem' - 'I cough a lot(sinus?) so I / get up and have some tea with cognac' - which means we are reading the speaker creating these poems WITHIN one of these poems. There is a text within a text within a text. 'I' must be very much a textual creation - not only evidenced in the phrase 'write one of my "I do this, I do that" poems', but because this then throws the consciousness of the whole poem back from the brink of the illusion of a definite presence behind the words, and into its reality as a literary text, created and existing only in language. O'Hara is perhaps in this way obliquely anticipating Derrida's 'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte'. [16] The text stands alone, without needing or presenting links back to the author as a central presence at the heart of the words and their meaning.

O'Hara is left, as author, standing outside his poems, to examine the portrayal of death, of non-being within the text, by utilising already existing modes of the language of death; playing with other literary models of death.

LITERARY DEATH

O'Hara has written several poems actually titled as elegies. In these, he must be tipping his hat toward the

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[16] Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, Translated by G.C. Spivak, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p.158.

genre, and be willing to utilise the traditional or conventional treatment of death within his own work. In 'Four Little Elegies', the genre is stretched to include differing approaches. 'LITTLE ELEGY' (CP p.248) begins:

> Let's cry a little while
> as if we're at a movie
> and not think of all life's
> fun for a little while.

The poem takes the position of a public elegy, the speaker adopting the plural: 'let's...we're', as though on the behalf of the population at large. Within this stance, however, O'Hara undermines the gravity expected of such a poem. The invitation to 'cry a little' is at once reminiscent and corruptive of Milton's 'Lycidas':

> ..Who would not sing for Lycidas? he knew
> Himself to sing, and build the lofty rhyme.
> He must not float upon his watry bier
> Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,
> Without the meed of som melodious tear.[17]

The plea for tears for the dead men is present in both poems, but for Milton, the tears are 'melodious', a weeping ceremony akin to song. O'Hara takes the rhetoric and drama away entirely, 'let's cry a little' sounding sentimental, nostalgic, rather than tragic and dutiful. To then qualify this by saying 'as if we're at a movie' undermines the truthfulness of the emotion - the crying can only be achieved if thought of in terms of being part of an

[17] John Milton, Poetical Works, ed. Douglas Bush, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) p.143.

audience at something staged. To commit to the act of crying - the physical manifestation of emotion, the poet has to prompt readers to look not to their real experience, but to emotion felt as voyeurs of some fictitious rendering of tragedy. Perhaps O'Hara is attempting to make the reader cry for the actor, as remembered on the screen. Which death is being mourned here? Can death only be mourned by appropriating it to some other source of emotion - one built on falsity and acting?

Real sentiment or grief is difficult to locate in the poem. O'Hara seems to be trying out elegy as a form - attempting to ask for the tears as does Milton - and finding it inauthentic. At the end of this elegy, O'Hara asks:

> ..And how do we know
> where he is and what
> he's pretending? there in
> the sand under stones.

In contrast to Milton, O'Hara does not allow his subject to be:

> ...mounted high
> Through the dear might of him that walked the waves;
> Where, other groves and other streams along,
> With nectar pure his oozy locks he laves.
> And hears the unexpressive nuptial song,
> In the blest kingdoms meek of joy and love.[18]

or like Shelley's Adonais:

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[18] John Milton, Poetical Works, p.147.

> Whilst burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,
> The soul of Adonais, like a star,
> Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.[19]

The certainty of eternal life is denied O'Hara's readers. Shelley and Milton take comfort in the thought of their subject being safely ensconced in the heavenly realms. O'Hara does not even offer any proper closure. Though James Dean is dead, O'Hara doesn't leave him buried. He has to know 'where he is'. This encompasses the belief that he still 'is'. Yet in what form? In this elegy O'Hara does not finally mourn the death of his idol as forever cut off from life. He asks to know 'what / he's pretending'. James Dean is still acting. In this case, how can he have ceased to be? Is it just the memory living on? The text makes this ambiguous. Yet O'Hara places the actor 'there in / the sand under stones'. The location of his subject seems more exact than Milton's conventional heavenly kingdom, as O'Hara textually points out Dean's location, 'there'. Yet, the dead actor is 'in / the sand', a shifting and moving landscape on which no firm foundations can be built.

The following elegy in the series is subtitled 'OBIT DEAN, SEPTEMBER 30, 1955'. In contrast to the adopted elegiac requirements of the above poem (the instructions to weep, the asking after the hereafter), this poem is almost all straightforward biographical information. According to

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[19] Percy Bysshe Shelley, The Complete Poetical Works, (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p.444.

O'Hara's biographer, the poem is 'modeled on the format of Dean's newspaper obituary' and yet also 'parodied a classical invocation to a goddess - in this case Carole Lombard'.(Gooch p.266.) Can elegy take on the form of obituary to celebrate a life? Perhaps it is a better, more authentic way:

> He was not ill at all. He died
> as suddenly as you did. He was
> twenty-four. Although he acted first
> on Broadway in See the Jaguar,
> is perhaps best known for films
> in which he starred: East of Eden,
> Rebel without a Cause and Giant.
> In the first of these he rocketed
> to stardom, playing himself and us
> 'a brooding, inarticulate adolescent'
>
> Born on February 8, 1931, in
> Marion, Indiana, he grew up in
> nearby Fairmont, Indiana, on
> a farm where he was raised
> by an aunt and uncle, his
>
> mother having died in 1940....

(CP p.249)

O'Hara is playing with different types of language to deal specifically with death. Biographical language is used, 'Born on 8 February, 1931', yet it is in the form of obituary that O'Hara chooses to use it, with its newsy format and shorthand: 'he acted first / on Broadway in See the Jaguar, / is perhaps best known for films'. This is literally a file of information on someone's life. Is this what a life amounts to? There is no meditation on death in this elegy. The bare facts question whether there is even an author behind it.

Most of the poem is comprised of objective factual information. Yet among these facts, there are comments which appear to be out of context from a straightforward obituary - '..he rocketed / to stardom, playing himself and us / "a brooding, inarticulate adolescent"'. Here, the initial phrase, 'he rocketed to stardom' is the clichéd language of reported fame, it is the language of TV documentary, or tabloid journalism. This phrase is followed immediately by 'playing himself and us' - judgement which seems personal, poetic.

Personal identification with the actor as part of the same sentence as the clichéd description serves to heighten the impact of both. The rocketing to stardom, a distant, unreal judgement is shown in new light with the touching mention of both 'himself' - the man, and 'us'. James Dean's showbiz fame, couched in cliché, stems directly from something vulnerable - the ability to portray his fans, and by extension, himself, speaking for the young generation. With this juxtaposition of two different modes of language, O'Hara creates within the text a celebration of James Dean both public and private. Two different formal ways of using language to deal with death meet here. He adds to this a third, the quotation, 'a brooding, inarticulate youth'. This is another voice within the poem which O'Hara encompasses into one elegy. Here, the quotation could easily be from a film critic, or a disapproving member of the older generation. Either way it adds more gloss to O'Hara's Life of Dean.

The apparently objective 'OBIT DEAN, SEPTEMBER 30,

1955' thus becomes an elegy for Dean, yet it holds not merely one opinion, one elegiac lament, a cry from one heart, but is constructed by different modes of language which are appropriate to death. Within one poem there are retrospective quotations that will, after death serve to define the subject; the newspaper obituary with its bare, unemotional facts, biographical details; quiet, personal observations; the classical invocation - 'This is James Dean, Carole Lombard. I hope / you will be good to him up there', and the switching of focus between the dead and the living, 'In New York today it's raining'. O'Hara has destabilised the boundaries between the different categories of writing, opening them up to a deconstructive contamination, in order to read death without being forced into the prescribed rhetorical devices of elegy. All linguistic renditions of death are allowed space in his text.

Richard Howard calls the poem 'adorable, but for all its pop-Lycidas charm, it is no more than vers de circonstance - without transcendence'[20]. Perhaps O'Hara does not seek transcendence. His use of the elegiac mode here is not one of deep meditation on death and its effects on the lives left behind. Although, by its title, and its subject matter (the dead young hero), it appears to occupy the same genre as Milton's 'Lycidas', Shelley's 'Adonais' and Tennyson's 'In Memoriam', O'Hara seems to turn the main concerns of these on their head in his own poem. The

[20] Richard Howard, '"Since Once We Are We Always Will Be In This Life Come What May"', in Alone with America: The Art of Poetry in the United States Since 1950, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), 396-412, p.408.

lamentation over the loss is not evident. O'Hara's 'this is a young / movie actor who just died / in his Porsche Spyder sportscar' seems devoid of emotion, especially when compared with Shelley:

> Ah, woe is me! Winter is come and gone,
> But grief returns with the revolving year;
>
> (Shelley, p.435)

or Milton:

> For Lycidas is dead, dead ere his prime,
> Young Lycidas, and hath not left his peer:
> Who would not sing for Lycidas?..
>
> (Milton, p 142)

or Tennyson:

> My friend, the brother of my love;
>
> My Arthur, whom I shall not see
> Till all my widow'd race be run;
> Dear as the mother to the son,
> More than my brothers are to me.[21]

O'Hara is not seeking to gain the sense of transcendence which Howard complains he lacks. In these poems he subverts the tone and methods of the traditional elegy. The different handling of the same subject is O'Hara's examination of writing death. Conventional language and genre has been used, and yet pulled apart. These of O'Hara's elegies for James Dean are more than

[21] Tennyson, Poems of Tennyson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1910), p.323.

merely 'adorable', more than 'pop' versions of traditional well-known elegies. They pull apart the methods and intentions of the genre, examine how death is made manifest in language, and then attempt to write it using different contexts. Other languages and texts associated with death, and its relationship to life - obituaries, biographies, quotations - all feature in O'Hara's poem. In addition, O'Hara subverts the questions traditionally addressed in elegy - the fate of the dead, the afterlife, the question of mourning and grief, and its consequences on the living (in O'Hara's 'Little Elegy, No.3', this is confined to the observations 'In New York today it's raining', and 'He's / survived by all of us, and so are you.')

In number 4A in O'Hara's series of 'Little Elegies', the speaker addresses the dead - still supposed to be James Dean, although never named ('Other drivers are racing / on superior speedways and salt flats in shinier cars' [CP p.250].). In this poem, the tone is more personal, more involved. Still, the emotion is held off. This poem is more a retrospective of death than a dealing head on with it - death as nostalgia:

> Now when the scullers are calmly competing and the new buds open their eyes to a first sun, your photographs are turning into parchment and dropping to floors[...]
>
> Your name is fading from all but a few marquees, the big red calling-card of your own death...

In this poem there is almost a promise of reflection on life and death, as it recalls life's moving on since the

event of James Dean's death. Yet the poem seems to sum up the impact of that death as hardly anything. There is a suggestion of his loss in the 'sad tires' of the cars in the background - perhaps the world has now taken on an inherent sadness in his absence. The very fact that the speaker is addressing the dead man reflects that the actor is missed, and yet it is only in these two hints that loss is felt. (This is echoed in another poem addressed to James Dean, 'To an Actor Who Died' (CP, p.226) - 'I think of you, and death comes / not'. Despite his death, he is not totally associated with death - its impact is not the driving force of the poem, and does not have to be worked out in the text.)

In 'Little Elegy 4A', the impact of the actor's death is allowed to wane, and is revived only in a macabre curiosity, on which the poem ends: 'And there's a rumour that you live, / hideously maimed and hidden by a conscientious studio'. The possibility of reflection on death and its consequences for the poet, 'In Memoriam'-style, is undermined. For life, Dean's death means only that he has become an idea, an image and a commodity - a perpetuation of his own myth.

Brad Gooch makes it clear that 'the movie star's death had inspired O'Hara to read...Milton's "Lycidas", Tennyson's "In Memoriam" and Shelley's "Mourn not for Adonais"' (Gooch p.266). If he was influenced by these elegies, it shows as subversion in his own. However, O'Hara, forever contradictory, does show the influence of the classical elegies in other poems for the movie star,

'For James Dean' (CP p.228), and 'Thinking of James Dean' (CP p.230).

Although not included in O'Hara's series entitled as elegies, these poems are more like the elegies of Tennyson and Shelley. In 'For James Dean', the speaker is an 'I', making an apparently personal and heartfelt plea to the gods: 'For a young actor I am begging / peace, gods.' The tone is emotional: bitterness towards the agents of his idol's death, and the speaker takes on a role as 'The ambassador of a hatred / who knows its cause'. This poem questions the reason of Dean's death, trying to make sense of it, and in doing so, has to set up 'others' in order to question; here the speaker needs 'gods', but for somewhere to put the blame rather than for comfort. In the final stanza, there is some echo of Auden's elegy for W.B. Yeats, in subject if not in tone. Auden's 'The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living'[22] come through in O'Hara's:

> Men cry from the grave while they still live
> and now I am this dead man's voice,
> stammering, a little in the earth.
>
> (CP p.230)

Does this make the speaker the perpetuator in some way of James Dean? Or does it mean that a little bit of the 'I' dies with him - he is 'a little in the earth'? Is it the poet or the actor who makes this 'cry from the grave'. Has

[22] W.H. Auden, The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939, p.242.

the dead actor, to paraphrase Auden once more, become his admirers? The ambiguity between the living and the dead lingers at the end of the poem, but, in its personal working through death and its effects, it is a very different writing of elegy than O'Hara's poems actually entitled 'elegies'. Similarly, in 'Thinking of James Dean', the actor's death is set within the landscape of the speaker's (mental and physical) life:

> Like a nickelodeon soaring over the island from sea to
> bay,
> Two pots of gold, and the flushed effulgence of a sky
> Tiepolo
> and Turner had compiled in vistavision. Each
> panoramic second, of
> his death. The rainbows cancelling each other out,
> between martinis
> and the steak.
>
> (CP p.230)

The poem is full of 'dolorous surf ... sorrows ... depths ... abysses... plunging... total immersion ...crushing waves...pounding me...deeply torn...bruised' images, and in its highly emotive rhetoric, it entwines the death of the star with the speaker's own fate:

> ...had I died at twenty-four as he,
> but
> in Boston, robbed of these suns and knowledges, a
> corpse more whole,
> less deeply torn, less bruised and less alive...
> ...would I be
> smaller now in the vastness of light?

Is this poem more recognisably elegiac than his named

elegies to the actor? A.F. Potts attempts to analyse the factors which comprise elegy, and concludes that:

> In the theme of transience, in the barrage of questions, and in the metaphors of light and darkness...we recognise the traits of elegy.[23]

Here, at least, O'Hara does indeed appear to be writing in the tradition of elegy. Both these two poems, and the elegies for James Dean included in 'Four Little Elegies' were written in October 1955, and yet the form of the elegies for Dean is so different. As elegies, they have in common the death of an idol, and yet their form does not conform to the definitions laid out for one genre. One major way in which they fall outside of the categories prescribed by the critics for elegy, is in their coming to terms with death, with 'how the living apprehend loss'.[24]

There is not the sense of the writing as catharsis found in the poems of Milton, Shelley, or Tennyson:

> I sometimes hold it half a sin
> To put in words the grief I feel;
> For words, like Nature, half reveal
> And half conceal the Soul within.
>
> But, for the unquiet heart and brain,
> A use in measured language lies;
> The sad mechanic exercise,
> Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.
>
> In words, like weeds, I'll wrap me o'er,
> Like coarsest clothes against the cold;
> But that large grief which these enfold
> Is given in outline and no more.
>
> ('In Memoriam', p.320)

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[23] A.F. Potts, The Elegiac Mode, p.96.

[24] L. Kingsley, 'The Modern Elegy: The Epistemology of loss', abstract.

For Tennyson, the physical act of writing is like a therapy, comforting by its 'sad mechanic exercise'. Words themselves, as they stand alone on the page, are able to express the grief 'in outline and no more'.

Yet it is through writing that Tennyson moves to new understanding. He is able to write of his life in relation to death's effect:

> Regret is dead, but love is more
> Than in the summers that are flown,
> For I myself with these have grown
> To something greater than before;
>
> ('In Memoriam' p.400)

Kinereth Meyer suggests that:

> The 'homeopathic strategy' - a process by which the poet (and the reader) moves from loss, through a vicarious death, to a final healing - is not only a salient structural characteristic of the elegy, but is the very psychological foundation which has allowed the elegy to remain a workable genre for modern poets.[25]

Meyer believes it is writing as a healing-process-within-the-text which is the basis for modern, as well as older, elegies. The actual movement from (textually) experienced death to a sense of renewal, is, he believes, the subject matter and the formal procedure of writing elegy.

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[25] Kinereth Meyer, 'The Mythology of Modern Death', Genre, 19(1), (Spring, 1986), 21-35, pp22-3.

Meyer adds:

> The elegy continues to live in twentieth-century poetry because it provides the means for the poet to construct [...] a myth of the self.[...] by allowing the poet to realize the innermost core of his subjectivity - his own death - the elegy indeed provides a 'homeopathic strategy', a strategy of healing and renewal[26]

Meyer's view echoes Kingsley's definition of the elegy as the writer's 'self-definition in respect to loss'. Yet here, the self-definition has death at its core - an interpretation of self certainly in keeping with O'Hara's. For Meyer, however, this is hidden from the poet until he works it out in the poem, echoing Karl Malkoff's belief that:

> Death bequeaths to man his individuality. But man cannot easily come to terms with death. It is, in fact, the business of the ego to repress awareness of that aspect of the human condition. Therefore [...] man represses his true individuality, his true identity.[27]

In Meyer's view, this Freudian reading of death-as-repressed-identity can be recognised through writing elegy; the 'healing and renewal', are, for the modern elegist, an important part of coming to terms with self. The idea of the poem as a process of healing, is absent in these elegies by O'Hara. Death is not something which is

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[26] Kinereth Meyer, 'The Mythology of Modern Death' p.25.

[27] Karl Malkoff, Escape From the Self:A Study in Contemporary American Poetry and Poetics, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p.4.

necessary to transcend in the poetry. It is the language of death O'Hara works with, and through which he subverts the form of elegy. In the 'Little Elegies' O'Hara is not trying to bring forth a healing. He is examining, textually, how language deals with death, rather than attempting to use the poem in order to arrive at a psychological sense of renewal beyond the text.

'Little Elegies' numbers 4B, 4C and 4D do, however, take a subjective stance. They are about 'I'. James Dean is not alluded to, no longer part of the text. Perhaps these poems are these examples of the 'meditative autobiography' by which A.F. Potts tries to define elegy[28]. 4B simultaneously supports and refutes this. The 'I' is manifest as both alive and dead:

> I can't deny it,
> I am among the noble /
> dead, the famous.
>
> (CP p.251)

and within the same text:

> I can't really tell
> that I'm alive, except
> I name the world.

and:

> I think I am in
> the heavens! waiting
> to be formed,
> to have my love
> and my self given
> a name, at last.

[28] A.F. Potts, The Elegiac Mode, p.94.

The poem certainly involves self and death, and yet it totally confuses the process through which elegy is defined as moving. Death here is that of the speaker, who, within the same poem seems to speak from beyond the grave, from life, and from the afterlife, at the same time. Death is hovering between actuality and metaphor. Among the positive statements ('I can't deny it...'), death is seen as metaphor - 'I am out / of this world...I'm really dead / to it..'.

O'Hara takes on death in all its linguistic uses, so within the elegy, 'I' is on a journey of linguistic, rhetorical death, surfing its connotations. O'Hara's metaphoric use of death is echoed in the final one of this sequence of poems, as the speaker states 'I am in heaven'. This phrase is certainly elegiac material, the subject placed in the realms of the afterlife. Yet here, the phrase takes on a more earthly meaning, as the speaker is definitely alive:

.....my
thoughts are pitch.
It is my fault,
the beating of
my heart. No
extraordinary
pain is mine.

(CP p.251)

The poem projects a concentrated form of selfhood, not unlike that of Sylvia Plath's in 'Tulips'. Yet there is no centred context for the 'I' to exist within. The 'I am in heaven' sits oddly. It could refer to the afterlife. It

could equally be a camp expression of happiness. Happiness certainly seems to have no place in this poem, where even the lines are short, closed off, as though the articulation of them is in itself painful, and the speaker describes himself as 'low'. In this particular elegy, O'Hara seems to be working out the type of metaphoric death he hinted at in 'Little Elegy' 4B:

> Yes, I am no
> longer going out
> into the world....
>
> It doesn't matter
> that I'm really dead
> to it, not living...

In their subjectivity, elegies 4B - D serve to move O'Hara some way back into the realms of elegy as defined by Potts:

> The authentic elegist is pre-occupied rather with his diagnosis of whatever is dead or sterile, or bloated, disproportionate, corrupt, death-dealing.[29]

Yet O'Hara does not totally fulfil Potts' definition of an elegist, as absent from his elegies is the 'diagnosis' of death and sterility therein. Analysis of the textual death is not relevant here. The poems <u>are</u> textual death, rather than textual death analysed and explained: a fulfilment instead of O'Hara's 'I hope the poem to *be* the subject, not just about it' (<u>CP</u> p.497).

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[29] A.F. Potts, <u>The Elegiac Mode</u>, p.95.

The 'transcendence' and sense of 'healing' required by Howard and Meyer are not provided by O'Hara, as he demonstrates that the text can only contain words in all their shifting meanings, rather than answers and resolutions to major questions about life and death. In this case, O'Hara often addresses the question of death - whether impending, hinted, or feared - through others' textual deaths in his poetry. O'Hara utilises the work of other elegists to manoeuvre meanings and expressions of death within his own poetry.

DEATH AND INTERTEXTUALITY

O'Hara brings the topic of death into his own work with references to, or slight subversions of, other writers' textual dealings with it. His attitude here is seen as, and in, echoes of other poetry. In 'Joe's Jacket' (CP p.331), O'Hara introduces death via D.H.Lawrence. The reference to Lawrence allows O'Hara to demonstrates his own inability to believe in transcendence, or a Lawrentian sense of rebirth:

> and the rain has commenced its delicate lament over
> the orchards
> an enormous window morning and the wind, the beautiful
> desperation of a tree
> fighting off strangulation, and my bed has an ugly
> calm
> I reach to the D.H.Lawrence on the floor and read 'The
> Ship of Death'
>
> I lie back again and begin slowly to drift and then to
> sink.

O'Hara begins this section of the poem with a re-worked reading of Lawrence's poem. The symbolic autumnal fruit which opens 'The Ship of Death' sees its echo in the tree O'Hara depicts. Yet O'Hara's tree is not the symbol of recurring seasonal creation, standing for both death and rebirth. It exists in the poem as the view from a window, and rather than hinting at the grandeur of nature's power of perpetuation, the view is of the tree's 'desperation'. The tree, part of nature, is also the victim of nature - it is being strangled, presumably by ivy or some other parasitic plant, and the spectacle is of its 'fighting off' its own death, rather than the accepting process of nature and the participation in its own destruction undergone by Lawrence's fruit:

> Now it is autumn and the falling fruit
> and the long journey towards oblivion.
>
> The apples falling like great drops of dew
> to bruise themselves an exit from themselves.
>
> And it is time to go,...[30]

O'Hara describes the tree's desperate struggle as 'beautiful', as opposed to the calmness of his bed which is 'ugly'. To fight is to be beautiful. Yet nature does not promise anything else here beyond aesthetics, there is no image or symbol to be decoded. Into the context of the view of the dying tree, the poem brings the reference to 'The Ship of Death', with its spiritual tone and its prophetic language:

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[30] D.H. Lawrence, D.H. Lawrence: The Complete Poems, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and F. Warren Roberts, (London: Penguin, 1977), p.716.

> Have you built your ship of death, O have you?
> O build your ship of death, for you will need it...
>
> ..And death is on the air like a smell of ashes!
> Ah! can't you smell it?
>
> And in the bruised body, the frightened soul
> finds itself shrinking, wincing from the cold
> that blows upon it through the orifices....[31]

The effect of superimposing this text onto the text of O'Hara's poem shifts the focus of his poem. Allusion to the religious sense of death and rebirth in Lawrence's poem, and reference to the pagan sense of seasonal cycles are now at play within O'Hara's text. The symbolic associations of 'The Ship of Death' enter O'Hara's text, making its inclusion much more than a mere incidental biographical reference. A reading of Lawrence's poem is inserted into O'Hara's, and the context alters readings of both. How does this affect the meaning and textual representation of death within O'Hara's poem?

Lawrence's urge to prepare spiritually for death is carried into the next line of O'Hara's poem, 'I lie back again and begin slowly to drift'. This could be in answer to Lawrence's:

> Now launch the small ship, now as the body dies
> and life departs, launch out, the fragile soul
> in the fragile ship of courage, the ark of faith..
>
> (Lawrence p.719)

O'Hara ends his line, however, with 'and then to sink'.

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[31] D.H. Lawrence, The Collected Poems, p.717.

With humorous bathos, O'Hara literally submerges Lawrence's efforts at spiritual transcendence. Does this mean that, like the tree, the speaker will not readily succumb to death, or does it hint at an inevitable death-as-finality - there is no other side, no chance that:

> ..the little ship wings home, faltering and lapsing
> on the pink flood,
> and the frail soul steps out, into her house again
> filling the heart with peace.
>
> (Lawrence p.720)

O'Hara's rebuttal of Lawrence's notions of death may be tinged with humour, but it firmly places death as a concern within the text, a sense which lingers ghostlike throughout the poem. Where O'Hara chooses to glut on life, he gives the presence of death a heightened sense, an effect he even physically seeks within the poem - 'I drink to die a little and increase the contrast of this questionable moment'. That taste of death gives life a piquancy, the moment becomes a more intense experience because of the knowledge of its - and life's - transience.

The Romantic, Byronic moment in the poem is given vent in other O'Hara poems, and Helen Vendler suggests:

> O'Hara was stubborn enough to wish...that life could always be lived on the very edge of loss, so that every instant would seem wistfully precious"[32]

[32] Helen Vendler, 'The Virtue of the Alterable', in Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980), 179-194, p.180.

The sense of 'life...lived on the edge of loss' is particularly noticeable in 'Getting Up Ahead of Someone (Sun)':

> it is tomorrow
> though only six hours have gone by
> each day's light has more significance these days
>
> (CP p.341)

Here, there is an echo of Keats in O'Hara's placing of the 'significance' of each hour, as the awareness that time is always running out finds its parallel in Keats' pleasure, joy and beauty:

> ...Beauty that must die;
> And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
> Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
> Turning to Poison while the bee-mouth sips:[33]

Each is imbued with a greater intensity in the knowledge that it is so temporary and fragile in the same way that O'Hara's 'each day's light' is flooded with intensity in the knowledge that 'it is tomorrow' already. Within the poem, 'it is' exists not in today, but in tomorrow, as though the present cannot be held before it has to become the past.

O'Hara's sense of the elusive present is also articulated in 'Joe's Jacket':

> returning by car the forceful histories of myself and

[33] John Keats, Keats: Poetical Works, ed. H.W. Garrod, (Oxford: Oxford University Press,1989), p.220.

histories...loom Vincent
like the city hour after hour closer and closer to the
future I am here
and the night is heavy though not warm, Joe is still
up and we talk
only of the immediate present and its indiscriminately
hitched-to past
the feeling of life and incident pouring over the
sleeping city
which seems to be bathed in an unobtrusive light which
lends things
coherence and an absolute, for just that time as four
o'clock goes by.

(CP p.330)

Within the poem, 'histories...loom' towards the future. It is the future which usually looms, and yet here the speaker confuses time zones, the end of the second line of this section reading 'the future I am here / and the night is heavy..'. The present seems to be an amalgam of past and future. The poem elicits many questions about time. Does O'Hara's 'I am here' refer to the future? Is he hurtling towards the past, 'closer and closer'? Is the heavy, warm night situated in the present? What is the present? Half-articulations of a Romantic glutting on the moment are here, ('Joe is still up and we talk / only of the immediate present') but are also subverted, as the moment seems unable to be located.

Time is made ambivalent, so that the 'immediate present' can only be talked of in terms of past and future. The feeling of life' in the poem must, in this case, be an illusory sensation within the confusing movement of time. In the poem's vista, it is a slant of light which 'lends' things 'coherence and an absolute'. The speaker acknowledges that coherence and absolute are not the true

state of things, and have to be lent this appearance through a trick of the light. Coherent time is an illusion, and yet, as this illusion is taking place, the speaker is able to point to a specific time: 'for just that time as four o'clock goes by'. Time is now pin-downable in precise minutes and hours. Is the poet inside time, or out of it? O'Hara leaves the answer ambiguously open.

Other readings seem to waft across the poetry, to inform and also to complicate its own meanings. The constant awareness of death is registered through weaving in references or allusions to other texts' treatment of it. Grace Hartigan states that O'Hara was 'overly conscious of death'(Gooch p.269), and the poet's utilisation of other literary workings of death, allows him to articulate this preoccupation from his understanding of others' writing. This way death is opened up within the poetry to readings and rereadings. Death is re-iterable within the framework of literary texts, not merely as a word, but as the whole of its articulation through poetry. In recognising and utilising this iterability, O'Hara pulls other poets' textual deaths into his own context to flavour the meanings of his own.

By harnessing the resonances of death from the works of other writers, much of O'Hara's poetry seems to be melancholy at a level below the apparent subject matter. Among so much unedited detail in O'Hara's work, it is often in unobtrusive lines of a poem that the sense of death and melancholy is felt, and the full force of what it means for the poet is revealed: death as terrible isolation in 'Poem

(Instant coffee with slightly sour cream)':

> Instant coffee with slightly sour cream
> in it, and a phone call to the beyond
> which doesn't seem to be coming any nearer.
> 'Ah daddy, I wanna stay drunk many days'
> on the poetry of a new friend
> my life held precariously in the seeing
> hands of others, their and my impossibilities.
> Is this love, now that the first love
> has finally died, where there were no impossibilities?
>
> (CP p.244)

The poem hinges on the phrase 'my life held precariously in the seeing / hands of others' - to be alive depends on communication, on interaction, and death is the cutting of that contact. Yet where death is directly mentioned, it is as the death of an emotion, giving way to a new one. Again, the overt mention of death is as a figure of speech, and the real sense of life/death in the poem lingers under the words, as though the word 'died' cannot give meaning to it. Instead, the sense of alienation in the poem is what holds the life in danger.

In the sense of isolation, are echoes of Reverdy's poetry of alienation, the sense of a displaced personality suspended in a non-interactive world:

> On the threshold no one
> Or your shadow
> A memory lingering there
> The road passes by
> And the trees come closer as they talk
> What is there behind
> A wall
> voices
> The clouds that lifted
> Just as I was passing by

And all along a barrier
Those who will not enter

('Road' p.53)

I seem to have lost the key and everyone laughs all about me, each one showing me an enormous key hung about his neck.
Only I have nothing with which to enter. They have all disappeared and the closed doors leave the street sadder. No one.
I shall knock everywhere.
Insults lash out from windows and I go on.

('Under the Stars' p.21)

He climbs, never stopping, never turning round, and no one but himself knows where he is going.
The weight he drags along is heavy, but his legs are free and he has no ears.
At each door he shouted his name; no one opened.

('The Wrong Side on the Right Side' p.35)

Air
And light
A gleam on the edge of the glass where
Nothing fills my disappointed hand
So I'll have lived all alone
To the dawn of the final day

Without a word to tell me which was the right way
('Crossroad' p, 77)[34]

O'Hara utilises yet subverts this solitariness: there is a 'phone call to the beyond' - he is establishing relations with that 'beyond' even if it 'doesn't seem to be coming any nearer', and there is another voice in the poem. The strange, unplaceable 'Ah daddy, I wanna stay drunk many

[34] All poems taken from Pierre Reverdy: Selected Poems, trans. John Ashbery, Mary

days' has to come from somewhere, and is present within the poem - it is not all isolation, there is even mention of a 'new friend'. Yet the fear and acknowledgement of the fragility of life, and the speaker's dependence on others for its continuation informs much of O'Hara's poetry; the feeling of being 'a step away from them', of being both in and out of the crowd. The crowd for Reverdy often seems to function as a unified being, a sort of other to the individual in focus. For O'Hara, the crowd - other people - are essential to living - part of being-in-the-world, of being bound up with people and the material world in order to exist. He is then allowed to be partly alienated from this participation, and therefore always looking over the edge of existence.

The ending to 'A Step Away From Them' acknowledges the debt O'Hara owes Reverdy, as it finishes with the sentence 'My heart is in my / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy'. This link goes further than expressing kinship with another poet. The heart, which is the core and force of life, appears numerous times in O'Hara's poetry, bringing with it all its connotations as the traditional rhetorical figure of life and love. To say his heart is Reverdy's poems is to express poetry as his core. His heart is art. O'Hara uses this rhetorical construct, a tool of his trade, and equates it with poetry. The use of the heart as metaphor for poetry is evident in more than one of his poems, apart from in 'A Step Away From Them':

(cont..)Ann Caws & Patricia Terry, (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books,1991.)

> Whose heart is beating in this shell? the pulse
> of poetry, although the sound girl's at a funeral
>
> (CP p.247)

> I want my face to be shaven, and my heart-
> you can't plan on the heart, but
> the better part of it, my poetry, is open.
>
> (CP p.231)

Poetry becomes the life force, and, unlike the human body, does not expire. O'Hara's journal entry for 4th November, 1948 states that 'against death art is the only barrier'[35]. O'Hara appears to set up the word as living entity.

DEAD SPEECH / LIVING TEXT

Several of O'Hara's early journal entries suggest the importance he places on the written word in the face of death. On 29th October, 1948, he wrote:

> Simply to live does not justify existence...but oh to leave a trace, no matter how faint, of that brief gesture! For someone, someday, may find it beautiful![36]

The perceived importance of leaving something lasting beyond life, is echoed in another journal entry where the poet expresses 'a wish to contribute something to life's fabric'.[37] Earlier, in 1945, a letter to his parents (Gooch p.130) lists his favourite poems, among which is Whitman's

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[35] Frank O'Hara, Early Writing, ed. Donald Allen, (Bolinas: Grey Fox Press, 1977), p.106.

[36] Frank O'Hara, Early Writing, p.105.

[37] Frank O'Hara, Early Writing, p.105.

'O Me! O Life!'. The poem asks:

> Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid
> crowds I see around me,
> Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the
> rest me intertwined,
> the question, O me! so sad, recurring - What good amid
> these O me, O life?
> Answer
> That you are here - that life exists and identity,
> That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute
> a verse.[38]

To write, to produce the written word, seems to have been important to O'Hara from early in his life. As he matured into poet, the written word seems to have taken on a new twist in importance. O'Hara's mock manifesto, 'Personism', claims more for poetry than just to exist for posterity in the form of a written verse:

> Personism has nothing to do with philosophy, it's all art. It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it! But to give you a vague idea, one of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself).....It was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959, a day in which I was in love with someone.....I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born.....It puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person...The poem at last is between two people instead of two pages.
>
> (CP pp. 498-9)

The poem here could function instead of a phone call. Far from making it throwaway and unimportant, this places the poem as the ultimate in living form, poetry as

[38] Walt Whitman, Collected Poems, p.298.

conversation. The poem itself becomes primary, above any sense of the selves involved. Life is not bled off from some sense of self, of which the poem is an extension, but rather is inherent in the poetry, which acts as autonomous entity. The word is alive. Poetry is the important event happening between two people, it is alive in its own right, rather than attempting to be the expression of an outside self; a two-way connecting of lives. What is important is the interchange, the intercourse, which, literally and metaphorically, begets life.

The whole concept of poetry as conversation is relevant to O'Hara's work. By definition, conversation can never arrive, it is always moving forward, always open and influenced by mood and by outside forces. Only existing in the present (but being able to be about the future or the past), conversation suits O'Hara's quick, spontaneous approach, as his poems refuse to be anything but alive:

> what happened and is here, a
> paper rubbed against the heart
>
> and still too moist to be framed.

(CP p.322)

In the refusal to allow life to harden into non-being on the page, O'Hara is giving the ultimate power to the written word. The text does not signify, for O'Hara, marks of speech which are cut off from their speaker, secondary to the spoken word. Writing is not dead meaning, merely derivative of the spoken word. Breath can expire, written

words endure. O'Hara acknowledges that life is manifest in language, in poetry:

> I can't really tell
> that I'm alive, except
> I name the world
>
> (CP p.250)

In 'Poem Read At Joan Mitchell's' (CP p.265) O'Hara places emphasis on life and liveliness being inherent in poetry:

> Yesterday I felt very tired from being at the FIVE SPOT
> and today I felt very tired from going to bed early and reading ULYSSES
> but tonight I feel energetic because I'm sort of the bugle,
> like waking people up.

In this instance, tiredness and lethargy occurs from actual participation in life, in living. Energy comes through his work as poet. He is the 'bugle'. Even though this poem is 'read' aloud to friends, it is more than a one-off speech. It exists in written form, separate from the life O'Hara is living on that date.

In 'In Memory of My Feelings', (CP p.252) the 'ardent lover of history' is ultimately a poet, and that history is relevant for its exploitation by art - as poet, he can make things 'become art, / I could not change it into history'. Here, O'Hara deals with the necessary death of literary forefathers in order to create his own poetics, to create new, living material. O'Hara's articulation is almost

biblical in style and tone, and yet this often turns out to be the recognising of another poetic voice within the text:

> The most arid stretch is often richest,
> the hand lifting towards a fig tree from hunger
> digging
> and there is water, clear, supple or there
> deep in the sand where death sleeps, a murmurous
> bubbling
> proclaims the blackness that will ease and burn.
>
> (CP p.254)

What promises to be a prophetic voice is denied validation, as elsewhere the speaker proclaims he is 'the opposite of visionary', and instead we are thrown back inside the realms of poetry, as the prophetic is more likely to be an echo of The Waste Land. O'Hara's poem has the feel of an oracle, or perhaps apocalyptic insight, yet offers no hope outside the realm of text itself. There is no sense of hope for humankind, no possibility of change, but loop upon loop of history, of generations dying off, lives that are destined for death, survived and utilised only by art. Thus the whole of the classical period of history is 'converted into statuary. I adore the Roman copies'.

O'Hara backs up the idea that his poetry is not aiming for metaphysical depth, when he states that 'Personism' has 'nothing to do with philosophy, it's all art' (CP p.499). O'Hara's poetry does not reach out beyond the text towards some objective truth or certainty. In 'Design etc.' (SS+W p.33) - a set of notes for a talk given in 1952 - O'Hara writes of the importance of form and design in poetry. Here, he suggests one 'monster' threatening

poetry is:

> the poet's passion for poetry and his own ideas: this ...will tend to run away with the poem and after it has happened a few times, the poet feels that his emotions are more important than any poem, that indeed they, not words, *are* the poem.
>
> (SS+W p.35)

O'Hara here again seems to anticipate Derrida's 'Il n'y a pas de hors-texte'. Derrida attempts to show that:

> beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as...text, there has never been anything but writing;...there have never been anything but...substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the 'real' supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace...And thus to infinity, for we have read, in the text, that the absolute present, Nature... have always already escaped, have never existed; that what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence.[39]

O'Hara's poetry celebrates language, the word's ability to move and change, rather than trying to grasp at meanings beyond it. In this case, are O'Hara's poems elegies? The poems go beyond the normal bounds of the genre, which is occupied with subjectivity and the world beyond the text - the poem as written catharsis or self-reflection in relation to a particular person or situation. For O'Hara the text, the words, are important. The poem becomes the event, not a transparent way to the world beyond it, thus

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[39] Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, pp. 158-9.

his poetry is not so much about mourning loss of life(in the world), as a celebration of the text in its own life. O'Hara's poetry is not preoccupied with a living person trying to comprehend and survive death - although both the living person and death are addressed. Instead, self recedes in importance besides how the text deals with the notion of life, and the notion of death. In this way the text itself becomes a liberation from mortality. O'Hara turns away from the artist's self-definition in the face of non-being, and focuses on the play of language, and the impossibility of its finally being able to construct 'being' beyond the text.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis has been to examine O'Hara's treatment of the city, art and death in the light of existing scholarly works on the subjects, in order to offer new readings of his poetry through these themes. Ultimately this will assist in an evaluation of O'Hara's contribution to the literary concerns and achievements of this century.

The new interpretations of O'Hara's work are achieved by close reading of the poems, alongside discussion of recent critical studies on the genres of city writing, ekphrastic literature and elegy, to discover how O'Hara's work contributes to these genres. The question of genre itself is also held up for inspection in O'Hara's poetry, and in this way the poetry can be seen as implicitly predictive of some notions addressed by theories of deconstruction and postmodernism. Both O'Hara's poetry, and deconstructive theory address the opening up of boundaries between separate categories of writing, and recent Postmodern thinking addresses the all-inclusive eclecticism inherent in O'Hara's work. Within one poem, many different genres co-exist. A poem, for example, such as 'Having A Coke With You' (CP p.360) is a love poem, art poem and city poem simultaneously, opening up the boundaries of genre to a new sense of inclusion. The eclectic mix within the frame of a single poem, is summed up two decades later as part of the prevailing aesthetic of the times. Jean-Francois Lyotard's 'Answering the Question: What Is

Postmodernism?' puts forward the belief that:

> Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture...Artists, gallery owners, critics, and public wallow together in the 'anything goes', and the epoch is one of slackening.[1]

O'Hara's poetic treatment of his subject matter is, at mid-century, producing an aesthetic effect which is epitomised as the touchstone for late twentieth century culture. Thus, the poet's representations of the city, art and death, and the genres associated with them, reflect the sensibility of today's culture of inclusiveness; O'Hara's work appears to be pertinent to the concerns and demands of the contemporary reader.

It is over thirty years since O'Hara's death, and from this retrospective viewpoint it is now possible to assess how, and to what extent, the concerns of his poetry are as relevant and instructive to contemporary times, as they were to the era in which they were written. O'Hara's contributions to the literature of this century pinpoint and voice considerations that are fundamental to its times - not just to the 1950s and 60s. Studies such as Ward's Statutes of Liberty aim to prove that literature and literary theory in the years since O'Hara's death demonstrate that his influence and innovations, especially

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[1] Jean-Francois Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?', translated by Regis Durand, in The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Theory and History of Literature, Vol 10, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.76.

in terms of style and form have been cultivated and made to flourish. Ward writes:

> His poetry was far-sighted in its anticipation of the playfulness and rapid-fire brilliance of Postmodernism; but what to O'Hara was a way of keeping himself entertained, a flashlight for use under the stifling bedclothes of the fifties, turned out to be something like the dominant style of the 1980s.
>
> (SL p.176)

The assessment of O'Hara's significance for future writers in terms of formal and syntactic innovation is work which has already been undertaken by scholars including Ward[2], and Hettich[3], so comprehensive research into the developments of O'Hara's style by poets of the 1970s, and 80s is only touched on incidentally in the work here. Instead, this work focuses on detailed accounts of O'Hara's innovative ways of writing on art, the city and death, and charting how he manipulates traditional practice, thus bringing the opportunity of different ways of writing and reading to these genres. The research concentrates on providing new readings of O'Hara's poetry which show his concerns to have been relevant and pertinent for contemporary readers, overturning the idea that he is no more than a poet's poet,

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[2] in Statutes of Liberty and Language Poetry and the American Avant-garde.

[3] Michael Hettich, 'Contemporary Action Poetry: Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery', (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Miami, 1991; abstract in Dissertation Abstracts International, v.52(7), [January, 1992], p.2552 -A.) The final chapter is dedicated to the topic, stating in the abstract that it 'examines the continuing influence of O'Hara and Ashbery, discussing such contemporary movements as the Language school and the still flourishing New York school.'

a mid-century cult figure whose only relevance is his stylistic influence on the succeeding generations of avant-garde poets.

O'Hara's recent prominence as an influence on current practice had been predicted in the 1970s by critics such as Perloff[4], Helen Vendler[5], and Charles Molesworth, who suggests that:

> Frank O'Hara's poems, as profuse in their inventiveness as they are in their influence, demand that we attempt to judge their place in American poetry.[6]

He later attempts to make that judgement himself by claiming:

> I would argue that no poet born since 1920 has had more of an impact on American poets today than Frank O'Hara. His role in shaping the current idiom challenges overstatement.
> (Molesworth, p.94)

A relevant point to make here is that Molesworth only mentions O'Hara's effect on poets. He does not extend this 'impact' to his relevance for the tradition of writing in any particular genre, nor does he allude to his impact on readers - for whom, surely more than other poets, the

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[4] Perloff suggests that 'O'Hara had struck a new chord, that a new poetry was in the making', in PAP, p.183.

[5] Helen Vendler calls O'Hara 'a poet to be reckoned with, a new species', in 'The Virtue of the Alterable', Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980), 179-94, p.194.

[6] Charles Molesworth, '"The Clear Architecture of the Nerves": The Poetry of Frank O'Hara', p.85.

poetry was written. The work presented in this thesis attempts to right this balance.

Molesworth picks up on the 'idiom' as the way O'Hara was influential on his poetic successors. Although the city, the art world and O'Hara's awareness of mortality help to shape that idiom, the subjects themselves - specifically art and the city - recurring within the texts like a subliminal chorus, are generally regarded by those assessing O'Hara's work as areas which ground him firmly within his time. Writing in 1973, Susan Holohan suggested of O'Hara's city poetry, 'A New York has come to live in the poems that no longer exists in fact.'[7] The phrase 'no longer' shows that even as early as seven years after his death, O'Hara's portrayal of New York is one that is dated, his poems standing as a memorial to the city in its heyday of the 50s and 60s.

In the same way, the subject of art in his poetry is seen as linking him to a time and place which has now moved on. The vast majority of the critical work on art in O'Hara's poetry has concentrated on establishing links between the techniques of the Abstract Expressionist painters and the poetry he - and other members of the New York School of Poetry - wrote. To forge a connection of style between the two disciplines is to add to the sense that O'Hara's poetry is mired in the 50s and 60s, an era characterised by the Abstract Expressionist painters - the

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[7] Susan Holohan, 'Frank O'Hara's Poetry', American Poetry Since 1960: Some Critical Perspectives, Ed.Robert B.Shaw, (Cheadle Hulme: Carcanet, 1973), 109-22, p.109.

pre-Andy Warhol New York. The work of this thesis, is to show that O'Hara's treatment of the subject of art goes beyond application to just the art and artists of his time, through a demonstration of his innovatory method of representing paintings through textual means.

Death, and O'Hara's awareness of it, is a subject which has only recently been addressed at any length and detail, and yet current criticism suggests its placing is paramount to O'Hara's poetry. The reading of death in O'Hara's poetry provided here, goes beyond apprehending its representation as a metaphysical concern, and instead attempts to locate the nature of the word, and its inherent meanings, in O'Hara's poetry. Recent claims for the importance of temporality in O'Hara's poems, have been addressed here by an assessment of exactly how and where he utilises death within the poetry. The nature of death in O'Hara's writing is examined, in order to chart its effects on the body of his work as a whole.

The implications of these findings allow a retrospective reading of O'Hara's poetry which finds it pertinent to contemporary concerns.

I

THE CITY

Current growth in urbanisation, with ever more people living in the city environment, suggests the need for a body of literature which embraces and celebrates urban life. Writing about city poetry in 1991, Dana Brand suggests:

> we need a new, admittedly more abstract understanding of community....one that accepts a world of strangers and accepts the inevitability of what is frequently decried as 'urban impersonality'[8]

O'Hara addresses 'urban impersonality' by offering a poetics which forges a sense of belonging amongst the inhabitants of a city. His urban poetry provides a shared vernacular with the people of his city, opening up a possibility of hospitable citizenry. O'Hara's writing turns around the city's portrayal as a malign, alienating force, re-writing it as a place of community, of native habitat - indeed, going as far as to make it act as a benign agent for happiness, 'and even the traffic halt so thick is a way / for people to rub up against each other' (CP p.370) .

O'Hara's portrayal of the city as a place of community, as the new natural habitat for man, offers today's reader a rare, positive reading of the urban environment. His is a city which is familiar and friendly:

> How funny you are today New York
> like Ginger Rogers in Swingtime
> and St. Bridget's steeple leaning a little to the left
>
> (CP p.370)

The affirmative, warm city offered by O'Hara is something which is lost in later urban writing, such as Ron Silliman's What:

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[8] Dana Brand, The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth Century American Literature, p.195.

.....The way
gas stations dwindled overnight,
now go the banks: people
huddle in the rain
as close as they can to the wall
lined up for the automated teller.

(What pp 8-9)

O'Hara's writing grounds his city firmly as New York, recognisable and welcoming, avoiding Silliman's any-place urban description, bared of characteristic features. Silliman's work builds on O'Hara's use of the language of urban culture, but loses the sense of the city as home - rather it becomes where one lives and is socialised. A new sense of rootlessness creeps back into city writing, and Silliman's poem is perhaps in line with the progression of the representation-through-art of the city through the century as defined by Sharpe and Wallock:

> If any general attitude toward the representation of the contemporary city has been emerging, it is that the now-explicable nineteenth-century city has given way to the still elusive 'non-place urban realm' of the twentieth.[9]

Silliman's writing conforms to Sharpe and Wallock's description of the 'general attitude toward the representation of the contemporary city' by portraying a 'non-place urban realm', a sense of urban sprawl - literally 'elusive' - devoid of recognisable features by

[9] William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock, 'From "Great Town" to "Non-place.. (cont.)Urban Realm": Reading the Modern City', p.23.

which to ground it. In this way it differs from O'Hara's. O'Hara's poetry eschews the portrayal of an elusive urban environment, as defined by Sharpe and Wallock, and thus stands outside the 'general attitude' towards writing the city: O'Hara's is the more innovative approach to city writing in this century.

In mid-twentieth century, O'Hara's poetry provides a reading of the city which addresses its vast environment, yet which still makes it intimate and hospitable; his New York is a force for grounding and locating people, rather than losing them in anonymous and alien surroundings. The sense of intimacy in the city is what marks out O'Hara's poetry as innovative and exciting, and is also the means by which it offers a positive reading of urban life to contemporary readers - something which today's poetry has largely foregone.

Contemporary poetry's move away from a portrayal of the city as hospitable and benevolent, is perhaps in line with the expansion of the urban space itself in recent years. Burton Pike suggests:

> urban shapelessness is a form of disorder expressing anxiety and loss of coherence, and symbolising the anonymous randomness of contemporary life.[10]

Is this 'urban shapelessness' what Silliman and his contemporaries are reacting to? Michael Heller believes:

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[10] Burton Pike, The Image of the City in Modern Literature, p.129.

> the déjà-vu dadaism of the Language poets, as they attempt to move outside or circumvent meaning, seems predicated on the city's potential infinity of contents.[11]

'Déjà-vu dadaism' suggests something at once familiar and disorienting, with the emphasis falling on the disorientation. The Language Poets have responded to the vast urbanisation of today by writing poetry in which the city is expressed through random elements of urban culture, highlighting O'Hara's poetry as a positive, familiar body of urban poetics. Its ease with city surroundings offers an alternative to the contemporary reader.

O'Hara provides a reading of urban living - something from which there is now no turning back - which excites and celebrates. There is an ease and at-home-ness with the poet's language - an urban vernacular which does not exclude in its references, but opens up to every inhabitant of the modern urban world a new possibility of community and shared experience. A city language exists in O'Hara's poetry, which is PART of the environment, shaped in it and by it, rather than one which has to look on detached, alienated and in terrified awe.

From a late twentieth century viewpoint, O'Hara's portrayal of the literary urban environment stands as the positive highpoint of city poetry, between the Modernists' depiction of the city as the source of decadence and apocalypse, and the fragmented urban scenes punctuating the

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[11] Michael Heller, 'The Cosmopolis of Poetics: Urban World, Uncertain Poetry', p.96.

work of the Language Poets. O'Hara's city writing is relevant for today's readers and writers, as, in this era of mass urbanisation, much literature must aspire to the genre, and address the concerns of urban life.

The research in this thesis now leaves the way open for a thorough evaluation of O'Hara's influence in writing the city on later generations of writers, and to ask whether O'Hara's city poetry has had impact on poetry other than American. Is there now a city writing which is not just American? Does O'Hara's poetry firmly root city writing in the USA, anchoring the modern city, exemplified by New York, as the only possible touchstone for urban life, and thus leaving behind forever Baudelaire's Paris and Eliot's London, as archaic and irrelevant for contemporary reading of urban life?

II

ART

The results of the present research into O'Hara's utilisation of the visual arts in his poetry, provides a new and different reading of the function of art in his work. Prior to this research, O'Hara's poems were predominantly read as 'verbal equivalencies' (Crossing p.31) of abstract expressionist paintings, and as documentary versions of the social life of the artists of the times. This thesis undermines the importance and validity of those readings of O'Hara's poetry. The work here suggests that his innovations in addressing the

problems of rendering of the art object in the textual framework, is the way in which the subject of visual art is fundamental to O'Hara's poetics.

The present reading of the topic of art in O'Hara's poetry thus provides a new and different perspective of the its role in the overall critical account of his work. Rather than helping to tie O'Hara to a particular school or time, his use of the visual arts releases his work as unique and original; he offers a fresh and illuminating way to write about works of art.

Previous studies group together the abstract expressionist painters with other members of the New York School of Poets, particularly John Ashbery[12], to demonstrate their shared techniques. Friedman goes as far as to say that:

> desire to experiment with words as painters were experimenting with paint became a primary preoccupation among the New York Poets.
>
> (Friedman p.3)

This thesis suggests that such readings are restrictive to O'Hara's poetry; instead, it demonstrates that the techniques of painting - in O'Hara's case at least - cannot be applied to the poetry. In addition, the present research uncovers how O'Hara is able to write about specific

[12] see Michael Hettich, 'Contemporary Action Poetry: Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery.'(unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Miami, 1991).

paintings without resorting to re-hashed description of them through verbal means - a problematic concern for poetry about art. These findings may have impact on critical studies of O'Hara's work, as they require a turnaround in the consensus of opinion on the nature of art in his work.

The work on art here acknowledges that O'Hara did emerge as a poet alongside the abstract expressionist movement, along with the other poets of the New York School. However, through this research, O'Hara can now be separated from his contemporary poets in his USE of visual art. John Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in A Convex Mirror' opens:

> As Parmigianino did it, the right hand
> Bigger than the head, thrust at the viewer
> And swerving easily away, as though to protect
> What it advertises. A few leaded panes, old beams
> Fur, pleated muslin, a coral ring run together
> In a movement supporting the face, which swims
> Toward and away like the hand
> Except that it is in repose.[13]

The opening is descriptive, attempting to render the painting through verbal means. From the very beginning, the reader is presented with Ashbery's version of Parmigianino's painting. The translation of a visual image into verbal description is exactly what O'Hara overturns in his poetry:

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[13] John Ashbery, Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1977), p.68.

I look
at you and I would rather look at you than all the
portraits in the world
except possibly for the Polish Rider occasionally and
anyway it's in the Frick
which thank heavens you haven't gone to yet so we can
go together the first time

(CP p.360)

For O'Hara, Rembrandt's work is not described beyond its title, leaving the actual painting undiluted through verbal description. His poetry moves away from attempting to describe paintings, and so moves away from poems such as Ashbery's, quoted here. Ashbery's poem was written in the decade following O'Hara's death, and, stylistically is very different: a long poem playing with ideas of 'the ambiguities of pose and perspective...the act of framing...self-portrayal…[and] self-reflection' (SL p.157).

Ward's reading suggests that the poem uses the painting as a focus for metaphysical debate, and the painting has to be re-produced by Ashbery through passages of description. Yet this very act of description places Ashbery's poetry on painting within the mode of ekphrastic poetry that O'Hara over-reaches, demonstrating that O'Hara's ekphrastic poetry is innovative and unique. Art is more than merely a shared subject and style between the poets grouped together as the New York School.

It is outside the scope of this work to chart a comprehensive study of the ways in which the poets of the New York School diverge in their poetry on art. This

study, however gives a starting point by establishing how O'Hara's poetry is not confined to comparisons with others purely by a painterly style. The work presented here provides the starting point for a new interpretation of the relationship of the poets and painters in mid-century New York.

The work in this thesis demonstrates how O'Hara allows the two arts of poetry and painting space within one textual framework. The function of the visual arts in his poems thus points to the issue of production and reproduction of the artwork. From the research presented here, the way is now open for further study, to determine whether O'Hara's concerns address such contemporary considerations as Jean Baudrillard's theory of 'hyperreality',[14] - 'the meticulous reduplication of the real...through another reproductive medium'.[15] Baudrillard suggests 'art has entered its own indefinite reproduction',[16] and that the definition of reality is now based on its ability to become represented and reproduced.

Is O'Hara's art poetry relevant to theories of postmodernism in general? Does he, for example, anticipate Lyotard's theory of postmodernism, which 'would be that which...searches for new presentations..in order to impart

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[14] Jean Baudrillard, 'The Structural Law of Value and the Order of Simulacra' trans. Charles Levin, in The Structural Allegory: Reconstructive Encounters with the New French Thought, Theory and History of Literature, Vol.11, ed. John Fekete, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 54-73, p.69.

[15] Jean Baudrillard, 'The Structural Law of Value and the Order of Simulacra', p.70.

[16] Jean Baudrillard, 'The Structural Law of Value and the Order of Simulacra', p.72.

a stronger sense of the unpresentable.'[17]? This study gives a thorough reading of O'Hara's poetry on paintings which will enable such questions to be addressed. It will also allow for further research on the influence of O'Hara's art poetry on subsequent ekphrastic poetry, and his impact on that genre.

III
ELEGY

The discussion of death and temporality in O'Hara's poetry in this thesis, provides an assessment of how and where the topic stands in his work. In the time since his own death, critics have hinted at a sense of darkness in O'Hara's work, yet it is only recently that Ward has suggested its placing as 'crucial'[18] to his poetics. In this thesis, the work has attempted, in the light of Ward's claims, to provide an accurate account of the subject in his poetry.

The research reveals how O'Hara muddies the definitions of life and death, questioning the nature of the words and their inherent meanings. The examination of some recent definitions of elegy, read alongside O'Hara's work, help to open it up, to demonstrate the poetry's relation to the genre and assess whether O'Hara's work offers anything to the contemporary reader on the subject of death. The work here suggests that elegy has been

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[17] Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, p.81.

[18] Geoff Ward, ' "Why it's right there in the proces verbal": The New York School of Poets', p.276.

broadly defined as a meditative reflection on the self-definition of the poet in the face of mortality, and leads to a demonstration of O'Hara's attempt to express selfhood, in the light of his treatment of death.

In consequence, a reading of O'Hara's definition of self is provided, based on his use of life and death within the poetry. Death and identity become bound in a definition of each other within the poetry, and the thesis argues that death is less important as a metaphysical concern in his work, than its use linguistically. O'Hara brings into play the various modes of language associated with death, and tries on all its various meanings and innuendoes to show how the word is not primarily a direct route to a major metaphysical truth, but a linguistic device which unleashes varied meanings and associations.

The focus on death's function as a word is significant for a contemporary reading of his poetry, obliquely echoing the principles of Derrida's differance, with its combination of difference and deferral of meaning. In this way O'Hara avoids writing poetry about death as a cathartic exercise.

Yet this does not mean that he cannot write elegies which are profoundly touching. His elegy for Billie Holiday, 'The Day Lady Died'(CP p.325), is effective by its very lack of high rhetoric and lament. This is an elegy tapping into the exact sensibilities of the contemporary age: 'The Day Lady Died' could almost be written in response to Fredric Jameson's belief that the decentring of

self may mean a shift of emphasis from the expression of personal emotion, but does not necessarily signal the end of feeling generated by the text, through literature:

> As for expression and feelings or emotions, the liberation, in contemporary society, from the older anomie of the centred subject may also mean not just a liberation from anxiety, but a liberation from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling. This is not to say that the cultural products of the postmodern era are utterly devoid of feeling, but rather that such feelings - which it may now be better and more accurate to call 'intensities' - are now free-floating and impersonal.[19]

In 'The Day Lady Died', O'Hara's personal feelings are not discussed, and are not the source of reflection. Instead, the effect is of an 'intensity' of emotion which is literally part of the poem's make-up, part of its raw data. The main body of the poem focuses on the trivia of the day, and the discovery of the singer's death comes as part of that:

> then I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue
> and the tobacconist in the Ziegfield Theatre and
> casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
> of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it
>
> and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
> leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
> while she whispered a song along the keyboard
> to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing

Death is not even mentioned in the body of the poem - it is

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[19] Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, New Left Review, 146, (July/August, 1984), 53-92, p.64.

the title which lets us know the poem involves death - and it is only in the extended line break that death settles on the poem. Even then, the poem does not dwell on death, there are only four lines left, and it ends with the word 'breathing'. Death here is a shocking event in its intrusion into a day full of trivia, and yet it also becomes part of the myriad of everyday events which makes up that day - 'New York a Friday / three days after Bastille day'.

For O'Hara the definition of death is hand-in-hand with that of life, and O'Hara's poetry provides an examination of death and life as part of each other's properties. His poems are elegiac in examining language's attempt to reveal self in the face of death, and yet overthrow the boundaries of elegy in demonstrating that it cannot be done. The present assessment of O'Hara's placing of death in his poetry opens the way for further research into O'Hara's treatment of temporality. It demonstrates that death is one of the major topics in O'Hara's poetry. However, research is now needed to assess whether the trend in poetry dealing with death, has been influenced by O'Hara.

Through a close critical account of the themes of the city, art and death, this thesis has secured for O'Hara further evidence that he is not merely a marginal poet, only accessible and relevant to other poets. Rather, it places him as a major innovator - an important contributor to twentieth-century literature - and a major poet.

O'Hara's poetry is pertinent to the concerns of today's reader. It stands on the threshold between individualism, and the fragmentation of self and language embodied by the Language Poets, and offers a body of work which provides a reading of life at once contemporary and accessible.

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work of the Language Poets. O'Hara's city writing is relevant for today's readers and writers, as, in this era of mass urbanisation, much literature must aspire to the genre, and address the concerns of urban life.

The research in this thesis now leaves the way open for a thorough evaluation of O'Hara's influence in writing the city on later generations of writers, and to ask whether O'Hara's city poetry has had impact on poetry other than American. Is there now a city writing which is not just American? Does O'Hara's poetry firmly root city writing in the USA, anchoring the modern city, exemplified by New York, as the only possible touchstone for urban life, and thus leaving behind forever Baudelaire's Paris and Eliot's London, as archaic and irrelevant for contemporary reading of urban life?

II

ART

The results of the present research into O'Hara's utilisation of the visual arts in his poetry, provides a new and different reading of the function of art in his work. Prior to this research, O'Hara's poems were predominantly read as 'verbal equivalencies' (Crossing p.31) of abstract expressionist paintings, and as documentary versions of the social life of the artists of the times. This thesis undermines the importance and validity of those readings of O'Hara's poetry. The work here suggests that his innovations in addressing the