

## ORNATE AND EXPLOSIVE GRIEF

A COMPARATIVE COMMENTARY ON FRANK O'HARA'S  
"IN MEMORY OF MY FEELINGS" AND "TO HELL WITH  
IT", INCORPORATING A SUBSTANTIAL GLOSS ON THE  
SERPENT IN THE POETRY OF PAUL VALÉRY, AND A  
THEORETICAL EXCURSUS ON ORNATE POETICS.

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*Abstract:* Frank O'Hara's "In Memory of My Feelings" and "To Hell with It" are read consecutively to make a comparative point about the lessons of the first poem being taken up in the challenges of the second. Essays on the influence of Paul Goodman's theory of grief and anger and Byron's ecstatic elegy provide a theoretical groundwork for a close, comparative reading of the serpent in the poetry of Paul Valéry and O'Hara. An excursus on the ornate and ornamental offers a broader theoretical account for my readings. A commentary on "To Hell with It" is divided into close readings and digressions on the work of Mayakovsky, Shelley, Rimbaud, and the Tutivillus.



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The members of the dead ought to be dead even to the fingernails, and the living ought to be alive in every part. A body is said to be alive when of its own accord it has certain movements. It is called dead when the members may no longer carry out the functions of life, that is, movement and sentiment. Then the painter who wishes to express life in things will make every part in movement. But of all the movements that are charming and graceful, those movements are most graceful and most lively which move upwards toward the air.

– Leon Battista Alberti, on grace

Great is the force of memory, O Lord, I know not what, to be amazed at, profound, and of infinite multiplicity. And yet it is my mind: it is myself. What, then, am I, my God? What is my nature? Ever-changing, with many different forms, is life, and exuberantly limitless. Observe! in the wide plains of my memory and in its innumerable caverns and hollows filled beyond reckoning with varieties of countless things [*innumerabilium rerum generibus*]; either through images [*per imagines*], as of all material things [*omnium corporum*]; or directly [*per praesentiam*], as are basic skills and know-how [*artrium*]; or by means of I know not what notions or notations [...], as are emotions [*affectionum animi*]; for the memory retains them even while the mind does not experience them, although whatever is in the memory must also be in the mind. Through all these I range, and freely move from this to that, digging into them as far as I can, and never finishing. Such is the energy of memory, such the life-energy in human beings living mortally!

– Augustine, *Confessions*

No discipline is more *sentimental* than the one that represses sentiments. And who knows, perhaps what is most abject in us comes from the pleasure of being loved, that is, the refusal of the desire to love?

– Guy Hocquenghem, *The Screwball Asses*

Dehumanizing myself is my own most fundamental tendency

– Jean Genet, *Our Lady of the Flowers*

Resolve me of all ambiguities

– Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*

What follows is a comparative commentary on two poems by Frank O'Hara, reading in depth though by no means solely the relations between their titles and their finales. These poems are "In Memory of My Feelings" and "To Hell with It".

The manuscript of "In Memory of My Feelings" is dated June 27-July 1, 1956, with a manuscript dated June 17, 1955 containing an early version of part of section 4.<sup>1</sup> It was first published in *Evergreen Review* 2.6 (1958) and reprinted, influentially, in Donald Allen's *New American Poetry: 1945-1960*.<sup>2</sup> The following commentary understands "In Memory" to make strategic use of an elegiac mode to turn away from the accretion of memories and the feelings trapped therein on behalf of the compulsions and freedoms of new life; this commentary chooses to write a comparison with "To Hell With It" because the formal and emotional resolutions of "In Memory" are subsequently challenged by the insufferable feelings of grief for others, feelings that are less disposed to be aestheticized or, in the (bathetically) iconoclastic mode of "In Memory of My Feelings" to be de-aestheticized .

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<sup>1</sup> Frank O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), 538; hereafter abbreviated *CP* and cited parenthetically with page number. My thanks to Sara Crangle, Robin Purves, Keston Sutherland, Peter Manson and Ryan Dobran for their comments on and edits of this essay during its long gestation.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Allen, ed. *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 244-250.

The manuscript of “To Hell with It” is, according to Allen’s edition of O’Hara’s *Collected Poems*, dated July 13, 1957 (MS x96), just over a year after “In Memory”, though it is the alternative manuscript (MS x325) marked “(original restored),” printed in *Collected Poems* to which I will refer. The restored material includes both the “MOCK POEM”, “LITTLE ELEGY”, the subtitle “ENVOI” which precedes “Wind, you’ll have a terrible time / smothering my clarity”, and brilliant final line (which may or may not properly belong to the envoi), “And mean it.” The poem was first published in *Yügen* 4 (1959), and was reprinted in *The New American Poetry*. The line “It thinks *I’m* mysterious!” is placed in parentheses in Allen’s anthology.<sup>3</sup> Reprints include *Big Table* 1.4 (Spring 1960), and *Grist* 9 (1966) (in an alternative arrangement to that of the *Collected*). The indented section “LITTLE ELEGY” is the second of four of the “Four Little Elegies” published under that title in the *Collected Poems* (248-252 (248)), the first and third of which are explicitly dedicated to James Dean, whose death on 30<sup>th</sup> September 1955 in a car accident foreshadows that of the less famous screen-actor Gregory Lafayette, one of the two (three if we include Dean) subjects of “To Hell With It” (the second being V.R. “Bunny” Lang). The second “little” elegy is dated October 31, 1955, so preceding the deaths of Lafayette and Lang. Gregory Lafayette and his wife Judy Tyler were killed in a car crash on July 3<sup>rd</sup> 1957. Both were actors, and were killed after shooting Elvis Presley’s *Jailhouse Rock*. Lang died aged 32 on July 29, 1956 from what was then called Hodgkin’s disease, and is now called Hodgkin’s lymphoma.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Allen, *The New American Poetry*, 251-2.

<sup>4</sup> Supplementing the poetical elegies for Lang we also have two prose reflections. “V.R. Lang: A Memoir” includes O’Hara’s delighted first impressions of Lang: “She was sitting in a corner sulking and biting her lower lip – long blonde hair, brown eyes, Roman-striped skirt. As if it were a movie, she was glamorous and aloof.” See Frank O’Hara, *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, ed. Donald Allen (Bolinas, CA: Grey Fox Press, 1975), 86. More devastating is “A Personal Preface”, moments of which will resonate for those who know O’Hara’s poems. For example, the phone call from the beyond may bring to mind “Poem: Instant coffee with slightly sour cream” (*CP*, 244-5), “Personism: A Manifesto” (*CP*, 498-9).

I also have a black dunce-cap, decorated with silver bells. She gave it to me to wear when I wrote. “It will keep you relaxed,”

This period of O'Hara's writing is riddled with elegies (even more so than is typical of O'Hara's elegy-strewn oeuvre), of which I will note a few to begin, in order to demonstrate in what ways O'Hara is practicing the elegiac mode, and to draw attention to a few features we will meet again in our two key poems.

### 1. PREAMBLE: FRANK O'HARA'S ELEGIES

Several poems are dedicated to James Dean: "For James Dean" (*CP*, 228), "Thinking of James Dean" (*CP*, 230-1), as well as the aforementioned "Four Little Elegies".<sup>5</sup>

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she said, "free from distractions. It will keep away SPOOKS!"  
When Bunny was your friend, she was not only a dear friend,  
she was also the guardian of that friendship.[...]

It is now five years since she died; it seems a moment, it seems it didn't happen at all. She is calling us long distance in these poems, telling us how it is with her, how bright things can be, how terrible things are. (Frank O'Hara, *Standing Still*, 88)

O'Hara's refusal to have worked through grief above is also evident in "The 'Unfinished' *In memory of Bunny Lang*" (*CP*, 317-19), dated January 27, 1959 (*CP* 543). O'Hara, in a letter to Larry Osgood, writes: "Bunny and I often discussed the thing about 'finished' and 'unfinished' poems, to the effect that we both felt that the poem sometimes finished itself before we realized it or before we wanted it to" (quoted in Brad Gooch, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 286). Allen notes the canceled earlier title: "A short story in the Only Form I can Find" (*CP*, 543). Lang died within weeks of O'Hara composing "In Memory of My Feelings" so the elegiac "In Memory" was, significantly, unfinished. Brad Gooch describes how grief-stricken O'Hara remained for Lang: "Ten years later he still kept a photograph of her next to his typewriter on his writing desk. The poet Bill Berkson recalls an evening in the early sixties when 'Frank cried like crazy on his Ninth Street bed about Bunny Lang.... I was scared for him. I'd never seen anyone act like that.'" (Gooch, *City Poet*, 285). O'Hara's "To Violet Lang", *Poems Retrieved* ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: Grey Fox, 1996), 194, is dated March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1959, and is a remarkably simple address to "My darling" offering his life in exchange for hers, in which the line "it would have been no sacrifice" suggests both the strength of his love for Lang, and the depressive side of O'Hara that makes itself apparent not infrequently.

<sup>5</sup> Joe LeSueur clarifies O'Hara's movements around the composition of "To an Actor Who Died" (*CP*, 226-7) to provide evidence the poem is not

“For James Dean”, dated October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1955, and so composed within a week of Dean’s death, has the title in manuscript “Elegy for James Dean” (*CP*, 536). It was published in *Poetry* in March of 1956, and later in *Meditations in an Emergency* (1957) and *The New American Poetry* (1960). Brad Gooch documents the frisson of disagreement around its publication in *Poetry*.<sup>6</sup> It opens with a riff on Dean as the rebel without a cause, O’Hara entreating his hosts, the gods, as a poetical “ambassador”:

    Welcome me, if you will,  
     as the ambassador of a hatred  
     who knows its cause  
     and does not envy you your whim  
     of ending him. (*CP*, 228)

This elegy is a praise poem, “begging” the “gods” for the peace of the “young actor” (*CP*, 228). “To Hell with It” will repeat the following hubristic knock-down carried out by the wind or air:

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dedicated to Dean. See Joe LeSueur, *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O’Hara* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 63. Its tone and pacing do not significantly evoke the style of Dean. On the Dean poems more generally see LeSueur, 63-9.

<sup>6</sup> Gooch quotes from a letter of O’Hara’s to Fairfield Porter, distinguishing his work from that of John Ashbery, via *East of Eden*. I’ve italicized the self-description which echoes perfectly the tone of “For James Dean”.

“I think one of the things about *East of Eden* is that I am very materialistic and John is very spiritual, in our work especially,” O’Hara wrote, casting himself with reverse vanity as the James Dean of poetry. “John’s work is full of dreams and a kind of moral excellence and kind sentiments. Mine is full of objects for their own sake, *spleen and ironically intimate observation which may be truthfulness (in the lyrical sense) but is more likely to be egotistical cynicism masquerading as honesty*. I’m sorry if you’re bored by this, but sometimes I think that writing a poem is such a moral crisis I get completely sick of the whole situation. Where Kenneth and Jimmy produce art, for instance, I often feel I just produce the by-product of exhibitionism. Well, chacun à son mauvais goût!” (Gooch, *City Poet*, 268).

He has banged into your wall  
of air, your hubris, racing  
towards your heights and you  
have cut him from your table  
which is built, how unfairly  
for us! not on trees, but on clouds. (*CP*, 228)

It will also repeat the suppression of the role of mothers, here in “and to love the envy / of the dreary, smudged mouthers”, and later in “you’ll have a terrible time / smothering my clarity” (*CP*, 276). The poem makes great, furious use of negative affect: “ambassador of hatred” (though “not envy”), “dirty feet and head”, “filth”, “to be true to a city / of rats”. O’Hara refers to his:

example nearer the sirens’ speech,  
a spirit eager for the punishment  
which is your only recognition. (*CP*, 228)

There’s a martyrish quality which meets a masochistic energy to the hero inciting his punishment (“smoldering quietly in the perception / of hopelessness and scandal”) that recalls a queering of Jesus (O’Hara will have to clean his own “dirty feet”). Years later in *Hollywood Babylon II*, Kenneth Anger revealed that Dean was nicknamed the “Human Ashtray” for his sadomasochistic predilection for having cigarettes stubbed out on his skin.<sup>7</sup> There’s an allusion to Dean’s homosexuality, perhaps, as a recovery of scorn, in “I speak as one whose filth / is like his own”. It’s impossible from this vantage to know quite what O’Hara would have known of Dean’s life, but clearly the “smoldering” actor transforms the “toilets / of a great railway terminal” into a pleasurable filth. Certainly O’Hara and friends seem more clued in than those documented in the timeline DeAngelis provides.

The way Dean’s persona lends grace to the poem is wonderful to behold, though it is not set up as a simple transference of properties; the poem is simply drenched in the style of its apostrophised star, the “hubris”, the “arcane dejection”, the “smoldering” (*CP*, 228), the “final impertinence” (*CP*, 229). Eyes

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in Michael DeAngelis, *Gay Fandom and Crossover Stardom: James Dean, Mel Gibson, and Keanu Reeves* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 112.

and eyelids dominate the poem from the “taciturn power to close my lids / in tears, and my loins move yet” (*CP*, 229) through to the “army of anguishes” summoned up by Dean in the “million hooting blood vessels / on the eyes and in the ears / at that instant before death.” (*CP*, 229) O’Hara’s choice of body-part to detail is right; going back through images of Dean, the look is consistently hooded, peering out from the “fat eyelid”, as though light itself was painful to behold. The poem’s attack on the gods who “withhold” their light concludes with an address in which the voice of the poet consciously takes on the voice of its hero, or at least introduces a confusion of projections between “voice”, “I”, and “your”:

Men cry from the grave while they still love  
and now I am this dead man’s voice,  
stammering, a little in the earth.  
I take up  
the nourishment of his pale green eyes,  
out of which I shall prevent  
flowers from growing, your flowers. (*CP*, 230)

The style of the poem is held in its dynamic between envious gods, the *sprezzatura* of Dean’s life (its “pride and speed”), and the “unctuous starers”, these “navel-suckers” who gather round his death; their luxuriating in grief is anathema to the kinds of elegy O’Hara determines are needed.

A less successful evocation (to my mind) of Dean’s “cynicism masquerading as honesty” is “Thinking of James Dean”, written a few days later on October 11<sup>th</sup>. It offers a vision of the sea which is “dark” and, bathetically, “smells of fish” latent beneath the “silver surface”, presumably the “silver surface” which is also the silver screen. A suicidal fantasy of “simulated death” on the beach, pounded by the “crushing waves” (*CP*, 230) finishes with a scratched-out line in the sand: “A leaving word in the sand, odor of tides: his name.” (*CP*, 231) The name scratched into the sand, James Dean, is the acrostic then recounted in the first of the “Four Little Elegies”, the first three of which were composed between October 6<sup>th</sup> 1955 and October 31<sup>st</sup> 1955, and the last between February and June 1956. The third, subtitled “Obit Dean, September 30, 1955” introduces Dean to his heavenly host, Carole Lombard (who died in a plane crash). The poem is notable for its journalistic detail, “his Porsche Spyder sportscar / near Paso

Robles on his way / to Salinas for a race”, presumably details all taken from a real obituary or newspaper column. The tone continues its reportage, remarking about *East of Eden* (and with only the “us” nudging its way in to demonstrate affiliation): “In the first of these he rocketed / to stardom, playing himself and us / “a brooding, inarticulate adolescence” (*CP*, 249).

Beyond Dean “Poem (And tomorrow morning)” (dated April 17<sup>th</sup>, 1956, (*CP*, 244)) includes notice of the burial of “my oldest aunt”. It’s epigraphic opening refers to a tornado that drove through Birmingham, Alabama, killing 25 people in April 1956, and remains pregnantly silent on the racial politics of that time and place.<sup>8</sup> The indented second stanza includes an attempt to deflect the grief-stricken from attending the poet’s own funeral:

When I die, don’t come, I wouldn’t want a leaf  
to turn away from the sun – it loves it there.

At first glance this appears casual yet overwrought, but what starts out to be a jaunt ends down the line in impeccably prosaic sincerity, “it loves it there.” We’re charged with happiness:

There’s nothing so spiritual about being happy  
but you can’t miss a day of it, because it doesn’t last.

This is one of O’Hara’s revisions of modernist crisis, the loss of metaphysical philosophy fostering happiness as much as anguish. Such convictions about the importance of attention, and the preference for happiness over spirituality are key to O’Hara’s psychology.

“A Step Away From Them” (dated August 16, 1956 (*CP*, 538)) follows immediately after, and arguably deserves to be read as enabled by the decision-making finale to “In Memory of My Feelings”. “A Step Away From Them” includes in its elegy V.R. “Bunny” Lang, John Latouche and Jackson Pollock. Lang died on

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<sup>8</sup> See the *Tornado History Project*, accessed 10<sup>th</sup> May, 2012, <http://www.tornadohistoryproject.com/tornado/1956/table>

July 29, 1956, Latouche of a heart attack on August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1956 at the age of 41, and Pollock on August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1956 at 44.<sup>9</sup>

The poem includes one of the finest examples of O’Hara’s ability to switch between the invocation of present experience (“Everything suddenly honks: it is 12.40 of / a Thursday”) and the syncopation with loss which is its articulation (“A Step Away from Them”). Too frequently the elegiac break is overlooked in the cult of spontaneity of O’Hara’s readers. Its infolding of the elegiac mode as the coherent articulation of experience can be seen in the relation of one of my favourite lines of O’Hara’s (partly because it is ascribed as a sentiment to a friend), “Neon in daylight is a / great pleasure, as Edwin Denby would write”, to the question at the core of them poem: “But is the / earth as full as life was full, of them?” If “neon in daylight” (or, indeed, “light bulbs in daylight”) is an image of eager repletion, a property of which is to have been found in Bunny, Latouche and Pollock, then it’s only that hateful comma (“was full, of them”) which syncopates with absence, the “step away from them”. From the experiments with the “little” elegies that precede “A Step” we can extrapolate a modesty, a smallness, as one of O’Hara’s techniques in the non-heroic elegiac mode, and that comma is a mark of such a slightness.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

“In Memory of My Feelings” marks a crucial turning point for O’Hara; it is an ecstatic elegy for past feeling, an anti-memorializing poem designed to rid its speaker of certain past lives and the assumptions of the empire, both emotional and politically real, to which those selves live in thrall. As an elegy for deadening nostalgia, it is also an elegy for influence, a farewell to a suite of poetic precursors and the ready commitment to new, less egocentric or self-aggrandising poems. The second poem, “To Hell with It”, is, rather than an elegy for sentiment, a “real” elegy, that is an elegy for real people, loved friends of the poet who died young and in whose memory O’Hara refused to settle into calm reflection.

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<sup>9</sup> One of O’Hara’s greatest poems was originally titled “Ode at the Grave of Jackson Pollock”, and eventually became “Ode on Causality”. Allen dates the manuscript between May 21<sup>st</sup> and July 8<sup>th</sup> 1958 (*CP*, 542).

I am intrigued by a comparative gloss of these two poems, in particular their finales, since they both act decisively. This significant similarity is turned, however, toward opposite ends: the ambiguity of symbolic logic at the close of “In Memory” paradoxically increases the swiftness of its murderous action, whereas the hardened anger of “To Hell With It” utilises the open-ended ambiguity of “it” to forcefully close down digressive or playful connotations. The serpent at the end of “In Memory” and the “it” at the end of “To Hell with It” are comparable. They share a conviction, but their elegiac forces are otherwise opposed, one to elegy’s ground-razing to inspire the new growth of new feelings, the other a terminated elegy, refusing its succours, relying on the speciousness of “it” to act with sharp emotional candour: as the poem concludes, “And mean it”. The finale of “In Memory” is about satisfaction, but it is not about a satisfaction born of coherent completion, the weighing up and fulfilment of a life of self-knowledge; its satisfaction is stolen by an act of murderous surprise in a movement that exceeds sensible comprehension. The candour of the dynamic between title, “To Hell with It,” and close, “And mean it”, is ironic, in that the under-referenced “it” is meant with such force by the determination to say it, or have it be said with force. Its irony is in this way sacrificed to its compelled enunciation. It empties out what it spews forth.

What follows is an extended commentary, with a number of essayistic sections. Each section, to a greater or lesser extent, can stand alone, so the reader is encouraged to skip ahead if they find their patience waning. It would of course be helpful if the reader could have copies of the two poems within sight.

### 3. COMMENTARY: “IN MEMORY OF MY FEELINGS”

#### I. IN MEMORIAM “IN MEMORY OF MY FEELINGS”

This is my third attempt to reach a satisfactory gloss of O’Hara’s “In Memory of My Feelings”, and in particular the final section, section five, of the poem, a third attempt which reminds me of the term “essay” in the tradition of Montaigne, that of an

attempt.<sup>10</sup> This article, then, plays the essay against the gloss; it admits dissatisfaction with the notion of recovering the references or locus of ideas sufficient to gloss a poem; it takes the gloss and wonders how to describe that which exceeds description, without mythologizing that excess (how description might correspond to an aesthetics of representation, critiqued in what follows by various reflections on evocation); and it finds essayistic theses persist when attempting to hold the object of comprehension steady in commentary, most obviously with the material here on Paul Goodman and on the ornate or ornamental, the first because its insights tally with something of the ethos of O’Hara, the second because it describes how the various incidents of a poem are held in a multiplicitous but persistent form. My critical practice more generally (such as it is), tends to place its emphasis on close reading, if only (though not only) because everything else about the research process tends to be unforgivably digressive and allusive; if the scenery is going to shift so far, the spotlight better stay still. Whilst mindful of *Glossator’s* charge to maintain the integrity of the object under consideration, these poems speak to me as replies to other poems, whether earlier poems by O’Hara, or poems by others, and as poems to and about love and death, so their integrity (Latin *integritatem* meaning wholeness) is belied by their lack of wholeness in terms of both content (the vulgarity of love, the loss of a loved one), and form (the poem as reply). They do, however, speak with an alternative kind of integrity held in their generosity beyond their borders, and a formal openness to the accidents and emergencies of a sociable life.

I will recap just a couple of conclusions from previous essays which might helpfully be understood to underpin this current gloss.<sup>11</sup> With Geoff Ward I understand this poem to be (at least in part) an elegy for O’Hara’s formative influences, “a meditation on its poetic begetters, [it] mourns its own emancipation from the parent-texts it must ritually slay with the killing touch of parody or

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<sup>10</sup> Montaigne’s formal development of the essay owes much to his own consideration of memory. See Michel Beaujour, *Poetics of the Literary Self-Portrait* (New York: New York University Press, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Sam Ladkin, “‘And now it is the serpent’s turn’: The Rhetoric of the *Figura Serpentina* in Frank O’Hara’s ‘In Memory of My Feelings,’” (unpublished), and “Frank O’Hara’s Ecstatic Elegy: ‘In Memory of My Feelings’ In Memory Wallace Stevens,” *Blackbox Manifold* 10 (2013), accessed 1<sup>st</sup> November, 2013, <http://www.manifold.group.shef.ac.uk/>.

irony”, though presenting it as an Oedipal “anxiety of influence” overstates a neurotic sensibility largely absent from O’Hara’s make-up, and the genuine reflection on his own life and that of his family (for example the death of his great aunt, even of his father who died when O’Hara was studying at Harvard).<sup>12</sup>

More or less against Nick Selby, Alan Feldman and Marjorie Perloff, and closer in spirit to that of Andrew Epstein, I contest interpretations that save a real, essential or natural self in the finale of the poem.<sup>13</sup> The serpent is saved, and it is not a singular,

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<sup>12</sup> Geoff Ward, *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1993), 75. Lytle Shaw makes the excellent point that limitations must be made on the anxiety of influence because of O’Hara’s “fundamental refusal to acknowledge paternity itself” on behalf of a more “experimental model of affinity” and kinship. See Lytle Shaw, *The Poetics of Coterie* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2006), 50.

<sup>13</sup> Marjorie Perloff: “The integrity of the self—this time, a ‘real’ or natural self—is preserved, but only at a very high cost” in “Watchman, Spy, and Dead Man: Johns, O’Hara, Cage and the ‘Aesthetic of Indifference,’” *Modernism / Modernity* 8.2 (2001): 213. Nick Selby describes the “killing of the serpent in the last line”, when it is the serpent who is saved. See Selby, “Memory Pieces: Collage, Memorial and the Poetics of Intimacy in Joe Brainard, Jasper Johns and Frank O’Hara,” in *Frank O’Hara Now: New Essays on the New York Poet*, ed. Robert Hampson and Will Montgomery (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 246. Alan Feldman, too, considers art making to be an act of “rescue” of the “essential self of the poet” in his *Frank O’Hara* (Boston: Twayne, 1979): “In Memory of My Feelings” “describes each new feeling giving rise to a new self. These however are eventually rejected. The essential self is constantly sloughing off any new identity as it emerges in order to escape from the trap of self-definition” (91). Feldman’s position is more nuanced than this suggests, however: “Yet from the midst of the poet’s many selves a vision of an essential self emerges – a self that is always *becoming* but never is content to be simply what it is, a self that constantly asserts “I am *not* what I am,” and is determined to escape beyond the boundaries of a fixed personality” (92). Shaw erroneously refers to the “murdered serpent of the final section”, but otherwise offers an important reflection on the sociable turning-out of the self: “the poem is metacommunal in the sense that it explores the extent to which the self of an experience is also the self of one or several collectivities that frame that experience, conditioning its meaning. These collectivities are not simply present groups but pasts out of which one emerges” (89). Shaw is helpful, too, on the ways in which “the multiple subjective selves and worlds of experience they make possible must be collapsed into at least temporary figures” (90).

essential self. Epstein calls it “one of the richest examples of O’Hara’s pragmatist conception of the self; it is also one of the most important and influential postwar American poems, in part because its rigorous dismantling of coherent human identity anticipates the obsession in postmodernist thought with the decentring and unmasking of the “essential” human self.[...]”<sup>14</sup>

The other significant conclusion necessary to what follows relates to the interpretation of Apollo and the Pythian serpent. We would typically expect the defeat of the serpent at the hands of Apollo, and the capacity for prophecy thus engendered by the poet to be triumphs. O’Hara, however, favours saving the serpent from the grasp of the poet Apollo, the Orphic god who could promise safety and eternal life and wished for the visionary powers in the serpent’s protection. This salvation of the serpent is precisely the refusal of visionary temporality on behalf of immediacy. Not only is it the “serpent’s turn” in the argument of the poem, but the “serpent’s turn” is itself a figure of “now” – now *is* the serpent’s turn. What does the serpent turn between? The “I” is the “opposite of visionary”, which is precisely the elegiac. Apollo, in murdering Python, becomes the prophet-poet. Because the serpent is also the prophecy of death, we can judge the “turn” to be the force of the contradiction between prophecy and elegy, the death behind and the death ahead. The turn of the serpent, however, is the resistant figure of mobility, of charming quickness and attention.

If both “In Memory of My Feelings” and “To Hell with It” are substantially elegies, what motivates them to avoid conventional clichés of the heroic elegy?

### 3.II. THE INHIBITION OF GRIEF: PAUL GOODMAN

In *Poetics of Coterie*, Lytle Shaw rightly emphasises the following quotation from Paul Goodman’s “Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950”, by using it as the epigraph to the chapter on “In Memory”.

The essential [task of the] present-day advance-guard is the physical reestablishment of community. This is to solve the crisis of alienation in the simple way: the

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<sup>14</sup> Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 99-100.

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*.<sup>15</sup>

Terence Diggory uses Goodman's phrase "intimate community", from the same essay, to describe the New York School as an avant-garde, though diverges from its efficacy by comparison with Jean-Luc Nancy's theory of the "inoperative community".<sup>16</sup>

It is another piece by Goodman, however, that evidentially inspires "In Memory of My Feelings", and that is the 1950 essay, "On the intellectual inhibition of explosive grief and anger".<sup>17</sup> Goodman describes a split between subject and feelings, between the "I" who feels and the feelings themselves. He critiques the "intellectual", those "who have appetites, who show initiative in approaching and possessing their objects and are therefore subject to frustration and loss, but who cannot give way to anger and grief because they know too much".<sup>18</sup> My thesis in what follows is that "In Memory of My Feelings" is an elegy both personal and intellectual written to gather sufficient momentum from anger and grief to live anew, to feel refreshed.<sup>19</sup> O'Hara seeks to kill off the

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<sup>15</sup> See Goodman's "Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950," *The Kenyon Review* 13.3 (1951): 357-380; cited in Shaw, *Poetics of Coterie*, 81. On Goodman see Shaw, 81-86.

<sup>16</sup> Terence Diggory, "Community 'Intimate' or 'Inoperative': New York School Poets and Politics from Paul Goodman to Jean-Luc Nancy," in *The Scene of My Selves: New Work on New York School Poets*, ed. Terence Diggory and Stephen Paul Miller (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 2001), 17.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Goodman, "On the intellectual inhibition of explosive grief and anger," *Utopian Essays and Practical Proposals* (New York: Random House, 1962), 93-109. First published *Complex* (Spring 1950).

<sup>18</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 96. When Goodman writes "intellectual and sensitive persons" (94), I'm uncertain whether this includes a critique of effeminacy, which would betray a complex support for varieties of queer sensibility.

<sup>19</sup> My reference here is to O'Hara's "Personism: A Manifesto": "I'm not saying that I don't have practically the most lofty ideas of anyone writing today, but what difference does that make? They're just ideas. The only good thing about it is that when I get lofty enough I've stopped thinking and that's when refreshment arrives." (*CP*, 498)

frustrations and inhibitions of his past life, recollections of family and war, in order to experience a more satisfying, if deeply pained, anger and grief. We will see how “To Hell with It” acts out the explosive anger of O’Hara’s grief.

The title, “In Memory of my Feelings”, plays off two temporalities of elegy. On the one hand it writes in the present an elegy for past feelings, the feelings that exist in memories. On the other, it takes its feelings as presentness, and commits them to the past, to make of them memories. The two are, of course, related, present feeling being too closely in thrall to the accretions of the past for comfort. But it is the latter which approaches Goodman’s demand for conviction, the conviction announced in the close of the poem, “the conviction that there is a real, present object of anger and grief”.<sup>20</sup>

It is the self that must relent. The self, its theory and picture of itself and its habitual reasonableness, is the chief constraining force. As we say, “It takes two people to make a bore,” and oneself is always one of them. Typical standards of the relentless self are: the need to be always right; to be consistent; unwillingness to be a fool; satisfaction with the situation as it is when it is well enough. The bother is that these standards are irrefutable. Our rationalizations are usually true.<sup>21</sup>

Goodman describes the one who has been in love, but loses love, and at once sees the loss as inevitable, “inevitable in the character of the beloved and in his own character”, writing:

Nevertheless he feels he is deprived and he is miserable. Being miserable, he characteristically draws back from the feeling of loss and explains it, and he lets his grief dribble away. He is ennobled by understanding. He is now wiser still. The experience was worth it. But he is not purged, and he is henceforth less open to love. He has not mourned enough to be able to live again.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 94.

<sup>21</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 103-4.

<sup>22</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 97.

“In Memory” portrays such a tricky relationship between mourning (both real deaths and past, multiplicitous lives) and the risks of self-knowledge. In the climactic passage (*auxesis*) of the poem the reification of self-knowledge is arguably resisted as cancerous statuary accreting within the body. The poem taunts by paralleling epic and personal ruins, but its decisiveness is on behalf of the farewell, of the purging ready to be, as Goodman describes, “open to love[...] able to live again”.<sup>23</sup> What, for Goodman, is the technology of such resistance to a restrictive wisdom? Surprise: “We could say that what is lacking is *surprise*. If he were surprised, he would not have the opportunity to rise above the situation and survey it and let his feeling dribble away.”<sup>24</sup> And so the poem ends with sudden, surprising, murderous intent.

and I have lost what is always and everywhere  
present, the scene of my selves, the occasion of these ruses,  
which I myself and singly must now kill  
and save the serpent in their midst (*CP*, 257)

What are the risks of failing to grasp the negative affects as they really are, “anger and grief” rather than merely the belated memories of such? Anger and grief need to be acknowledged or else they will be sustained. Without acknowledgement, Goodman argues, intellectuals “cannot purge these passions” and therefore they fail to attain “animal satisfaction”.<sup>25</sup> This “animal satisfaction” is the gesture of the serpent at the close of the poem. To save “animal satisfaction” O’Hara saves the “serpent”, symbol of paradoxical properties of stillness and speed, of corporeal erection and wateriness, fixity and fluidity. Here is, I argue, the crux of O’Hara’s poem and an insight fundamental to the emotional life as presented throughout O’Hara’s mature poetry:

The intellectual person feels his deprivation but he does not weep because, as he says, “my feelings are not hurt, *I* am hurt.” Since he sees that the causes of his loss are objective and general, he knows that they are not aimed especially at him. He is not insulted.[...] Quite the

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<sup>23</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 97.

<sup>24</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 97.

<sup>25</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 94.

contrary, by his intelligent understanding of causes, he is able to identify himself with the depriving power, he is even somewhat magnified.<sup>26</sup>

“In Memory of My Feelings”: O’Hara seeks to understand his feelings as inclusive of hurt, but to refuse to allow those feelings to settle into subjectivity as “*I am hurt*”. Evidence of the antagonistic split between I, self and feelings can be found throughout the poem, from the opening line, “My quietness has a man in it”, through reference to the weaponry by which “[...]” “protect myself”, and this only from the first part, a part answered by the fifth and final part.

O’Hara’s emotional insight, from “In Memory” onwards (if not before) refuses to constitute the self as martyr to feelings; he refuses to let his suffering become loved. Therefore he does two things. Firstly, he maintains emotional life as an experiential existence, rather than as the precursor of and mere enabler to the “self” who so experiences.<sup>27</sup> With Goodman he says, “my feelings are hurt”, thus acknowledging experiential hurt, and further seeking to have other, different, new, (even happier) feelings. Secondly, and in a style which gets closer to his appropriation as a camp writer, but which I would rather set in a history of mannerism, O’Hara refuses to overcome hurt by mature intellection as “objective and general”; he insists on being insulted by hurt. Just as the refusal to ascribe feelings to the conceptually prior and superior (italicised) “*P*” contests self-aggrandisement, so the refusal to “identify himself with the depriving power”, the refusal to understand and, crucially, *sympathise with* the cause of loss, to feel oneself to be the cause of such loss, is a form of forgiveness, which is grace.

Consider the following from Goodman: “But it is just one’s own character that one does not feel. It is the character of an intelligent sensitive person to understand itself in principle, but not to feel engaged in the struggle between happiness and character,

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<sup>26</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 97.

<sup>27</sup> Lytle Shaw puts this succinctly: “The poem consistently links two kinds of necessary but impossible representations: that of experiences, always pluralized by the range of feelings from which they emerge and which they in turn generate; and that of identities, or selves, which at once depend upon and transcend the contexts and histories that would make them legible” (90).

and break down”.<sup>28</sup> Character acts as a kind of reified observer of what should be a struggle in the pursuit of happiness. O’Hara’s poetry is alive to such a struggle, to the habituation of character into a kind of patter. There is a huge emotional cost of such a struggle.<sup>29</sup> We can see this in the close of “In Memory” where it is ultimately the “serpent” saved. Again:

and I have lost what is always and everywhere  
present, the scene of my selves, the occasion of these ruses,  
which I myself and singly must now kill

What the self has “lost”, either the present or presentness, split from the “always and everywhere” which seeks to include it by that fabulous line break, or the loss of “what is always and everywhere” current to the poet, will need to be killed off. The poem charges the “I myself” with the task of killing off that which “I have lost”, which itself has been the “occasion of these ruses”, the excuse for all kinds of artful obfuscation.

The saved serpent evokes the Garden of Eden, of course, and the dangers of the pleasures of knowledge and the knowledge of pleasures. Goodman’s essay commends as part of the struggle a related paradisaal trapping:

First, instead of looking for reminders of paradise, which lead to weeping softly *he must engage in the present hope and effort for paradise*. In such a pursuit he cannot passively identify with the existing causes of things, for paradise does not exist. So, second, he must identify with paradise by actively *making* the causes of his reality. Then, instead of relenting pity for himself, which leads to choking up, he will be vulnerable to present tangible loss.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 98.

<sup>29</sup> Consider John Wilkinson’s description of the emotional cost of “In Memory”: “Rather, both ‘In Memory of My Feelings’ and the *Odes* verge on the rapturous; to be given birth, the work of art requires of its creator a profound sacrifice of personal history, of self-knowledge and of conscious obligation, and an expense in real pain” (“Where Air is Flesh”: The *Odes* of Frank O’Hara,” in *Frank O’Hara Now*, 103).

<sup>30</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 101.

The immense emotional struggle of the poem is carried by this extraordinary logic: make paradise, a paradise that does not exist and therefore can only be a reflection of your actions; though failing to make paradise, since paradise does not exist, one must “identify” oneself with it (and perhaps the serpent within it) for the gain of happiness, but also with the concomitant, and necessary, vulnerability thus opened up. The failure to achieve the impossible paradise leads one “vulnerable to present tangible loss”. “I haven’t told you of the most beautiful things / in my lives, and watching the ripple of their loss disappear”: O’Hara’s poem records loss, but also records the echoes and afterlives of loss, watching “loss disappear”. Such a moment of forgetting, when the ripples fade out, is refused to make that which has been lost a “present tangible loss” sufficient to gather up the energy of anger. The loss in “I have lost what is always and everywhere / present” must be transformed into the murdered loss of a grief actively attended to: “I myself and singly must now kill”.

So long as paradise is regarded as “lost” or again as “not yet,” we are not able to cry, for our losing is not tangibly present. In the present it is not possible to know the laws of paradise, but only to make them.<sup>31</sup>

I will return to Goodman’s alternative to the intellectual inhibition of grief and anger in my commentary on “To Hell with It”, but to reiterate: the dynamic relationship between self and feelings, and the critique of inhibitions that prevent lively attention on behalf of apathy and boredom are fundamental to O’Hara’s poetics, and found an ally and early provocation in the work of Goodman.

### 3. III. “IN MEMORY OF MY FEELINGS” AS ECSTATIC ELEGY: BYRON

I want now to point out a number of echoes of Byron’s work in O’Hara’s “In Memory”, notably the image of the sepulchre, and, firstly, the adoration of mobility. These echoes demonstrate O’Hara’s turn to the poetry of sensibility or sentimentality, shifting his modernist inheritance into a different register.<sup>32</sup> The first reason

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<sup>31</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 104.

<sup>32</sup> The importance of Byron to O’Hara was established by Geoff Ward in *Statutes of Liberty*: “Both Byron and O’Hara understood but were fearful of

to include in this commentary a more or less theoretical account of elegy is to demonstrate “In Memory of My Feelings” as a play on a particular kind of elegy, the “ecstatic elegy” which I will go on to explain. The second reason is to foreground the relationships between elegy, attention and mobility, relationships understood in the poetry of O’Hara, and as described above by Paul Goodman. The third reason is to reach from the murderous response to deadening sentiment in “In Memory” to the ambivalent relationship to sentiment in “To Hell with It”.

“And now it is the serpent’s turn” (*CP*, 256): the turn of the serpent is the figure of mobility.<sup>33</sup> The final section of the poem introduces the “serpent’s turn” to speak, or sing (“singly” (*CP*, 257)); the “serpent’s turn” is immanence, the turn between past and future of “now”; and “it” is “the serpent’s turn”, the “it” tensed between cataphora and anaphora, referring backwards and forwards “amidst” the “scene of my selves” (*CP*, 257). The “now”, the elusive “it”, the “serpent” are all aspects of movement: as has been much commented upon, O’Hara’s poems are in thrall to mobility, to the quicknesses of attention.<sup>34</sup> One of the key narratives of his poetry is the development of a style of displaying motility without killing its essence by ponderous thought or logic. I use motility sporadically here as a nuanced version of mobility, combining as it does movement with autonomy; motility is the capacity to spontaneously move one’s self.<sup>35</sup> We find in Byron:

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a Romantic obsession with poetry, and in both a compulsive, at times manic urge towards Orphic utterance sits at odds with the cooler inclination to get writing in perspective as just one activity in a varied life” (41).

<sup>33</sup> On mobility see M.G. Cooke, “Byron’s Don Juan: The Obsession and Self-Discipline of Spontaneity,” in *Acts of Inclusion: Studies Bearing on an Elementary Theory of Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 218-41; and Jerome McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, ed. James Soderholm (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 36-52 (chapter three (53-76) provides the crucial reading of “My brain is feminine” for a queering of gender ideology).

<sup>34</sup> See Marjorie Perloff, “Frank O’Hara and the Aesthetics of Attention,” *Boundary 2* 4.3 (1976): 779-806.

<sup>35</sup> Motility refers back to Quintillian’s use of *motus*, the root form of motility; see John Shearman, *Mannerism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 84-5; See David Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 91-3.

So well she acted, all and every part  
 by turns – with that vivacious versatility,  
 Which many people take for want of heart.  
 They err – 'tis merely what is called mobility,  
 A thing of temperament and not of art,  
 Though seeming so, from its supposed facility;  
 And false – though true; for surely they're sincerest,  
 Who are strongly acted on by what is nearest.<sup>36</sup>

Acting “by turns” produces “vivacious versatility”, the *furia* of the serpent. To be “acted on by what is nearest” is to be in thrall to what Michael Cooke calls the running together of “spontaneity and sheer local reaction.”<sup>37</sup> The concern here is with fidelity, that some may betray their love with affairs of the heart; for Byron such roving is a form of fidelity. Mobility, what “many people take for want of heart” (the heart including and rhyming with “art”, showing its own mobility), is an example of “truth in masquerade”. When O’Hara chooses the “aesthetic of attention” he chooses to be “acted on by what is nearest”, to turn on his heel from harm and towards what is fleeting, what catches his eye, or happens over his shoulder. Byron defines *mobility* as “an excessive susceptibility of immediate impressions – at the same time without *losing* the past; and is, though sometimes apparently useful to the possessor, a most painful and unhappy attribute.”<sup>38</sup> Mobility is a “structure of social

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted from Byron’s *Don Juan* (XVI) in McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, 39. Emerson’s essay, “The American Scholar”, includes what is likely a source for O’Hara’s description of the hero (possibly via Stevens): “The sacredness which attaches to the act of creation, the act of thought, is transferred to the record. The poet chanting was felt to be a divine man: henceforth the chant is divine also. The writer was a just and wise spirit: henceforward it is settled the book is perfect; as love of the hero corrupts into worship of his statue. Instantly the book becomes noxious: the guide is a tyrant.” (88) Geoff Ward pointed this out in *Statutes of Liberty*, 79; On Emerson’s influence see Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies*. The essay also contains this gem, of considerable interest to O’Hara’s preferences: “Man is surprised to find that things near are not less beautiful and wondrous than things remote.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar,” in *Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin, 1982), 102.

<sup>37</sup> Cooke, *Acts of Inclusion*, 227-8.

<sup>38</sup> Byron’s note on Canto XVI, quoted by McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, 39.

relations” rather than simply a psychological characteristic. It appears as:

a set of social graces, a capacity to charm and to be all things to all men, but it arises, apparently, from a ground of “sincerity” in those kinds of people “Who are very strongly acted on by what is nearest”; yet it *appears* the very height of insincerity and calculation. Which is it: “a thing of” one’s spontaneous “temperament,” or of one’s role-playing and “art”? Is it “false” or “true”?<sup>39</sup>

Such mobility recalls perhaps the most famous passage of “In Memory”, and indeed O’Hara’s epitaph, with its less frequently cited next sentence:

Grace  
to be born and live as variously as possible. The conception  
of the masque barely suggests the sordid identifications.  
(*CP*, 256)

“In Memory” references explicitly Byron’s “Manfred”, the story of a past guilt which Manfred fails to forget, even with the aid of seven spirits called up by his artifice, until that is the success of his suicide. Section I of “In Memory” reads:

At times, withdrawn,  
I rise into the cool skies  
and gaze on at the imponderable world with the simple  
identification  
of my colleagues, the mountains. Manfred climbs to my nape,  
speaks, but I do not hear him,  
I’m too blue. (*CP*, 253)

Serious stuff: O’Hara’s interlocutor is “too blue” even to contemplate, with Manfred, the freedom of suicide. John Wilkinson describes the deflation of Manfred:

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<sup>39</sup> McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, 40. On the relations between grace and *sprezzatura* with reference to O’Hara see Sam Ladkin, “Problems for Lyric Poetry,” in *Complicities: British Poetry 1945-2007*, ed. Sam Ladkin and Robin Purves (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2007), 271-323.

Manfred is apotheosized over mass humanity and at the same time casts himself as fallen abjectly below the moral status of any ‘free-born peasant’ upright in his certainties.[...] Prometheanism has turned him into a statue. ‘I’m so blue’ then is O’Hara’s pithy deflation of this scene, at once laying claim to the blue empyrean’s ultimate overview, and reducing Manfred’s wordy angst to a vernacular shrug.<sup>40</sup>

The bathos of Manfred serves to chasten the self “from primitive authority to a mortal, social humanity”.<sup>41</sup> In sentimentality’s reversal of the “wisdom of Ecclesiastes”, Manfred seeks forgetfulness “of that which is within me”, the sorrow that increases knowledge.<sup>42</sup> Manfred seeks “Oblivion, self-oblivion” (l. 144):

There is a power upon me which it withholds,  
 And makes it my fatality to live;  
 If it be life to wear within myself  
 This barrenness of spirit, and to be  
 My own soul’s sepulchre, for I have ceased  
 To justify my deeds unto myself –  
 The last infirmity of evil. (I, ii, ll. 23-29)

Byron here echoing and refusing Milton’s pact:

To live a life half dead, a living death,  
 And buried; but O yet more miserable!  
 Myself, my sepulchre, a moving grave.

O’Hara, too, refuses the fatality which is “to be / My own souls’ sepulchre”. Firmly evil, the “sordid identifications” have the grace of autonomous life. O’Hara refuses to “justify my deeds unto myself”: as he warns in “Personism: A Manifesto”:

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<sup>40</sup> Wilkinson, “Where Air is Flesh,” 108-9.

<sup>41</sup> Wilkinson, “Where Air is Flesh,” 109.

<sup>42</sup> “Manfred, A Dramatic Poem,” in *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, Vol. IV, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 58, l. 137.

suppose you're in love and someone's mistreating (*mal aimé*) you, you don't say, "Hey, you can't hurt me this way, I care!" you just let all the different bodies fall where they may, and they always do may after a few months. But that's not why you fell in love in the first place, just to hang onto life, so you have to take your chances and try to avoid being logical. Pain always produces logic, which is very bad for you. (*CP*, 498)

The morality of self-justification is anathema to O'Hara; instead he embraces the satanic serpent, the clarifying force of "anti-pathos". The love, "that one", which has become the "cancerous / statue" (the line-break here refusing the solidity of the statue) is sepulchral, the graven image of the poet in thrall to past love.

It is an unfeasibly elusive finale, but the close of "In Memory" sets up the elegiac address: that which is lost, "the scene of my selves", must be killed, and must be killed by "I myself and singly"; that is, the elegy kills off the lost part, whereas grief or mourning exacerbate loss. Only the killing of loss will resurrect the "present", what is "always and everywhere". The "serpent in their midst" is irreducible to either "I" or the "scene of my selves". The serpent is an expression of the contest or even conflict between the past which loses presentness and the "I" which exists as memorial to that loss.

Charles Altieri argues that, since Romanticism, poetics has founded itself on constitutive oppositions to rhetoric.<sup>43</sup> I argue that it is not by chance alone that the constitutive oppositions to rhetoric run in parallel to the constitutive oppositions to sentimentality and sensibility. Sensibility is damned for its rhetorical power, and the use of that power towards ostensibly conservative ends, to a hokum emotional slurry, and endless

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<sup>43</sup> Charles Altieri, "Rhetoric and Poetics: How to Use the Inevitable Return of the Repressed," in *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted (London: Blackwell, 2004), 473-493. Altieri quotes from Ezra Pound, who regarded rhetoric as the art of the "advertising agent for a new soap" (478) and from W.B. Yeats' who wrote, "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry" (479). See also Altieri's "The Return to Rhetoric in Modernist Poetry: Stevens and Auden," in *The Art of Twentieth Century American Poetry: Modernism and After* (New York: Blackwell, 2006), 126-156.

vampiric text feeding off the too-easy empathy of the reader, all the stuff that Ezra Pound despised. O'Hara is not (and nor am I) asking for a return to the sentimentality of Victorian self-sacrifice; in fact O'Hara's attitude can be described as the refusal to participate in the cultivation of martyrdom to loss. As with Byron, there is no redemption in martyrdom to pain; not "Even for its own sake do we purchase pain".<sup>44</sup>

How do we combine the two oppositions, to rhetoric and to sensibility? And how do we characterize O'Hara's crucial undermining of the bad faith of both, his commitment to sending experience back out into the world rather than crafting a hothouse within the text for a conceited version of life martyred from world, and his commitment to the courage of vulgarity which takes joy as love's affect rather than the self-satisfaction of sacrifice to a dreamt future?

Jerome McGann takes elegy as a genre crucial to his definition of a poetics of sensibility. His "The Loss of Sentimental Poetry" reads the sentimental as a lost literary style, and finds in elegy an exemplification of its own re-imagining of the economy of loss. McGann's essay describes the "compensatory schemas of elegy", opposing a tradition which "carries out or embodies the logic of redemption" against an alternative strain of poetry which establishes loss *as* loss, and in doing so strangely finds new ways of liberating life, what he calls the "ecstatic" tradition.<sup>45</sup> Wordsworth's commitment to "enshrine the spirit of the past / For future restoration" (*The Prelude* 1805, XI.342-3) is taken to be the normative or "restrictive" form of elegy in which writing is "memorial act" and essentially a form of redemption: that which is lost is redeemed in writing or in the memorial act writing performs for the reader.<sup>46</sup> The *ecstatic* strain, however, emphasizes "visionary ecstasy as its own reward, self-generating, self-consuming" (here McGann is thinking of Blake in particular).<sup>47</sup> Ecstatic elegy fails to "accrue spiritual rewards", instead scheduling "complete expenditure". One of McGann's key examples is Shelley's

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<sup>44</sup> Byron from "[Epistle to Augusta]," quoted by McGann, "The Loss of Sentimental Poetry," in *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 156.

<sup>45</sup> McGann, *Poetics*, 150.

<sup>46</sup> McGann, *Poetics*, 151.

<sup>47</sup> McGann, *Poetics*, 151.

“Adonais”, which he describes as “not the poetry of epitaphs, where the experience of loss is replaced by the memorial tribute of a shrine of loving language”, but rather as “loss forever” which establishes “all things on a basis of present and immediate life”.<sup>48</sup>

What of Byron? McGann writes: “Indurated Byronic sorrow signifies a loss from which there is no redemption. The traditional figure for such a loss is Satan, to whom, of course, Byron will turn often enough”.<sup>49</sup> Satan, or Satan’s representative serpent, is the figure of loss without redemption. “In Memory of My Feelings” is *ecstatic* elegy in the sentimental tradition, as it is for Byron, for whom “the contemporary equivalent of Satan[...] is an archangel fallen not through an excess of knowledge but through an excess of love”.<sup>50</sup> The serpent, whose turn it is, and who is turning, when referring to the “most beautiful things / in my lives” watches “the ripple of their loss disappear” (*CP*, 256). The poem is the persuasive and deliberate failure to save the memorial past on behalf of new feelings.

“I have lost what is always and everywhere / present”: the “present”, that which is “always and everywhere” is that which is “lost”, and saving the serpent is the attempt to save the immediacy of experience. Save the present by killing the scenes of presentness trapped by elegiac memories. Losing the present is the only requirement of presentness. Here we might re-install one of the other symbolic functions of the serpent: murdering what is “always and everywhere” is also the loss of Edenic immortality, the eternal garden. To gain mortal time (that which is in the line-break) over eternal time is the gift of the temptations of the serpent and the bounty of the tree of knowledge. O’Hara’s version of autonomy is, to borrow Jonathan Dollimore’s expression, the “agency of displacement”, and if that agency needs to be named, then its naming must be able to be, still, elusive, or else its agency will again be drawn into the concrete world of memory.<sup>51</sup> And so O’Hara calls it the serpent, the figure of the gesture of sin. The serpent is at once a trope, the figure of figurality (language, sense, metonymy, poetry, meaning) and a figure of corporeality (sex,

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<sup>48</sup> McGann, *Poetics*, 152-3.

<sup>49</sup> McGann, *Poetics*, 156.

<sup>50</sup> McGann, *Poetics*, 156.

<sup>51</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 310.

desire, pleasure), and when the serpent precipitates the fall, it is an ecstatic loss; the serpent in becoming oppositional creates in excess the real world.

The distinction between models of elegy is important not only for its own sake; McGann is also proposing that the sentimental tradition (sensibility), which makes “feeling, and in particular human love, the ground of an experience of perfection”, has been suppressed by institutional modernism (and this has implications for a queer recuperation of a feminine gendered literary practice).<sup>52</sup> The sentimental is modernism’s guilty secret. By reinstalling sentimentality in late modernism, we can reincorporate the virtues of sentimentality (O’Hara’s dedication to vulgarity), and we can challenge modernism’s logic of the recuperation of classical motifs with the present pleasures of forgetting. Sentimental writing, according to McGann, promises the “wisdom of the body” rather than Romanticism’s love grafted to the “most spiritual of the senses”, the beautiful. Sentimentality prefers the kiss, “where the authority of feeling and the lowest order of the senses asserts itself”.<sup>53</sup> We can see it in “You Are Gorgeous And I’m Coming”, the “endless originality of human loss” flowing into “the air the stumbling quiet of breathing”, with “the past falling away as an acceleration of nerves” (*CP*, 331). As O’Hara writes in his Statement for *The New American Poetry*: “My formal ‘stance’ is found at the crossroads where what I know and can’t get meets what is left of that I know and can bear without hatred” (*CP*, 500).

Byron’s sensibility, according to McGann, remains Romantic for two reasons, because he raises the sentimental to a “spectacular level”, and because his Romantic irony rescues and redeems the “disaster” threatened by his own imagination.<sup>54</sup> “In Memory of My Feelings” is an elegy for sentimental attachment (“feeling”); its Byronic irony is to use the language and genre of sentiment to write sentiment’s own epitaph, and so save it. The memorial life of feelings must be sacrificed *without gain* to save the autonomy of feeling. McGann describes Byron “struggling to break wholly free from his sentimental sufferings – ultimately, to break wholly free from the doomed poetry that expresses and discovers those

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<sup>52</sup> McGann, *Poetics*, 159.

<sup>53</sup> McGann, *Poetics*, 171.

<sup>54</sup> McGann, *Poetics*, 158, 159.

sufferings”.<sup>55</sup> “In Memory of My Feelings” is an elegy to the “feeling heart” that saves sentimentality by its elegiac ardour. O’Hara’s Romantic sentimentality is a revisioning of modernism’s seriousness, with one major inversion: language of the “feeling heart”<sup>56</sup> martyrs itself to the love of tears and suffering whereas O’Hara (possibly more compellingly than any other poet) refuses the right of suffering to elevate itself in martyrdom. His poetry is constantly alive to the threat that suffering *will make itself loved*, and therefore concreted into effigy. This is modernism’s experiment with the forms of sensibility; where the sentimental enjoys its moral handwringing over the felicities of touch (sighs, swoons, blushes, as catalogued by McGann), and furthermore makes guilt the energy of the overwhelming touch, O’Hara refuses the right of suffering to possess the self as a virtue, as proof of depths of sincerity. The dream is to turn back to love, which makes of the present a memorial, precisely the kind of cancerous statue the close of the poem defies. Nostalgia for love is precisely not-love: nostalgia for love is the active prevention of present love. Sentimental late modernism is the inability to turn back to the sensibility of love, and the ecstatic elegy for it, the “complete expenditure” that effects an alternative autonomy, a turn. Though it is, I think, a questionable term for O’Hara’s style, both because it is not contemporaneous with his work and fails to describe the particularity of the oppression of the 1950s, consider Jonathan Dollimore’s definition of camp as “a parodic critique of the essence of sensibility as conventionally understood.”<sup>57</sup> Camp, a queer style, feeds off the “essence of sensibility”; the late modernity of O’Hara is queer sensibility, its truth “nothing but a ‘body of falsehood’”, the ecstatic elegy for sensibility’s masquerade of heterosexuality.<sup>58</sup> Sentimental poetry came to be a “pejorative term” standing “in general for writing which made a mawkish parade of spurious feelings.”<sup>59</sup> “In Memory of My Feelings” is the ecstatic elegy for spurious feelings because spurious feelings need no decent parentage, but are born, vulgar, anyway.

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<sup>55</sup> McGann, *Poetics*, 159.

<sup>56</sup> McGann, *Poetics*, 4.

<sup>57</sup> Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, 308.

<sup>58</sup> McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, 64.

<sup>59</sup> McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, 57.

The following section describes another key influence on O'Hara's poem, Paul Valéry. Valéry's poetics are a model for the ornateness theorized in the central portion of this essay, and more particularly provide O'Hara with one source for the paradisaical figure of the serpent, with whom the self exists in agonistic, dialectical difference.

#### 3.IV. O'HARA GLOSSING PAUL VALÉRY: THE ORDER OF THE SERPENT

My research suggests that the influence of Paul Valéry on Frank O'Hara has not been recognised. O'Hara is taken to be so vocal about his passions that you'd imagine we'd have more declarative signs of his affection, were he as passionate about Valéry as he was about, say, Pierre Reverdy. My claim is that, instead of being lionized as was Reverdy, Valéry is a more ambivalent figure whose purpose was to mediate pleasures of classicism and aestheticism without regressing too far into an aristocratic uptightness reminiscent of Eliot. Valéry's poetry is too neo-classical to be name-checked, but too significant to be simply overlooked.

We can perhaps understand his influence by triangulating with the world of dance, to which both O'Hara and Valéry were devoted. Valéry's position might arguably correspond to that of George Balanchine, a high modernist in his rejection of conventional narrative, but still invested in matters of form and beauty. The work I fail to carry out below is that which places the dialogue between Valéry and O'Hara as part of a conversation with Wallace Stevens, again a figure too noble to be a New York Schooler, but sufficiently modernist to warrant sustained attention.<sup>60</sup> I have presented elsewhere the case for the influence of Stevens on "In Memory of My Feelings", largely through the

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<sup>60</sup> Stevens is mentioned in O'Hara's interview with Edward Lucie-Smith, including the fact that O'Hara read a Stevens poem (not named) during his own reading ("Edward Lucie-Smith: An Interview with Frank O'Hara," in *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, ed. Donald Allen (Bollinas, CA: Grey Fox Press, 1975), 24). Stevens also gets a shout-out in "Biotherm (For Bill Berkson)", but one which is in French: "j'ai composé mon "Glorification" hommage au poète américain / lyrique et profond, Wallace Stevens / but one / of your American tourists told me he was a banker" (439).

figures of the hero and the serpent in “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War” and “The Auroras of Autumn”.<sup>61</sup> Briefly, the serpent in “The Auroras of Autumn” owes much to the example of Valéry, as both a symbolic figure as conventionally understood, and as a reflection of the formal properties of prosody.<sup>62</sup> O’Hara, therefore, uses the figure of the serpent to triangulate an American and a European modernism.

The serpent, or the sign of the serpent, shows itself in the following of Valéry’s *Charmes* (Charms): “La Pythie” (“The Pythoness,” 162-177), and “Ébauche d’un serpent” (“Silhouette of a Serpent,” 184-205), and in his seminal long poem “La Jeune Parque” (“The Young Fate”/“The Youngest Fate,” 68-105), composed between 1913 and 1917.<sup>63</sup> According to Chisholm the two later poems from *Charmes* were composed as “side-panels for a triptych having as its central panel *La Jeune Parque*”, with the

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<sup>61</sup> See Ladkin, “Frank O’Hara’s Ecstatic Elegy.” Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 244-250 and 355-363. Other resonances include “Angel Surrounded by Paysans” (423); compare O’Hara’s “When you turn your head/ can you feel your heels, undulating?” to:

...Am I not  
Myself, only half a figure of a sort,

A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man  
Of the mind, an apparition apparelled in

Apparels of such lightest look that a turn  
Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone? (423)

For other serpents in Stevens, see also “The Bagatelles the Madrigals” (193) and “Owl’s Clover” (152).

<sup>62</sup> Stevens translated Valéry’s *Eupalinos ou l’Architecte* [“Eupalions, or the Architect”] and *L’Âme et la Danse* [“Dance and the Soul”], on which see Barbara Fisher, “Stevens Dancing: ‘Something Light, Winged, Holy,’” in *Wallace Stevens, New York, and Modernism*, ed. Lisa Goldfarb and Bart Eeckout (New York: Routledge, 2012), 71-84 (76); and Lisa Goldfarb, *The Figure Concealed: Wallace Stevens, Music, and Valéryan Echoes* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2011).

<sup>63</sup> All parenthetical page numbers refer to Paul Valéry, *The Collected Works of Paul Valery, V.1, Poems*, ed. J. Mathews and Trans. David Paul (London: Routledge, 1971).

innocent Eve “moving away from pure Being towards a sensuous and dynamic Living” in “Silhouette”, and in the other the “young Pythia, a prey to sombre Being and cruelly cut off from Living”, whilst “in the central panel the young Parque, after her long meditation in the night, joyfully accepts Living, with all that it implies.”<sup>64</sup> Chisholm writes:

The implication of the whole triptych is that woman, like man, can be emancipated and made whole only by unrestricted consciousness, although thought in her case has to admit and rationalize the instinctive urge of passion and maternity.... Thought and instinct; recognition of the illusory character of the world, and a healthy acceptance of life: these antinomies are reconciled in the central panel.<sup>65</sup>

It is that central panel, “La Jeune Parque”, a poem composed in classical French alexandrines, and therefore participating in a by then fairly ersatz version of conservative formalism, that can be shown as one source for O’Hara’s poetry.<sup>66</sup>

For Agnes Mackay the imagery presents “no difficulty”:

La Jeune Parque, a statue come to life, wakes on some remote Thessalian shore. Her waking thoughts and retrospective meditations, her walks through flowering grass, her reactions to the world around her, her horror of the serpent and her desire for purity are easy to understand.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> A.R. Chisholm, “‘La Pythie’ and Its Place in Valéry’s Work,” *The Modern Language Review* 58.1 (1963): 24.

<sup>65</sup> Chisholm, “La Pythie,” 25.

<sup>66</sup> “The verse form is the classical French alexandrine, and the resources of this line of twelve syllables are enlarged and renewed. The rhymed couplets also follow the classical Racinian usage. There are sixteen movements of varied length, consisting of recitatives often composed of a single period, or periods alternating with lyrical passages.” Agnes Ethel Mackay, *The Universal Self: A Study of Paul Valéry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 155.

<sup>67</sup> Mackay, *The Universal Self*, 156-7.

It's tempting to go with Mackay on the interpretation of the young fate as a statue, but it does not seem to be so easily assumed by other commentators. We can though read the fate's awakening into a new state of liveness by the sting of a serpent as an echo of Ovid's Pygmalion.<sup>68</sup> The metamorphosis between dead statuary, mortal life and final death is played out in both O'Hara's and Valéry's poems, and for both there is a statuary accreting within the living which must be resisted, a kind of deadness in life that is the enemy of fluid, attentive vivacity. When I develop my reading of ornament, I'll consider how various largely ignored terms that span rhetoric and aesthetics are all about this distinction between the mere *representation* of living things, and the vividness of life (*energeia, furia*), and how Valéry and O'Hara take on this distinction between representation and evocation as an insidious and dangerous potential failing in living things, that the very liveliness of one's life can become reified into its own representation, a dead statue accreted within our lives when they cease sufficient movement.<sup>69</sup> There is, therefore, a necessary push against representation as an aesthetic promise since its repercussions impact upon the life of the poet, and of the poem's readers. For O'Hara, martyrdom to memories presents such a focus of wariness, as we potentially live our current lives as representations of past lives and loves.

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<sup>68</sup> "In 1917, Valéry outlined briefly in one of the Cahiers the compositional story of the poem he had just finished, 'How I wrote the J' Nadal knew of these lines, but he perhaps deciphered them imperfectly. Under the heading 'Genesis,' Valéry enumerated, year by year, some of the themes he had worked with. Here is found, among the Serpent (1913), - a particularly rich symbol since the reptile's bite represents the consciousness awakening to pain, while its coiling evokes self-awareness as well as 'the animal abyss,'" Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin and Emmett Gossen, "Introduction to La Jeune Parque," *Yale French Studies* 44 (1970): 100.

<sup>69</sup> The value of impetuosity is something like *furia*: "Seen in this light, Michelangelo is heir to that redefinition of psychic energy that took place in the early Renaissance. *Furia* is no longer a vice, but a virtue to be praised. In its higher form, Poliziano wrote, it is *excandescencia* (*thymos*), which is the opposite of *stupor* (in the usual sense of the word), as spring of winter, a strength to be husbanded and shaped, symptomatic of a character born to great undertaking and accomplishment." Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, 247.

“La Jeune Parque” opens with an epigraph from Pierre Corneille:

Le Ciel a-t-il formé cet amas de merveilles  
Pour la demeure d’un serpent?

Did heaven form this mass of marvels  
To be a serpent’s dwelling-place?<sup>70</sup>

The serpent in Corneille’s play was, according to George Whiting, a symbol of eros, and no doubt O’Hara plays on such a convention, but such stability of symbolic reference belies the major symbolic potential of the serpent as a particularly self-reflexive symbol due to its formal properties, the mystery of its movement, its capacity for paradoxical temporalities, capable of total stillness and the impeccable speed of the strike, or of a languorous shimmer, the way its figure constantly shifts and transforms itself, the way its shape (its figure) acts out the slipperiness of figuration, resisting permanence on behalf of tortuosity. Its symbolic rationale is therefore its resistance to the symbolic, said resistance of symbolic logic arguably inspiring “La Jeune Parque”. Valéry writes that “there is nothing so valuable for getting one’s ideas clear as to write a long and obscure poem”.<sup>71</sup> Note that the argument is not that the poem becomes clear, but that somehow its obscurity transforms the vagueness that lies behind it into clarity. Obscurity sacrifices itself. We’ll see this

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<sup>70</sup> All references are to Paul Valéry, *The Collected Works of Paul Valery, V.1, Poems*, ed. J. Mathews and Trans. David Paul (London: Routledge, 1971), 70-1. The French original will be placed above the English translation. Brad Gooch understands O’Hara to have purchased the *Selected Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1950) of Paul Valéry between 1948 and 1950 (Gooch, *City Poet*, 140). The New Directions edition includes passages from “La Jeune Parque” with alternative translations. The other works of French poetry purchased during that time were in French, and it is fair to assume O’Hara would have had access by 1956 to the original “La Jeune Parque”. The other books listed are *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris* by Baudelaire, *Poésies* and *Un Coup de dés* by Mallarmé, *Choix de Poésies* by Paul Verlaine, *Illuminations* and *Oeuvres* by Rimbaud, *Figures et Paraboles* by Paul Claudel, and *Paroles* by Jacques Prévert.

<sup>71</sup> James R. Lawler, “Notes and Commentaries,” in Valéry, *The Collected Works of Paul Valery, V.1, Poems*, 448.

throughout “In Memory” in, for example, the repeated references to “transparency” in part I, and in “To Hell with It”, in the conclusion’s forceful push for clarity.

“La Jeune Parque” develops, Valéry claims, not out of its symbolic history, but its sound: “All the development that concerns the serpent came out of the rhyme – *ordre*”.<sup>72</sup> Order becomes, implicitly, the ordering function, transposing itself throughout the poem. It is contained within variations, notably “mordre” (to bite), and “désordre” (disorderliness). Order means both to order something in time, in a hierarchy, a word order, etc., but also as a command, to give an order. The sound, “ordre”, therefore, is aligned with the serpent that compels the poem onward and organizes its parts. Its key figure *and* its structure are serpentine; James R. Lawler comments that the poem “comprises a number of “coils” (*nœuds*) which form a sinuous emblem, an image of the sensibility”.<sup>73</sup> In a letter to Maurice Denis written in preparation of his composition, Valéry writes of the poem as “an infinitely extensible hydra, that may also be cut into parts”.<sup>74</sup> O’Hara’s “In Memory” offers no such myth of origins in the undulation of sound, but instead its prosody, which has been various throughout the poem, performs its serpentine form in section five by loosely beginning each line twisted below the last, a feature echoed in the two major sections of “To Hell with It”.

This ordering function isn’t, however, merely an intellectual exercise. “La Jeune Parque” sets up a dynamic in which the poem in its formal qualities is used to contest the realm of ideas. Prosody and poetic form take on the properties associated with the continuity of the body. In a helpful passage worth providing at length, and littered with Valéry’s own insights, James R. Lawler summarizes the lessons of “La Jeune Parque” as follows:

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<sup>72</sup> “Tout le développement (du Serpent) est sorti de la rime à *ordre*.” Quoted in Charles G. Whiting, *Paul Valéry* (London: Athlone, 1978), 23.

<sup>73</sup> James R. Lawler, “Notes and Commentaries,” in Valéry, *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry*, V.1, *Poems*, 453.

<sup>74</sup> James R. Lawler, “Notes and Commentaries,” 453. Valéry says the “real subject” of *La Jeune Parque* “is the painting of a sequence of psychological substitutions and in the main the change of consciousness during the length of a night.” “I have tried[...] and at the cost of unbelievable effort, to explain the modulation of a life.” Quoted in Mackay, *The Universal Self*, 153.

The young woman who wakes in the night and comes to pursue her monologue “sur l’écueil mordu par la merveille” discovers the elegy of the world. As she speaks the moist wind, the sea, the stars accompany her voice and prolong its plaint; but within the Parque herself we are aware of another counterpoint, that of mind and body. Accompanying ideas, memories, resolutions, reasonings there is an inner music, the basso continuo of the sensibility which is the Parque’s true center, her nonhistorical and nonanecdotal self. Although she appears to be caught up in an intellectual dilemma her poem is, as Valéry noted, “une physiologie et une mélodie,” or “un cours de physiologie,” as he told Frédéric Lefèvre with not a little humour. He meant that a process of transformation has been articulated, an ordered cycle of the sensibility which serves as a basis for the Parque’s thought, since it binds her consciousness to the body “comme une anémone de mer à son galet.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Lawler, *The Poet as Analyst: Essays on Paul Valéry* (Berkeley: University of California, 1974), 144-5. A note on translation: “comme une anémone de mer à son galet” translates roughly as “with a sea anemone and its grit”. The following gloss on the poem is compiled from the reading provided by Agnes Mackay in *The Universal Self*, and is therefore not beyond dispute, but helpful as an opening on the poem (the page references that follow in this footnote are all to Mackay). Mackay summarizes as follows: in the first section a “tear symbolizes regret for unfulfilled desires” (157), at which point the young fate “turns to question her memories” (158). The first movement ends with the introduction of the serpent, the second then working with the theme of temptation. From the inquisition of the self a “further Self is projected” (159), a Self which “defies temptation”, denying the serpent as symbol of the “world and carnal desires” (159). Mackay comments: “La Jeune Parque has taken her decision. Henceforth she must stand alone, governed not by her sensibility but by her intellect sustained by pride” (160). A new Self replaces the old self, before the young fate reawakens to the problems of life. Such problems, and the “bitterness of memory” are “metamorphosed into music”, the eighth section ending with “regret for those very temptations which have been rejected” (163). Hence the young fate vows not to be “ensnared” in future (163), and a “new Self repudiates the world, with all the force and clarity of a state of ecstasy.” (163) The poem then “sings of the betrayal of the Self overcome by sleep” (169) for it is at moments of “intellectual lassitude” (169) that selves give in to temptation. The final movement “brings us back to a double waking, for

To skip to the end, to what extent does the close of “In Memory” also seek a “sensibility” which is the “true center, [a...] nonhistorical and nonanecdotal self”? The “scene of my selves” and the “serpent”, do these provide a similar contestation between personal, historic and epic memories and a de-historicized sensibility, elusive in its movements and its transparencies? O’Hara’s poem seeks a further “elegy of the world”, increasing the variousness of ornamental prosody over that of Valéry in order, also, to free the sensibility of its habituated continuity.

The tradition that sees prosody as the music of verse is bound to physiology; music and corporeality are equally grounded, it is implied, in physical manifestations of continuous rhythms, the *basso continuo*, the rhythm underlying music. We can assume that both music and the body contrast to the ideational aspects of subjectivity by their avoidance of language. To remain “nonhistorical and nonanecdotal” they must remain outside of written or spoken record. Language and memory, therefore, become the harbingers of history, made apparent when placed in contrast to the continuity of the body in its rhythms. There is an implicit antagonism between language and history, and it is only poetry which can behave as language gesturing toward the possibility of its being denatured of its own existence as language by elevating form. Its formal properties either overwhelm or fatally undermine the history non-poetic language harbours. This is clearly paradoxical, that a kind of ahistorical base beat is maintained by the body susceptible to slip off the mortal coil, but I think that sense of pressure is exactly right for Valéry’s poem: history overtakes the living eventually, but it is the task of the living body to remain against history.<sup>76</sup>

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the Self of yesterday is replaced by that of today which in its turn must also die; for the new day already forms the substance of a tomb, each sunrise foretells its own setting, all thought has an end[...]. Thus the Self accepts the pure source of all intellectual power, in the figures of the sun and the sea as image and substance of the poet’s life; presence to which he must return, and in which he renews his creative forces” (170-1).

<sup>76</sup> Whiting describes the poem as a “dramatic struggle between a desire for intellectual purity, for a god-like state and the exigencies of life of a human being seen as a part of nature, and obeying inevitable laws of physiological functioning, development, reproduction and self-conservation” (Whiting, *Paul Valery*, 22).

Lawler's description of "counterpoint" refers to musical theory, with which O'Hara was more than familiar.<sup>77</sup> Here the counterpoint is taken to be the relation between mind and body, where body is (a little unproblematically) understood to be "sensibility". What of an alternative aesthetic term, that of *contrapposto*? Though frequently used when discussing the torsion of the body in a twisted pose, the term derives from the Latin *contrapositum*, which is itself a translation of the Greek *antithesis*, a "rhetorical figure in which opposites were set directly against one another".<sup>78</sup> David Summers continues:

In the Renaissance, *contrapposto* had a wider meaning than it has now, and could refer to any opposition – *chiaroscuro*, for example, or the juxtapositions of old and young, male or female.[...] The pattern for *contrapposto* composition was thus rhetorical; the setting of visual contrasts created vividness just as the setting of opposites in rhetoric or poetry created a memorable and convincing vividness.<sup>79</sup>

My point is that, rather than eliding the antagonism between aspects of personhood into either the weak "accompanying ideas" in Lawler's description, or the reference to the sensibility that "binds her consciousness to the body" *contrapposto* elaborates them, uses them as energy. Mind and body is not quite the key agonism in O'Hara's poem; for that the likeliest candidate is the agonism between memorial selves and present experience, but in both poems, that of Valéry and of O'Hara, the serpent is the symbol of the *contrapposto*, the symbol of a liveliness born when symbolism itself becomes, in a positive sense, rhetorical.

"La Jeune Parque" describes its protagonist, the youngest fate, a virgin, emotionally distraught, located in a place relevant to the conclusion of "In Memory of My Feelings", by the sea. Her distress is due to her dream in which she is bitten by a Serpent, as Charles G. Whiting describes it, "sinuous, undulating, impatient, yet

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<sup>77</sup> See Gooch, *City Poet*, 94. On music and Valéry see Brian Stimpson, *Paul Valéry and Music: A Study of the Techniques of Composition in Valéry's Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>78</sup> Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, 76.

<sup>79</sup> Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, 76.

heavily languorous”.<sup>80</sup> Such a summary of the scene elides the oddness of the poem however. The separation of waking and dreaming states is not enforced, so that a slurring of consciousness is effected. If its subject is the dynamic between intellect, sensibility, and corporeality, it is by its interpretation of erotic pleasure that it will proceed.

The poem opens with what we assume is the young fate describing her lament, her “broken heart” silent, reproached by the murmur of the “surf”.<sup>81</sup> The voice of the poem asks itself a number of questions (“I ask my heart what pain keeps it awake”) and this internal dialogue (which reaches out to Valéry’s obsession with narcissistic mirroring) becomes tortuous in its serpentine logic:

Je me voyais me voir, sinueuse, et dorais  
De regards en regards, mes profondes forêts.

J’y suivais un serpent qui venait de me mordre.

Quel repli de désirs, sa traîne!... Quel désordre  
De trésors s’arrachant à mon avidité,  
Et quelle sombre soif de la limpidité! (*Poems*, 70)

I saw me seeing myself, sinuous, and  
From gaze to gaze gilded my innermost forests.

I was tracking a snake there that had just stung me.

What a coil of lusts, his trail!... What a riot  
Of riches wrenched away from my longing,  
And ah, that obscure thirst for limpidity! (*Poems*, 71)

The serpent’s sting has already turned this subject into its likeness; it is “sinuous”, its Medusan gaze penetrating the wooded dark of an unconscious interior. The serpent who strikes in the dream is an antagonistic part of the self, rather than an external force, and yet it

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<sup>80</sup> Whiting, “Sexual Imagery in *La Jeune Parque* and *Charmes*,” *PMLA* 86.5 (1971): 940.

<sup>81</sup> Paul Valéry, *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry, V.1, Poems*, ed. J. Mathews and Trans. David Paul (London: Routledge, 1971); hereafter abbreviated *Poems* and cited parenthetically with page number.

has the force of externality such that the fate ponders whether the “crime” is “committed against me or by myself?” (*Poems*, 71).<sup>82</sup>

The narcissistic and apostrophic turn within subjectivity is echoed throughout O’Hara’s poem; its opening, though, is breezier, more fun, and arguably avoids the serpent’s sting. The subject and the serpent are already too similar; they share their weaponry. The “he” who is transparent, inside “quietness”, is likely just one of the “transparent selves[...] writhing and hissing” at the end of the first section of the poem, coagulating into at least a “resemblance” of “the Medusa”.<sup>83</sup> The “obscure thirst for limpidity” is arguably translated by O’Hara into “transparency”. Limpidity likely derives from the Latin *lympa*, meaning “clear liquid” (OED), so, as with transparency, there’s a paradox of obscurity and clarity at work: that which is transparent is open, has nothing to hide, and yet nothing can be seen. Light passes through and hence its substance becomes obscure. O’Hara’s “quietness” plays silence as similarly obscure and clear. This is Valéryan narcissism, the dangers of self-reflection held ultimately in hollowness. Both poems play with dynamics between liquid and air. O’Hara’s “I rise[s] into the cool skies” from its flooded streets, into a bathetic version of Byron’s *Manfred*. Compare the opening page of “La Jeune Parque” to the opening of “In Memory”:

Cette main, sur mes traits qu’elle rêve effleurer,  
Distraitement docile à quelque fin profonde,  
Attend de ma faiblesse une larme qui fonde,  
Et que de mes destins lentement divisé,  
Le plus pur en silence éclaire un coeur brisé  
La houle me murmure une ombre de reproche,

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<sup>82</sup> Mackay in *The Universal Self comments*: “In a letter to M. Lafont in 1922, Valéry called his poem a reverie, ‘with all the ruptures, all the renewals and surprises of a reverie. But at the same time a reverie in which the conscious consciousness is both the subject and the object.’ ‘Imagine,’ he wrote, ‘someone waking in the middle of the night, and the whole of his life appearing and speaking to him about itself... sensuality, memories, emotions, sensations of the body, the depth of memory and the light of former skies seen again.... Of this knotted thread, which has neither beginning nor end, I have made a monologue, on which I imposed, before I began, conditions of form as severe as the substance was free’” (153).

<sup>83</sup> On this figure, see Brian Reed, *Hart Crane: After His Lights* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 207-8.



strike of the serpent in terms of its “sovereign rays, weapons invincible, / The shooting glances of your eternity” (“Ces souverains éclats, ces invincibles armes”) and O’Hara’s poem, too, is concerned with the “weapons” the selves use for protection, but might be too apparent to provide protection against the predatory “creatures”. The “shooting glances of your eternity” (“les élancements de votre éternité”) are echoed at the end of the first section of “In Memory”, “and animal death whips out its flashlight, / whistling / and slipping the glove off the trigger hand” (*CP*, 253). “Une rumeur de plainte et de resserrement”, translated as “A rumor of lamentation and self-constraint” can be translated as “a murmured moan and tightening”, closer to O’Hara’s “the imperceptible moan of covered breathing” (*CP*, 253).

Valéry’s poem establishes a central character from amidst a slew of mythic precursors, including Eve, Psyche, Helen, and Pandora, to become, as Lawler describes her, “our destiny struggling with the inherent mystery of the mortal self”.<sup>85</sup> This youngest fate and her elusive hunter, the Serpent, which amongst other things appears to be self-awareness, are struggling between freedom and destiny. The young fate is born of the “loaded wound” of the serpent’s sting, the “poison” that “enlightens me”. The young fate addresses the serpent:

Cher Serpent... Je m’enlace, être vertigineux!  
 Cesse de me prêter ce mélange de nœuds  
 Ni ta fidélité qui me fuit et devine...  
 Mon âme y peut suffire, ornement de ruine! (*Poems*, 72)

Dear Snake.... I coil, vertiginous being, on myself!  
 Lend me no longer your enwound confusion  
 And your fidelity that eludes and knows me....  
 My soul, a ruin’s ornament, will suffice instead! (*Poems*, 73)

From the first section of “In Memory” we switch to the fifth, the two sections most apparently indebted to Valéry’s poetry of the serpent. Compare the above to:

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the imperceptible moan of covered breathing [open mouths gasping for the cries of the bettors for the lungs / of earth]” (*CP*, 253)

<sup>85</sup> Lawler, “Notes and Commentaries,” 452.





The “smooth” serpent echoes “Car toute à la faveur de mes membres unis” (*Poems*, 98) [“the smooth oneness of my limbs”] (*Poems*, 99).

Later in “La Jeune Parque” we understand how the serpent provides “insight” or some other charge of illumination,<sup>88</sup> “L’horreur m’illumine, execrable harmonie!” (*Poems*, 86), [“Horror gives me insight, accursed harmony!”] (*Poems*, 87). Consider:

Mystérieuse MOI, pourtant, tu vis encore!  
 Tu vas te reconnaître au lever de l’aurore  
 Amèrement la même...

Un miroir de la mer

Se lève... Et sur la lèvre, un soirire d’hier  
 Qu’annonce avec ennui l’effacement des signes,  
 Glace dans l’orient déjà les pâles lignes  
 De lumière et de pierre, et la pleine prison  
 Où flottera l’anneau de l’unique horizon...  
 Regarde: un bras très pur est vu, qui se dénude.  
 Je te revois, mon bras... Tu portes l’aube...

O rude

Réveil d’une victime inachevée... et seuil  
 Si doux... si clair, que flatte, affleurement d’écueil,  
 L’onde basse, et que lave une houle amortie!...  
 L’ombre qui m’abandonne, impérissable hostie,  
 Me découvre vermeille à de nouveaux désirs,  
 Sur le terrible autel de tous mes souvenirs. (*Poems*, 90-92)

Thing of mystery, ME, are you living yet!  
 When dawn’s curtain lifts, you will recognize  
 Your same bitter self....

A mirror is rising

From the sea.... And on its lip a smile of yesterday  
 Heralded by the weary extinction of the signs,  
 Already in the east fixes the faint lines  
 Of light and stone, and the ample prison  
 Where will float the ring of the single horizon....  
 Look: a purest arm is seen baring itself,  
 My arm: I see you again.... You bear the dawn....

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<sup>88</sup> See O’Hara’s brilliant interpretation of Pollock’s art as one of insight in *Art Chronicles 1954-1966* (New York: Braziller, 1975), 13.

Rude

Waking of a victim undispached... and still  
So gentle... bright, soothed level with the reef  
By the low wave, and washed by a deadened surf!...  
The darkness that sheds me, indestructible victim,  
Unveils me rosy to newborn desires  
On the terrible altar of all my memories. (*Poems*, 91-93)

O'Hara's "And yet" matches Valéry's "pourtant" when introducing a kind of apostrophic self-examination, challenging that which is living and that which is dead in subjectivity to battle. "Mystérieuse MOI", earlier "Harmonieuse MOI", matches "I myself" who must now kill in order to do what? The young fate turns through the poem from memory, through attention, to consciousness, until she "will awaken before our eyes to self-consciousness, to awareness of her "Moi"-always written with a capital and at times entirely capitalized, MOI, as though to underline its thematic importance."<sup>89</sup>

To "save the serpent", and whatever deathly promise it contains, thereby assures the perpetual reinvention necessary to remain truly alive and also to kill off the lingering of past lives, of memories, in the present: past love could not be transformed into a dead effigy of the past, "into history", and therefore lingers in the "always and everywhere" of the "present, the scene of my selves". How to be truly alive? The serpent's fluidity must sever deadening causality, as performed by that stunning line break from "always and everywhere" to "present". Such presentness cannot be contained symbolically or in language, but acted out in the "serpent's turn" (*CP*, 256) of the line break. It's set up metrically with great precision, too, the trochaic "always" implying a definitiveness, the prosaic, lingering "everywhere" implying a spreading out and suffusion, before the trochaic opening of "present" reflects "always", in newly resolved persistence.

Valéry's narcissistic "mirror" rising from the surf showing in its past a minor joy relates to the following description of the "beautiful things" in the memory of O'Hara's poem:

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<sup>89</sup> Duchesne-Guillemain and Emmett Gossen, "Introduction to *La Jeune Parque*," 98.

but the prey  
 is always fragile and like something, as a seashell can be  
 a great Courbet, if it wishes. To bend the ear of the outer world.

When you turn your head  
 can you feel your heels, undulating? that's what it is  
 to be a serpent. I haven't told you of the beautiful things  
 in my lives, and watching the ripple of their loss disappear  
 along the shore, underneath ferns,  
 face downward in the ferns  
 my body, the naked host to my many selves[...] (*CP*, 256)

Can we not take Valéry's lines as poetic motivation for O'Hara's  
 poem?<sup>90</sup>

L'ombre qui m'abandonne, impérissable hostie,  
 Me découvre vermeille à de nouveaux desires,  
 Sur le terrible autel de tous mes souvenirs. (*Poems*, 92)

The darkness that sheds me, indestructible victim,  
 Unveils me rosy to newborn desires

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<sup>90</sup> Consider this, too, from the edition of Valéry's *Selected Writings* O'Hara owned: "The searing lesson is more complete still. It was not enough for our generation to learn from its own experience how the most beautiful things and the most ancient, the most formidable and the best ordered, can perish *by accident*; in the realm of thought, feeling, and common sense, we witnessed extraordinary phenomena: paradox suddenly become fact, and obvious fact brutally belied." "The Crisis of the Mind" [published in *The Athenaeum* (London), April 11 and May 2 1919] in *Paul Valéry: An Anthology*, selected by James R. Lawler (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 95. In the following quotation we can imagine the inventors will give way to the scientists of World War II, struggling to control the force of the nuclear bomb that would end the war, and O'Hara's participation in the Pacific: "While inventors were feverishly searching their imaginations and the annals of former wars for the means of doing away with barbed wire, of outwitting submarines or paralyzing the flight of airplanes, her soul was intoning at the same time all the incantations it ever knew, and giving serious consideration to the most bizarre prophecies; she sought refuge, guidance, consolation throughout the whole register of her memories, past acts, and ancestral attitudes" (96). Such switches between "memories, past acts, and ancestral attitudes" is a pretty fair approximation of the energy of O'Hara's poem.

On the terrible altar of all my memories. (*Poems*, 93)

Obscurity, the shadow that abandons me, imperishable sacrificial victim, unveils the red of the “heart / that bubbles with red ghosts” (*CP*, 256) with the living *furia* of new desire, born on the “terrible altar of all my memories”, the “cancerous statue”. There are several references in Valéry’s poem that liken the self to “tombeau”. Perhaps O’Hara’s statue lies on the “terrible altar” which is a sepulchre, referencing Milton’s charge:

To live a life half dead, a living death,  
 And buried; but O yet more miserable!  
 Myself, my sepulchre, a moving grave.<sup>91</sup>

“In Memory of my Feelings” seeks this hostile, serpentine presence as the necessity to kill off, to murder, the past selves, the selves of memories, who otherwise haunt present experience. The “insight” referred to above, earlier the “souverains éclats” of “les élancements” (*Poems*, 68), and the “silence éclairé”, these are all the lightning strikes of a knowledge of mortality, symbolised by the gaze and strike of the serpent. Such combinations of sovereignty, light and silence pepper Valéry’s poem.

Je soutenais l’éclat de la mort toute pure  
 Telle j’avais jadis le soleil soutenu...  
 Mon corps désespéré tendait le torse nu  
 Où l’âme, ivre de soi, de silence et de gloire,  
 Prête à s’évanouir de sa propre mémoire,  
 Écoute, avec espoir, frapper au mur pieux  
 Ce cœur, - qui se ruine à coups mystérieux,  
 Jusqu’à ne plus tenir que de sa complaisance  
 Un frémissement fin de feuille, ma présence... (*Poems*, 94)

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<sup>91</sup> Think, too, of the following passage from Shelley’s “Essay on Love”: “Thou demandest, What is Love? It is that powerful attraction towards all that we conceive, or fear, or hope beyond ourselves, when we find within our own thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void and seek to awaken in all things that are a community with what we experience within ourselves.[...] Soon as this want or power is dead, man becomes the living sepulchre of himself, and what yet survives is the mere husk of what once he was.” Quoted in McGann, *Poetics*, 170-1.

I withstood the dazzle of death in its purity  
 As I formerly had withstood the sun....  
 My body desperate stretched its naked torso  
 Where the soul, crazed with self, silence, and glory  
 Ready to faint away from its own memory  
 Listens, in hope, to this heart knocking against  
 The pious wall, with a secret, self-destroying beat,  
 Till only from sheer compliance does it keep up  
 This thin quivering of a leaf, my presence.... (*Poems*, 95)

The insight of death and the clarity of sunlight are associated. There is an odd erotics to this passage, the deathly gaze behaving as a kind of light and heat under which the body can unfurl in its pleasures. O'Hara's reference to the acoustic echo of the seashell, in which resides the non-sentence, "To bend the ear of the outer world", reflects a narcissistic logic by which reflection, echo, rhythm, counter-intuitively antagonize and pull apart the self.

There is a buried Christian symbolism in these poems, particularly surrounding the roles of sacrificial victim or host. O'Hara writes:

face downward in the ferns  
 my body, the naked host to my many selves, shot  
 by a guerilla warrior or dumped from a car into ferns  
 which are themselves *journalières*. (*CP*, 256)

What are "the ferns" here (although they more directly recall Stevens' "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War")? The syntax is ambiguous. *Journalières* means either, as an adjective, daily or everyday, implying banality, or as a noun meaning a day labourer, or even commuter, so perhaps "themselves" refers back to the "many selves" rather than to the "ferns"? Corporeality, the spiritual grounded in flesh plays "host" to the Whitmanian multitudes (host also meaning multitudes). Valéry's altar might be used in the Eucharist, on which the bread as body of Christ will be laid. Host likely derives from the Latin *hostis*, meaning enemy, so O'Hara's "naked host to my many selves" also understands that memory and the body may be sworn adversaries, as played out by the assassination that follows. In Valéry the body is "désespéré tendait le torse nu", its naked torso tensed. The translation is poor; the soul is not so much crazed as made drunk or intoxicated by the self (a

much more Baudelairean conviction), suggesting again that self or subjectivity are not coterminous with whatever is to be saved by this poem. Made drunk by “de soi, de silence et de gloire”/ “self, silence, and glory”, or, perhaps better, self, quietness, and fame, the soul passes out, blacks out (much less dignified than the translation “faint”) from its own memories. We might read the heart striking (“frapper”), rather than knocking, against a devotional wall (in O’Hara, “against my will / against my love”), its mysterious blows breaking the self, until only an indulgency or complacency holds up the trembling ends of this leaf, my presence. “[C]omplaisance” offers various difficulties in its translations, but I suspect something close to the kind of cunning attributed to the serpent would be a better rendering. The leaf (“de feuille”) doubles as paper, suggesting the presence of the poetic voice is held, trembling, only on the slightness of the page.

“Qui s’aliène?... Qui s’envole?... Qui se vautre?...  
 À quel détour caché, mon coeur s’est-il fondu?  
 Quelle conque a redit le nom que j’ai perdu?  
 Le sais-je, quel reflux traître m’a retirée  
 De mon extrémité pure prématurée,  
 Et m’a repris le sens de mon vaste soupir? (*Poems*, 98)

“Who is estranged?... Who is vanishing?... Wallowing?...  
 In what blind turning did my heart melt away?  
 What shell echoed to the name I had given up?  
 Can I guess what treacherous ebb withdrew me  
 From my naked and untimely extremity,  
 And took away the sense of my huge sigh? (*Poems*, 99)

Moments of similarity in “In Memory” include the “serpent’s turn”; the “opposite of visionary” matches the “détour caché” (“blind turning” or perhaps “hidden” or “secret” turning); the “naked host to my many selves” relates to the “mon extrémité pure et prématurée”; and “as a seashell can be / a great Courbet, if it wishes” recalls “Quelle conque a redit le nom que j’ai perdu?”, where we might translate “forgotten” or “lost” rather than “given up”. Valéry’s question is perhaps stated thus: how did the rhythm of life, its ebb and flow, split me from my “naked” self?

Cherche, du moins, dis-toi, par quelle sourde suite

La nuit, d'entre les morts, au jour t'a reconduite?  
 Souviens- toi de toi-même, et retire à l'instinct  
 Ce fil (ton doigt doré le dispute au matin),  
 Ce fil dont la finesse aveuglément suivie  
 Jusque sur cette rive a ramené ta vie...  
 Sois subtile... cruelle... ou plus subtile!... Mens  
 Mais sache!... Enseigne-moi par quels enchantements,  
 Lâche que n'a su fuir sa tiède fumée,  
 Ni le souci d'un sein d'argile parfumée,  
 Par quel retour sur toi, reptile, as-tu repris  
 Tes parfums de caverne et tes tristes esprits? (*Poems* 96-98)

Seek at least, and declare by what sly paths  
 Night restored you to day from among the dead?  
 Recall self to self, reclaim from instinct  
 That thread (your golden finger vies for it with morning)  
 That thread whose fine-spun trace blindly followed  
 Has led your life again back to this shore....  
 Be subtle... or cruel... or more subtle still!...  
 Cheat, but find out! Tell me by what wiles,  
 Coward whom her own warm breath could not relinquish,  
 Nor the fond love of a breast of perfumed clay,  
 By what self-recollection, reptile, did you  
 Resume your cavernous savor and your glooms?  
 (*Poems*, 97-99)<sup>92</sup>

The poem asks to “Recall self to self, reclaim from instinct[...] That thread whose fine-spun trace blindly followed / Has led your life again back to this shore...” The reference to Ariadne’s thread relates the knowledge of mortality associated with the thread to Valéry’s attempt to make the ebb and flow of sensibility find a compatible rhythm such that the self is recalled to itself; can this juncture of inward and outward flow only meet, finally, at death? Is that death here replayed as the “vaste soupir”, an orgasmic closure? The “instinct” here is *thanatos*, the instinct not to self-preservation but to unselfing destruction.

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<sup>92</sup> Some notes on the translation: “Enseigne-moi par quels enchantements” might better read “Teach me by what enchantments”, rather than “wiles” because of the “chant”, the song, contained therein, echoed in O’Hara’s poem with “singly”.

Brian Stimpson describes the final section of the poem in which the Parque comes to the edge of the sea and reflects.

The scene proposed is one of recollection and reassessment evident in the tenses and moods of the first sketch; the confrontation of ‘selves’ is manifest as she remembers her former self, the experience she has undergone as well as the suggestion in the perfect conditional of what she perhaps ought to have done.<sup>93</sup>

The repetition of “souverains” (“sovereign”) refers to the “merveilleuse fin”, the sovereign act of self-murder to achieve the “absolute”, part of Valéry’s obsession with “a point of identification with the universal laws”.<sup>94</sup>

After surviving the quick illumination of death in self-sacrifice, (“Je soutenais l’éclat de la mort toute pure”), the young fate asks whether she should indeed have fulfilled the “merveilleuse fin” of choosing death:

Ô n’aurait-il fallu, folle, que j’accomplisse  
Ma merveilleuse fin de choisir pour supplice  
Ce lucide dédain des nuances du sort?  
Trouveras-tu jamais plus transparente mort  
Ni de pente plus pure où je rampe à ma perte  
Que sur ce long regard de victime entr’ouverte,  
Pâle, qui se résigne et saigne sans regret? (*Poems*, 94)

Oh fool, ought I not to have fulfilled  
My marvellous aim, choosing for self-torture  
My lucid contempt for fate’s varying moods?  
Will you ever light on a death more translucent,  
On a purer slope whereby to creep to perdition  
Than by that long gaze of the victim laid open,  
Pale, resigned, bleeding away without regret? (*Poems*, 95)

For Stimpson the “‘transparente mort’ represents for her ‘le moment souverain’.”<sup>95</sup> The murder of the corporeal aspect allows

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<sup>93</sup> Stimpson, *Paul Valéry and Music*, 223.

<sup>94</sup> Stimpson, *Paul Valéry and Music*, 229.

<sup>95</sup> Stimpson, *Paul Valéry and Music*, 229.

the mind to look down on the body as victim. The Fate asks herself whether she would regret such a decision, such a sovereign act?

The serpent's predation on affective lives, the "feelings" for which O'Hara's poem is an elegy, is therefore a necessary harm, a warning not to let past lives calcify around the martyrdom of a love. The self cannot coagulate at the close of this poem, since doing so is to lose the capability of movement, and "since to move is to love", solidification must be avoided. Hence the willed forgetting of "that one" love:

And yet  
 I have forgotten my loves, and chiefly that one, the cancerous  
 statue which my body could no longer contain,  
against my will  
 against my love  
 become art,  
     I could not change it into history  
 and so remember it,  
             and I have lost what is always and everywhere  
 present, the scene of my selves, the occasion of these ruses,  
 which I myself and singly must now kill  
             and save the serpent in their midst. (*CP*, 257)

The "cancerous statue" of a past love as it is becoming reified inside the body of the self is comparable to the "ruin's ornament" of Valéry. O'Hara's ersatz hankering after the "Roman copies" (*CP*, 254) of Greek statuary recalls his frequent play around Prometheus and Pygmalion, and returns us to the Medusan stare of the first section. Valéry's sense of doomed cultural empires (which I footnote later with a consideration of his "The Crisis of the Mind" essay) matches well O'Hara's more laconic take; for O'Hara there are erotic thrills in ancient effigies. What is the "cancerous / statue", then, but a parodic relic of its original love?

The "cancerous / statue which my body could no longer contain" echoes the following passage:

Délicieux linceaux, mon désordre tiède,  
 Couche où je me répands, m'interroge et ma cède,  
 Où j'allai de mon coeur noyer les battements,  
 Presque tombeau vivant dans mes appartements,  
 Qui respire, et sur qui l'éternité s'écoute,

Place pleine de moi qui m'avez prise toute,  
Ô forme de ma forme et la creuse chaleur  
Que mes retours sur moi reconnaissent la leur,  
Voici que tant d'orgueil qui dans vos plis se plonge  
À la fin se mélange aux bassesses du songe!  
Dans vos nappes, où lisse elle imitait sa mort  
L'idole malgré soi se dispose et s'endort,  
Lasse femme absolue, et les yeux dans ses larmes,  
Quand, de ses secrets nus les antres et les charmes,  
Et ce reste d'amour qui se gardait le corps  
Corrompirent sa perte et ses mortels accords. (*Poems*, 100-102)

Shrouds delectable, warm disarray,  
Couch where I spread, question, yield to myself,  
Where I set out to drown my beating heart,  
Living tomb almost within my dwelling,  
Breathing, on which eternity is conscious,  
Shape that is filled by me and takes me whole,  
Oh, form of my form, and hollow warmth  
Which my returning senses knew as theirs,  
Now all the pride that plunges in your folds  
Is confused in the end with the low shallows of dreams!  
In your sheets where smooth she simulated  
Her death, the reluctant idol lies drowsing,  
Weary, absolute woman, eyes sunk in her tears,  
Since the grottoes and charms of her naked secrets  
And that relic of love which possessed her body  
Undid her ruin, and her mortal pact. (*Poems*, 101-3)

That “tombeau vivant” (“living tomb”), the “forme de ma forme” (“form of my form”) is the “reste d'amour qui se gardait le corps” (“relic of love which possessed her body”/“the ruin of love kept in the body”): this is the “cancerous / statue” which accretes inside the person memorializing the past. This is the incremental death of sacrificing life to past love. The “secrets nus les antres et les charmes” (“charms of her naked secrets”). Valéry suggests: “Those who know how to read me will read an autobiography in the form,[...] for the substance matters little... it was from language that I started.”<sup>96</sup> Valéry’s “La Jeune Parque” ends with a description of

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<sup>96</sup> Quoted in Mackay, *The Universal Self*, 154.

the youngest fate setting herself against the wind as the wind raises the sea, a passage which echoes both the close of “Le Cimetière Marin” and, bathetically, O’Hara’s “To Hell with It”. In “La Jeune Parque” we read:

Si l’âme intense souffle, et renfle furibonde  
 L’onde abrupte sur l’onde abattue, et si l’onde  
 Au cap tonne, immolant un monstre de candeur,  
 Et vient des hautes mers vomir la profondeur  
 Sur ce roc, d’où jaillit jusque vers mes pensées  
 Un éblouissement d’étincelles glacées,  
 Et sur toute ma peau que morde l’âpre éveil,  
 Alors, malgré moi-même, il le faut, ô Soleil,  
 Que j’adore mon coeur où tu viens connaître,  
 Doux et puissant retour du délice de naître,

Feu vers qui se soulève une vierge de sang  
 Sous les espèces d’or d’un sein reconnaissant! (*Poems*, 102-4)

If the intense soul snuffs and furious swells  
 The sheer on the shattered wave, and if the headland  
 Breaker thunders, immolating a snowy monster  
 Come from the open sea to vomit the deeps  
 Over this rock, whence leaps to my very thought  
 A dazzling burst of icy sparks, and over  
 All my skin, stung awake by the harsh shock,  
 Then, even against my will, I must, oh Sun,  
 Worship this heart where you seek to know yourself,  
 Strong, sweet renewal of birth’s own ecstasy,

Fire to which a virgin of blood uplifts herself  
 Beneath the gold coinage of a grateful breast! (*Poems*, 103-5)

Note the trapped “malgré moi-même” (“against my will” or “in spite of”) which is placed on the right hand side of the page by O’Hara:

against my will  
 against my love

Valéry's description of a re-birth by the side of the sea does locate the drama in a similar place to that of "In Memory". In his brilliant essay, "Dream and the Unconscious", Malcolm Bowie reads the conclusion to this poem as follows:

Violent self-wounding and tender self-giving mark out the extreme emotional horizons of an interiority that has become vast and many-mansioned. In the course of the monologue, the Parque has become a working model of the natural world, a theatre in which its creative and destructive energies conduct their mighty battle. The new dilated human selfhood upon which the poem ends brings the speaker to the threshold of the non-differentiation from which she departed, but with this difference: that self-loss is now chosen rather than enforced, an opportunity rather than a limitation.<sup>97</sup>

The autonomy, the agency, to choose "self-loss" is the Parque's final ecstatic act. Bowie's essay captures the intensity of the sacrifice, but discloses in it not simply the dynamic by which rebirth follows the trauma of a wound, but how that wounding is a mark of pleasure, a "pleasurable violence - a goad, a bite, a rupture - from which the benefits of self-knowledge are expected to flow" referring to the "heavy wound", the "subtle bite" and the "young hurt". Bowie writes: "The poem's larger sense of dramatic outcome is perpetually being teased by an always precocious desire to have done, to receive now rather than at some appointed later time its 'lumineuse rupture'."<sup>98</sup>

Paul Gifford describes Valéry's conception of the "person" as "the sum of the contingent qualities pre-defining an individual - in short, the negated Other."<sup>99</sup> Against this Other moves the "pure Self", the "identifier-liberator: the function placing our true identity elsewhere-and-beyond in the very act of recognising - and rejecting - all particularity; it restores to selfhood a character of

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<sup>97</sup> Malcolm Bowie, "Dream and the Unconscious," in *Reading Paul Valéry: Universe in Mind*, ed. Paul Gifford, associate ed. Brian Stimpson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 27.

<sup>98</sup> Bowie, "Dream and Unconscious," 272.

<sup>99</sup> Paul Gifford, "Self and Other: Valéry's 'lost object of desire'," in *Reading Paul Valéry*, 284.

free potentiality, open dynamism, human transcendence.”<sup>100</sup> We can see in that construction an agon between viperine, Medusan multiplicity and serpentine singularity, a contest between contingent (and therefore multiple) memorial selves and the autonomy of the singular. Gifford cites Valéry’s claim that “man communicates with himself, by the same means he has for communicating with *the other* / Consciousness needs a fictive other – an exteriority – it develops only in developing that *alterity*”.<sup>101</sup> That dynamic alterity is born of the wounding described above. Whiting argues: “The serpent and its bite symbolize here the sexual nature of the Parque as well as her conscious awareness of herself, and not ‘evil’ or awareness of good and evil. She is ‘sinueuse’ (l. 35), because she contains this serpent within herself.”<sup>102</sup> According to Paul Gifford the “phantasmatic Medusa” had plagued Valéry’s consciousness since he was twenty-one. The Medusa alerted Valéry “to the secret presence and disruptive power of psycho-sexual eros, experienced as Another within.” This “Other within” is “said to emerge out of the cavity or quick of a ‘grievous wound’.” For Gifford “it is clear that the wound is, structurally, that of the self’s own *dédoublement* and inner division. The mutation involved in the Parque’s awakening has torn her away – fatefully and against the deepest gravitation of the heart – from a state of unitary being-in-the-world, which is nostalgically celebrated in the hymn to the lost paradise of the ‘Harmonieuse MOI’.”<sup>103</sup>

“In Memory of My Feelings”, too, develops according to a dynamic between its wounds, the memories, particularly of love and of the dead, the “dead hunting” the living (*CP*, 253). The sense of an internally antagonistic split can all be related to Valéry’s earlier inspiration. This section of my essay has, therefore, taken some of the most astute comments about Valéry’s poem and stated explicitly, or implied, their value when approaching O’Hara’s poem. How, then, is O’Hara’s poem so substantially different from that of Valéry? There’s something so overwrought in Valéry’s poem, and O’Hara’s variety of speeds, his bathetic collapses and visceral charms, play out the drama, not empty as farce but

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<sup>100</sup> Gifford, “Self and Other,” 284.

<sup>101</sup> Gifford, “Self and Other,” 295.

<sup>102</sup> Whiting, *Paul Valéry*, 26.

<sup>103</sup> Gifford, “Self and Other: Valéry’s ‘lost object of desire,’” 281-2.

candidly as farce. Its agonism is not lessened by its hilarity, but instead O'Hara demonstrates how that contestation is not a source of self-aggrandizement. It is still possible to be a bore, even if your sense of self is riven with its contradictions.

For Valéry the erotic seems serious, misogynistic, and a burden; these qualities infuse the contestatory selfhood he represents in his poems. O'Hara is not only much funnier, but understands implicitly how moving humour is, and how evasive: humour does not act to cancel the agonism described, but is a strategy of the agonism, repressing painful truths in acerbic asides, deflating the pretensions to grandiloquence, energizing the perspicacity of Valéry's thoughtfulness with the speed and grace of insight. What is the portrait of a mind worth if it imagines its cognitive prosody to be elaborative without the stumbles, leaps and falls of humour, always too quick for the ponderousness of "yearning".<sup>104</sup>

I am conscious of the predominantly de-politicized reading I have so far offered. Here, Lytle Shaw's work is crucial. According to Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin and Emmett Gossen, Valéry's research at the time of writing "La Jeune Paque" revolved around, in Valéry's note, "the astounding fact of finding oneself, of understanding oneself, of saying to oneself almost everything".<sup>105</sup> By referring back to the O'Hara's recitation of the variety of mock subjects in "In Memory of My Feelings", the passage beginning, "I am a Hittite in love with a horse" (*CP*, 256), as a nod to Rimbaud, we can imagine O'Hara to be undertaking a Valéryesque search for self in the midst of a Rimbaudian attack. The relation of self to multitude is key to the modernist lyric "I"; the by now familiar phrase "JE est autre" and *A Season in Hell* inspires the fourth part of "In Memory" and its catalogue of "sordid identifications".<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> See "Personism," *CP*, 498.

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Duchesne-Guillemin and Gossen, "Introduction to La Jeune Parque," 97.

<sup>106</sup> The poem as published incorporated an earlier piece, dated in manuscript from June 17, 1955, which includes a similar catalogue. It lacks the prosodic élan of the final poem, whilst promoting by repetition the line "what land is this, so free?" (*CP*, 538)

I am a jockey with a sprained ass-hole I am the light mist  
in which a face appears  
and it is another face of blonde I am a baboon eating a  
banana (*CP*, 256)

Perloff describes the “catalogue of assumed identities” as a “series of ecstatic identifications in which the poet is able to get outside himself and act in various desirable or comically absurd and hyperbolic roles”.<sup>107</sup> As Shaw notes, the task of living “as variously as possible” produces a catalogue of freedoms “both violent and imperial”. Shaw draws attention to Rimbaud’s “bad blood” section of *A Season in Hell*, in which the lyric speaker identifies himself with “barbarians” and Africans to “appropriate the anti-Communist rhetoric of associating the workers with both”.<sup>108</sup> Shaw adds, perceptively:

And yet if O’Hara’s poem, too, makes links between metropolis and periphery, Rimbaud’s concerns do not map neatly onto U.S. and world political conditions of 1956: the new scene is not one of opening up but rather of *transferring* colonial properties; and this operation is taking place not under the (differently hypocritical) French humanist rhetoric in which *liberté* is checked by *égalité* and *fraternité* but rather within the particular American rhetoric of singular and infinite “freedom.” Living “as variously as possible” thus becomes – in the world of “a Hittite in love with a horse,” “a sprained ass-hole,” and “a doctor eating a child” – a kind of monstrosity (variously funny and not) in which the freedoms of “our democracy” (256) get turned inside out through an “existence of emphasis” (254) that produces anything but “humanism”<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Perloff, “Watchman,” 212.

<sup>108</sup> Shaw, *Poetics of Coterie*, 197.

<sup>109</sup> Shaw is also spot on in transcribing the “III Statement” of W.H. Auden’s queer text *The Orators*:

One charms by thickness of wrist; one by variety of positions;  
one has a beautiful skin, one a fascinating smell. One has  
prominent eyes, is bold at accosting. One has water sense; he  
can dive like a swallow without using his hands. One is obeyed

It is a critique we have to take seriously, that O'Hara's neo-colonial historical moment might be felt in the poem's touristic sense of epic history, its use of kitsch: "lying in an oasis one day, / playing catch with coconuts, they suddenly smell oil."

#### 4. ORNATE POETICS: MEMORY IN "IN MEMORY OF MY FEELINGS"

This section is a digression on my broader project of writing on O'Hara. It does, however, have a purpose within the framework of these commentaries, which is to describe O'Hara's poetics and prosody as *ornate*, driven by elaboration and variety. I am arguing more specifically that the elegy for feeling which is "In Memory of My Feelings" is a version of the more consistently or essentially ornate poetic art of Paul Valéry, and that O'Hara's poem is in its way a gloss or commentary on Valéry's serpentine work. That Valéry described *La Jeune Parque* as an embellishment of "ordre", and commented, "there is nothing so valuable for getting one's ideas clear as to write a long and obscure poem" feeds my interpretation of his ornate poetics: rather than decide upon an idea or a subject matter to be represented in poetry, his poem is an elaboration of its own central obscurity, an unfurling of an unknown into clarity by the persistence of an ornate prosody of sensibility.<sup>110</sup> The ornate fetishizes involution, and O'Hara's poem takes the involuted complexity of Valéry's poetics and turns it

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by dogs, one can bring down snipe on the wing. One can do cart wheels before theatre queues; one can slip through a narrow ring. One with a violin can conjure up images of running water; one is skilful at improvising a fugue; the bowel tremors at the pedal-entry. One amuses by pursing his lips; or can imitate the neigh of a randy stallion. One casts metal in black sand; one wipes the eccentrics of a great engine with cotton waste. One jumps out of windows for profit. One makes leather instruments of torture for titled masochists; one makes ink for his son out of oak galls and rusty nails (62).

One scene in particular will reverberate, that of the "One [who] jumps out of windows for profit". In his biography of O'Hara, Gooch tells of the suicide of a man who jumped from the window of the YMCA, O'Hara writing in "In Memory", sardonically, of "an eventful trip" (*CP*, 255).

<sup>110</sup> Valéry quoted in James R. Lawler, "Notes and Commentaries," in *The Collected Works of Paul Valéry, V.1, Poems*, 448.

inside-out. O'Hara's poetry tends to prefer (although his work is so various any statements on a prosodic signature are impossible) the energy of variety, which I'll mention below as within the domain of ornament, but is still compelled by the ornate poetics of elaboration; think of the flow of "Having a Coke with You" or "In Favor of One's Time" for examples. "To Hell with It" continues the prosodic ornateness of "In Memory", and places it within an alternative circular elegiac formalism: the dead-stop, full stop, "To Hell with It[...] And mean it." "To Hell with It" marks the conflict between the ornate and the finite.

The substantial length of this digression is, I hope, justified by the necessity to understand the term ornate as inseparable from the content of the aesthetic work, rather than as a merely decorative appendage or ornament, not so much a difficult thing to do conceptually, but due to the long history of associating the ornate with the ornamental as (in a modernist tradition) unnecessary, extraneous, not integral. The ornamental, inseparable from the ornate, is not merely a term for an added, decorative elaboration; its elaborative poetics are included within the form of the artwork, or within the form of a figure within an artwork (a figure of rhetoric, or the representation of a person). The ornate therefore problematizes distinctions of form and content, form remaining incapable of offering sanctuary against the accidents and emergencies of "sentiment". The ornate is a way of thinking about movement, delight, and grace.

The broader intention of my project on Frank O'Hara is to recuperate a critical vocabulary for the analysis of his poetry that can be particularly sensitive to the comparison of the various art forms. The terms that dominate such a discussion, notably *Ut Pictura Poesis* and *ekphrasis* are too burdened to be sufficiently flexible, the first because of its long history of misinterpretation since Horace, the second because it requires a common subject with which to engage, even if one work provides that subject for the other medium. In some ways these are competing traditions; the first presumes formal comparison is possible, the second that comparison by content is more appropriate. I want a critical vocabulary which can offer sensitive comparative readings whilst also being true to matters of form in different mediums; thus, I want to be able to compare a work of dance by Balanchine with a poem by O'Hara in which the forms of both share some qualities, and yet the limits of the formal comparison are held in view. I am,

therefore, taking into my readings of O’Hara a critical vocabulary derived from the language of art of the Renaissance, and in particular that language which surrounded Michelangelo, both because he was reported to use such terminology, and because the terminology was used to describe his work. This language developed out of traditions of rhetoric, though much of it by the time of Michelangelo is differentiated, subtly, from those rhetorical modes. Much of my work here relies on David Summers’ extraordinary *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, both as a foundational text for my own theorizations of comparative reading, and in this section of my essay, which largely summarizes and restates relevant ideas from his book. This language of art occurs at a moment when its usage appears transgressive, in particular that rhetorical and aesthetic terms move between art mediums. This language is sufficiently developed that it can sustain an aesthetic, yet remains substantially untheorised, and most apt to the “sub-theoretical tradition, close to practice, in its various forms stemming from one idea, the equation of painting and poetry in point of license, an idea that took shape on a broad front in the late Middle Ages.”<sup>111</sup> I’ll come back to that significant “point of license” shortly.

Previously I described “In Memory of My Feelings” according to the *figura serpentinata*, the serpentine twisting of figuration that, for Michelangelo, evoked a living quality in his artworks.<sup>112</sup> Based on the dynamics of the *contrapposto*, of antithetical forces out of balance, the *figura serpentinata* provided a model for both the subject and the form of O’Hara’s poem, and the ambivalent turn backwards and forwards between forms, tropes, symbols and subjects. I want, now, to develop another term, apt to help wheedle out from these poems more of their qualities, and that is *ornatus*, given in two forms that are largely interchangeable (perhaps surprisingly): the ornate and ornament.

The terms ornate and ornament are hardly the most popular terms for serious discussion of the serious arts of modernism but, for Summers, we cannot understand Renaissance art without understanding their role, since the ornate was one of the ways in

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<sup>111</sup> Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, 4.

<sup>112</sup> Sam Ladkin, “‘And now it is the serpent’s turn’: The Rhetoric of the *Figura Serpentinata* in Frank O’Hara’s ‘In Memory of My Feelings,’” (unpublished).

which artistic freedom or license was defended, and one of the methods by which movement and vivacity was made apparent. If we're going to understand the arts of modernism and late-modernism as alternatives to "realism" as a genre, then understanding ornament as an inherent property of art making might prove helpful. Although we might assume the Renaissance to be the withdrawal of ornament on behalf of the arts of perspective, mimesis, realism and representation, to do so would be a mistake. The ornate is not extrinsic to figuration, for example, but intrinsic, and its role (as the ornamental) as extemporizing and embellishing is a function of its manner, which is to move. Ornate stems from Latin *ornatus* meaning adorned, and relates etymologically to *ordo* meaning order, where order, at least at the time of Michelangelo, means any or all of the following: the universal hierarchy created by God; the relation of the parts of the celestial spheres as echoed in the orders of architecture and the dimensions of the human body; and the procedure or order moving from beginning to end, that is as an ontological principle.<sup>113</sup> It is no wonder, therefore, that it becomes a generative term in Valéry's craft. Ornament, as we will see, is concerned with such orders. Its definition at the time of Michelangelo is vexed since each of the terms of value of artworks depends upon and in turn supports a series of other terms: *furia, grazia, motus, viva*.

According to Hellmut Wohl, *ornato* means ornate or ornateness, and can refer to "polish, embellishment, and refinement, whether in the style of a painting or of an oration", or even be synonymous with beauty; it might imply "grace, refinement, sophistication, opulence" or "idealization away from the natural".<sup>114</sup> With classicism and realism it was one of three "principles" required for "style" during the Renaissance, and was "first among them".<sup>115</sup> Wohl describes its significance for artists of the time as greater than that of perspective; against the notion that painting was seen as a "window through which we look into an illusion of space", the Renaissance understood painting as "an ornamented surface". For Vasari, *ornato* could be used to describe

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<sup>113</sup> These principles are derived by Summers from Vincenzo Danti's *Trattato delle perfette proporzioni (Michelangelo and the Language of Art, 297-8)*.

<sup>114</sup> Hellmut Wohl, *The Aesthetics of Italian Renaissance Art: A Reconsideration of Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2 and 5.

<sup>115</sup> Wohl, *Aesthetics*, 2.

anything naturally beautiful, whilst for Leon Battista Alberti *ornamentum* could refer to “any subsidiary component of the whole”, and *ornatus* to “that which offers delight and pleasure”.<sup>116</sup>

Michelangelo (and, by my extension, O’Hara) was obsessed with the evocation, rather than the mere representation of life in his artworks, and Summers describes at length a deeply interwoven collection of terms that go to make up this liveliness, which itself must be understood as part of a Neoplatonic philosophy. Summers quotes Lommazo’s statement that the “greatest grace and loveliness that a figure may have is that it seem to move itself; painters call this the *furia* of the figure”, and we can unpick Michelangelo’s commitment to the evocation of movement as the “soul and locus of the art of painting”.<sup>117</sup> *Motus* (movement), *furia* (liveliness and motility) and *ornatus* were all aspects of artifice, in particular the artifice necessary to create vivacity (*viva*), and were related to poetry in their use of the “fervid invention and exquisite discourse”; that is, their sense of freedom or imaginative license.<sup>118</sup> The *figura serpentinata*, or its synonym *vermiculatus* were typically considered versions of “extreme ornament”; Summers describes “vermiculate construction” as a “sophistic device, condemned by classical writers, embraced with mixed feelings by Cicero”.<sup>119</sup> In other words, the vermiculate, the energetically ornamental, was persuasive in its formal deceptions, and therefore suspicious for the tradition of rhetoric, which knew of its power but feared its specious relation to truth or rightness. *Ornatus* was even more suspicious, however, since it transgressed the bounds of rhetoric. Embellishment was certainly crucial to the skills of the rhetorician, but ornateness was taken to be a manner of distinguishing between rhetoric and the higher art form of poetry. Ornate language exceeded rhetoric and became poetry. Embellishment was even more prized to the rhetorician than invention and disposition:

Unlike rhetoric[...] poetry could speak entirely in terms of figured language, and it was more than anything else in figuration or diction that the personal style of a writer was thought to be evident. Ornament was universally

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<sup>116</sup> Wohl, *Aesthetics*, 54.

<sup>117</sup> Summers, *Michelangelo*, 72 and 74.

<sup>118</sup> Summers, *Michelangelo*, 61.

<sup>119</sup> Summers, *Michelangelo*, 94.

associated with *delectation*, and its proper use was generally defined by the formula “to instruct or convince through delight.”<sup>120</sup>

Ornament, which creates the experience of *delectatio*, was potentially dangerous since its charms of artifice were not necessarily expressive of truth; as Summers concludes, “If poetry (or rhetoric, for that matter) was pure *elocutio*, then it was possible, *by means of the artificial*, to give the false (or the feigned) the sensuous presence of truth.”<sup>121</sup> This is a pretty standard suspicion of rhetoric in general, of course.<sup>122</sup> Ornament and *elocutio* as “sensuous surface” explain the Platonic distinction between rhetorical and philosophical traditions of language use, and explain the difficulty as ever of cleaning language up of such improprieties. More important for Michelangelo was that delight could be the charge of liveliness in a work; in this his use of *ornatus* was poetic rather than rhetorical; it was underpinned by the truth of the poet, or artist, rather than manipulative of falsehoods.

Above I cite the equation of painting and poetry “in point of license”. What does this mean? Summers divides into two traditions. The first, the Horatian tradition, requires the refusal to

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<sup>120</sup> Summers, *Michelangelo*, 43. An introduction to “Figure, Scheme, Trope” can be found in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 409-412. Trope is, according to Quintilian, the “artificial alteration of a word or phrase from its proper meaning to another” and “a change in meaning or lang. from the ordinary and simple form” (409). In this it is a part of figurative language. Figure and trope are both part of *elocutio*.

<sup>121</sup> Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, 43. For Aristotle, *elocutio* is the “choice and arrangement of specific words and phrases” as opposed to *dispositio* (“arrangement of larger units of discourse such as exhortation, narration, peroration), and *inventio* (“subjects, arguments, commonplaces”). Both figures and tropes tend to be defined as divergent from normative language use. See *The New Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 409-10. For more on selection, see Tom Jones, *Poetic Language: Theory and Practice from the Renaissance to the Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 31-42, 148-160.

<sup>122</sup> It’s an argument taken on in positive terms by Charles Altieri as a way of overcoming of modernism’s crisis over fundamental and transcendental truths. See, for example, his “Why Stevens Must be Abstract,” in *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*, ed. Albert Gelpi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 86 -118.

permit poetry, “*by means of the artificial*, to give the false[...] the sensuous presence of truth”. Poetry was, almost by definition, ornate, and its ornateness prevented it falling back into rhetoric. In the phrase synonymous with Horace, *Ut Pictura Poesis*, Horace’s comparison is not between painting and rhetoric, but painting and poetry. The tradition associated most closely with Horace struggles, thereafter, (via turns to truth or decorum, for example) to limit the forms of invention, the freedoms of artifice, available to the poet or artist. Summers quotes the *Ars poetica* “*pictoribus atque poetis / quidlibet audendi semper fuit aequa potestas*”; painting and poetry are alike at a shared point of license, of invention, and therefore the two traditions are based on the response to this license, this freedom of artifice. For Horace a restraint on such license is necessary; form must be subjected to content, fantasy to truth.

Summers labels the second, and opposed tradition, “sophistic”, and it is described as a Florentine tradition with Petrarch as a foundational figure, and Michelangelo perhaps its greatest exponent. It is to this tradition that I relate O’Hara:

[P]ure artifice, fantastic invention and conspicuous brilliance of execution were all justifiable and critically defensible. In terms of audience its aims were those of epideictic, aimed at persons who understood art and the “difficulties” of virtuosity. As Gorgias himself is supposed to have written, “He who practices deception is more just than he who does not, and he who has yielded to deception is wiser than he who has not.”<sup>123</sup>

For Pino, and for Michelangelo, painting was also like poetry, this time in “making what is not”, that is in the power of its fantasy, its license, rather than in the decision to restrain the imagination of this mutual power. The most ornate language becomes poetry, and poetry includes forms of knowing. Alberti, who certainly fits into the more buttoned up aesthetics of Horace, struggled to maintain restrictions on the elaboration of line, *ornatus*, which he associated with the Florentine tradition, of which Michelangelo was the star. Where the Horatian tradition feared the possible uses of deception,

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<sup>123</sup> Summers, *Michelangelo*, 18.

the tradition of Michelangelo, as it stemmed from Leonardo, was the evocation of animacy.<sup>124</sup>

When Leonardo wrote that the artist must both observe the “serpentizing” of figures and see to it that they were not wooden, he was writing not about the description of movement, but about *grazia e varietà*, significant as movement, the manifestly poetic transformation of the *figura inculta*, the artificial enlivening of which was, as Lomazzo defined it, the purpose of the *figura serpentinata*. The ideal of sinuous and continuous movement as an aesthetic ideal thus passed from two into three dimensions to become, both in the treatment of line and in the composition of the forms it bounded, one of the animating principles of Italian Renaissance art.<sup>125</sup>

We can see this in twentieth century terms as an attack on representation on behalf of an alternative aesthetics of evocation. For Leonardo, Michelangelo, and the Neoplatonic tradition, *delectatio*, as generated by ornament, is delight, an experience of the divine; delight was access to the grace of God. Such *grazia e varietà*, I argue, can be seen not only in the art of Michelangelo and Renaissance mannerism, but in a secular form in the poetry of O’Hara. Again, it is subject matter and form: “Grace / to be born and live as variously as possible. The conception / of the masque barely suggests the sordid identifications”. For O’Hara it was a quality shared between the artforms he loved, in poetry, music, film and, perhaps most emphatically, dance. And it is this sense of the ornate that charges the work of Valéry, its attempt to make the formal properties of the verse sinuous and animate until the poem

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<sup>124</sup> For Leonardo “the identification of painting and poetry bore directly upon an innovative method of pictorial composition. ‘Now have you ever thought,’ Leonardo asks, ‘about how poets compose their verse? They do not trouble to trace beautiful letters, nor do they mind crossing out several lines so as to make them better.’ At this point he turns to the figure. ‘So, painter, rough out the arrangement of the limbs of your figures and first attend to the movements appropriate to the mental state of the creatures that make up your picture rather than to the beauty and perfection of their parts’” (Summers, *Michelangelo*, 74).

<sup>125</sup> Summers, *Michelangelo*, 94.

writes itself, not as representation of a subject, but as the *modulation* of ideas and selfhood.

We can see the distinction between the two traditions according to the location in which their truths reside. For Horace the fantastical must be limited in order not to stray too far from truth-telling, and therefore spare the audience deception. For Petrarch, since he is fated to be a poet (in a self-definition from artisan to genius repeated by Michelangelo), the grace of his poetry is held by the poet *as* poet, and poetry itself *ornaments* the world:

Not only does the god inspire him, but God ordains him; and the precious fruit of his ordination is his poetry, which ornaments the world and men's lives. "The inherent difficulty of the poet's task lies in this, that whereas in the other arts one may attain his goal through sheer toil and study, it is far otherwise with the art of poetry, in which nothing can be accomplished unless a certain inner and divinely given energy is infused in the poet's spirit."<sup>126</sup>

The vivacity of the poet makes the vivacity of the poet's art. The life of the artwork, a display of the grace of *sprezzatura*, is created by the grace of the artist in response to another key challenge, *difficultà* (difficulty), above expressed within the tradition of arguments over the *paragone*. In Petrarch's words:

You delight in brush and colors, both the worth and art of which please, together with variety and novel arrangement (*curiosa disparsio*). So the living gestures of the lifeless, and the movement of unmoving images, figures bursting forth from their places [that is, in relief], and features of countenances so live that you expect voices to break forth at any moment; and there is danger in this, because it is the greatest lure of *ingenium*; whereas the bumpkin (*agrestis*) passes by with but little amazement (*stupore*), there he of *ingenium* lingers, sighing and reverent.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Summers, quoting Petrarch, *Michelangelo*, 34.

<sup>127</sup> Quoted by Summers, *Michelangelo*, 47.

We can see how important was the evocation of movement for poetry, as well as for the visual arts. *Ornatus* in both painting and poetry conveyed this movement. For Leonardo the painter should follow the inventions of poets and “rough out the arrangement of the limbs of your figures and first attend to the movements appropriate to the mental state of the creatures that make up your picture rather than to the beauty and perfection of their parts”.<sup>128</sup> Rather than the artwork representing the movement of the body, the artwork was to evoke the agency of that movement. We can see in Michelangelo’s work movement was relayed by *ornatus*, became graceful, and delightful, in Michelangelo’s drawings for the resurrection, “where pure grace of upward movement is explored to a spiritual purpose not found elsewhere in Renaissance art, this restless seeking after perfect movement in consummately resolved variety again makes its appearance”.<sup>129</sup> Movement charged by *contrapposto*, enlivened by variety, was, after the theory of Aristotle, “a condition of axial disequilibrium of parts of the body”; such qualities of the ornate are therefore tied into figuration, rather than being supplemental to it.<sup>130</sup> Disequilibrium, being off-balance, creates movement.

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<sup>128</sup> Summers, *Michelangelo*, 74

<sup>129</sup> Summers, *Michelangelo*, 76.

<sup>130</sup> Summers, *Michelangelo*, 76. Summers describes the competing traditions as exemplified by Horace on the one hand, and the Florentine tradition of Michelangelo, Dante and Petrarch, derived from studies of Homer and Vergil. Dio Chrysostom commends Homer from being “exceedingly bold and not to be censured”, praising his “frankness and freedom of language”: “he did not choose just one variety of diction, but mingled together every Hellenic dialect[...] and not only the languages of his own day but also those of former generations[...] and he also used many barbarian words as well, sparing none that he believed to have in it anything of charm of vividness.” (Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, 244). This evidence would have been of interest to Poliziano when he came to consider Homer and Vergil, Summers commented that these “conventions have the deepest implications for Michelangelo” (244). Poliziano writes: “Thus in the poetry of Homer we gaze upon examples of all the virtues and all of the vices, and we see the origins of all the sciences, and the images and likenesses of all that concerns mankind” (245). This is a tradition of variety, heterodoxy, contrast, and license. The following is a description of Vergil’s style by Macrobius, emphasizing his “use of all these varied styles” (244): “Vergil’s language is perfectly adapted to every kind of character, being now concise, now copious, now dry, now ornate,

For Michelangelo, ornament becomes a quality of overcoming *difficultà*, that is the virtue made of executing difficult works with grace. Again, the term is underpinned by Neoplatonic thought, since “the *difficultà* of the human figure became a sign of the ontological stature of the human figure”.<sup>131</sup> For the art of Michelangelo it was representation of the human figure in movement, and the evocation of that movement as a living quality, that was, above all, his obsession. The movement of figures, their liveliness, known as *energia*, was for Quintilian the highest attainment of rhetorical skill, and was classed as an ornament.<sup>132</sup> Ornament is therefore “anything but extraneous”:

Contrary to modern rhetorical tastes, it is not simply statement that is most fruitful; ornament rather restores the life lost in the transformation to words, it makes the subject seem to live. Leonardo, discussing *varietà* of movement wrote that “In these precepts of painting an inquiry is made as to the best way of persuading of the nature of movement, as the orators persuade by words....” The goal was not so much to represent life, but to give forms the brightness and presence of life. This imparting of virtual life was achieved by art, through ornament, artifice and license.<sup>133</sup>

So, I’ve described a loop, working through some of the taxonomy of Michelangelo as related by Summers to demonstrate how *ornatus* connects to a host of dependent terms. The common element, or the one I find most significant, is this sense of a deeply attentive and studied art-making placed in the service of a vivacity as an excess, as something irrecuperable to representational models of aesthetics. Many of these terms are ways of pointing to what cannot be adequately described, the liveliness squandered by dogmatically formalist works and theories. Prosody works, or can work, as ornament. Rather than describe the formal embellishment of the poem’s content, prosody can name an inner animacy,

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and now a combination of all these qualities, sometimes flowing smoothly, or at other times raging like a torrent” (245).

<sup>131</sup> Summers, *Michelangelo*, 4.

<sup>132</sup> See Summers, *Michelangelo*, 96.

<sup>133</sup> Summers, *Michelangelo*, 96.

driven, for example, by the sinuousness and variousness of the antagonistic energy of *contrapposto*, that which is out of equilibrium. Ornament cannot survive on its own; it needs to be the motility, the self-movement of something, and therefore this is not pure formalism. This is not the final bonding of form and content, of prosody and language, but their dialectical energy.

In the case of O'Hara's poems, I want to reflect on his evocation of liveliness and memory ("In Memory"), and turn to the dead stop ("To Hell with It"). Without restating what is by now a common move, I understand the pleasure principle and death drive (*thanatos*) as the energizing *contrapposto* of these works, death calcifying life in "In Memory", life meaning "it", even in the act of its own renunciation, in "To Hell with It". I want to build a bridge between the ornate or ornamental poetics described above and the anti-memorializing elegy which is "In Memory of My Feelings"; that bridge is the term *ductus*.

Mary Carruthers in *The Craft of Thought* asks readers to "conceive of memory not only as 'rote,' the ability to reproduce something[...] but as the matrix of a reminiscing cogitation, shuffling and collating 'things' stored in a random-access memory scheme, or set of schemes – a memory *architecture* and a library built up during one's lifetime with the express intention that it be used inventively."<sup>134</sup> That "inventively" is crucial. The "five-fold 'parts' of rhetoric", read as follows (and they move hierarchically down from left to right), "Invention, Disposition, Style, Memory, Delivery".<sup>135</sup> The art of memory could include "*memoria verborum*", something like rote learning, a lowly task for children or slaves, whereas *memoria rerum* was the task that produced wisdom and built character, and could help to perfect one's soul".<sup>136</sup> The art of memory which is meditation, rather than rote learning, "is a *craft* of thinking".<sup>137</sup> Such a definition places memory into an aesthetics, a sense of formal experimentation with the process of recovery: memory is "most usefully thought of as a compositional art."<sup>138</sup> Invention (and Carruthers understands this development to have

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<sup>134</sup> Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, rhetoric, and the making of images, 400-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4.

<sup>135</sup> Carruthers, *Craft*, 7.

<sup>136</sup> Carruthers, *Craft*, 30-1.

<sup>137</sup> Carruthers, *Craft*, 4.

<sup>138</sup> Carruthers, *Craft*, 9.

occurred during the fourth-century) becomes not the recall of scripture but the creative way in which the mind moves through the memory of scripture, its meditative routes; the term for the way in which one travels through memories was called the *ductus*.<sup>139</sup> This is a cognitive model of the paths or ways of memory; the composition of memories is the composition of the work, and its flow. The “movement within and through a work’s various parts” is the *ductus*: “Indeed, *ductus* insists upon movement, the *conduct* of a thinking mind on its *way* through a composition.”<sup>140</sup>

We can begin to rethink “In Memory of My Feelings” according to the *ductus*, the way in which its composition flows and moves by a complex set of personal and historical associations. O’Hara’s love of movement (“to move is to love”) over statuary encourages such a reading, but there is another reason to bring in this further concept of the *ductus*, and that is the relation of *ductus* to ornament. The ornamental composition of ideas and of language are those tropes by which the “associational play” of the mind composes its *ductus* through the memory. Carruthers writes:

An essential first step of invention is thus recollective cogitation. For the process of meaning-making to begin at all, one’s memory must be “hooked up” and “hooked in” to the associational play of the mind at work. That is the essential function of any ornament, and it explains why many of the basic features of the ornaments are also elementary principles of mnemonics: surprise and strangeness (for example, *metaphora*, metonymy, *allegoria*, oxymoron, and, in art, grotesquery), exaggeration (hyperbole and litotes), orderliness and pattern (chiasmus, tropes of repetition, various rhythmic and rhyming patterns), brevity (ellipsis, epitome, synechdoche, and other types of abbreviation) and copiousness (all tropes of amplification), similarity (similitude), opposition (paradox and antithesis) and contrast (tropes of irony). All of these characteristics are essential for making mnemonically powerful associations.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Carruthers, *Craft*, 61.

<sup>140</sup> Carruthers, *Craft*, 77.

<sup>141</sup> Carruthers, *Craft*, 117.

That is, the techniques of ornate or ornamental language are inventive movements through the memory, understood in cognitive terms, rather than simply as a storehouse for information. Ornament makes things stand-out within the similar crafts of memory and literary invention. Sections 2 and 4 are perhaps most open to analysis in the light of their ornaments, and the way in which O'Hara's meditation on his memory moves, its *ductus*. Think, for example, of the way Section 2 opens with "The dead hunting" the living, and memories of family multiplying by kin: "My father, my uncle, my grand-uncle and the several aunts. My / grand-aunt dying for me, like a talisman, in the war / before I had even gone to Borneo"; and we are off, from family into memories of O'Hara's own naval wartime experience.<sup>142</sup> The *ductus* through memory flickers between years: "My 10 my 19, / my 9, and the several years. My 12 years since they all died, philosophically speaking." These elisions, glossed over or repressed gaps in the landscape end twelve years back, which would be, given O'Hara was writing "In Memory" around what he thought was his thirtieth birthday, his eighteenth birthday. Moving away is then tied to a shift into "humanism" and the Arabian inspired Renaissance, presumably with the sexual overtones of such a cultural history. Family history splices with epic and colonial history, the "Arabian ideas", presumably mathematical, which the Marines recite, as they watch the deaths of their enemies in war, drowning:

the trying desperately to count them as they die.  
But who will stay to be these numbers  
when all the lights are dead?<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Gooch traces this "grand aunt" to his Great-Aunt Elizabeth Donahue Reid, known as Lizzie; see *City Poet*, 33-4. I am reminded of the following quotation from Valéry: "Les morts n'ont plus que les vivants pour ressource... il est juste et digne de nous qu'ils soient pieusement accueillis dans nos mémoires et qu'ils boivent un peu de vie dans nos paroles", translated as: "The only resource of the dead is the living... it is just and worthy of us that they should be piously welcomed into our memories and that they should drink a little life in our words". Quoted in Suzanne Nash, "Other voices: intertextuality and the art of pure poetry," in *Reading Paul Valéry*, 188 and 197.

<sup>143</sup> On O'Hara's service on the U.S.S. Nicholas from April 1945, situated off the eastern coast of Borneo, and participating as cover for a land operation by Australian forces ("the invasion of the Australians"), see

The memories of the dead are hunting O'Hara, and the trauma of this wartime experience has been too casually referenced in the past. The third section emphasises epic history, and its relationships to the war for oil in the Middle East exacerbated by World War II. The fourth section shifts from echoes of Whitman and his earlier erotics of war (the "ardent lover of history" going down on a "taut spear off grass", taking time to "admire this flag") into memories of Chicago, where Jane Freilicher heard a man committing suicide by jumping from a window, back to wartime memories, the "German prisoners on the *Prinz Eugen*" being "painted purple" by antiseptics.<sup>144</sup> The purpose of this brief exposition is simply to gesture towards O'Hara's meditative *ductus*, the way a coherent historical timeline is sacrificed for the back and forward of associations, each periodically returning to one or several deaths which, typically, is underplayed within the hectic ornament of the poem.

The list of meditative tropes offered by Carruthers becomes more or less coterminous with the devices of literary language, and I could now go back through "In Memory" glossing the prolific use of surprise, exaggeration, repetition, antithesis, etc. More importantly, we can consider the following "cognitive 'way-finding'

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Gooch, *City Poet*, 85; and "Lament & Chastisement", *Early Writings*, 112-131. The ship also transferred Japanese emissaries prior to their formal surrender (Gooch, *City Poet*, 88). I suspect one of the prompts for the fusion of colonial and intellectual readings of empire is the following, from Valéry: "We had long heard tell of whole worlds that had vanished, of empires sunk without a trace, gone down with all their men and all their machines into the unexplorable depths of the centuries, with their gods and their laws, their academies and their sciences pure and applied, their grammars and their dictionaries, their Classics, their Romantics, and their Symbolists, their critics and the critics of their critics.... We were aware that the visible earth is made of ashes, and that ashes signify something. Through the obscure depths of history we could make out the phantoms of great ships laden with riches and intellect; we could not count them. But the disasters that had sent them down were, after all, none of our affair." (Valéry, "The Crisis of the Mind," 94). Including the loss of a warship alongside the downfall of empires, Valéry writes: "But France, England, Russia... these too would be beautiful names. *Lusitania*, too, is a beautiful name. And we see now that they abyss of history is deep enough to hold us all. We are aware that a civilization has the same fragility as a life" (94).

<sup>144</sup> See José M. Rico, "The Heavy Cruiser *Prinz Eugen*," *KBismarck*, accessed January 4, 2011, <http://www.kbismarck.com/prinzeugen.html>.

function[s] in rhetorical *ductus* of three important stylistic ornaments: *enargeia* ('bringing-before-the-eyes'), *paranomasia* ('punning'), and *allegoria* ('difficulty').<sup>145</sup>

The confusion between *enargeia* and *energia* (and the variations of spelling) is considerable, though the two terms have different histories. *Energia* can be used to describe the movement, the energy, of a particular figure (including the ornamental energy of a figure), whereas *enargeia* describes an alternative kind of vividness. Zanker paraphrases Dionysius as follows: "*Enargeia* is the stylistic effect in which appeal is made to the senses of the listener and attendant circumstances are described in such a way that the listener will be turned into an eyewitness[...]"<sup>146</sup> *Enargeia* therefore describes the way in which language (typically) can make something appear to the eye, vividly, sensuously, rather than merely represent it. The two terms do, however, appear to have been conflated at various points in their usage, so it's hard to unpick the following claims from Carruthers, that for Quintilian "*enargeia* seems the basic ornament, the ornament that subsumes most of the others",<sup>147</sup> and from Summers, that for Quintilian *energia* was the 'highest attainment of rhetorical skill' and "classed it as an ornament".<sup>148</sup>

My attention is drawn to *enargeia* to distinguish between language as the description of life, of movement, of spontaneity, of decision-making, and the way in which the evocation of those features might be alternative, or even competing modes, and how, synonymous with ornament, *energia* describes the lively movement of the figure, both the figures and subject matter within the text or picture, the movement, the *ductus*, of the mind moving through memory, and the movement of the mind through the text.

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<sup>145</sup> Carruthers, *Craft*, 117-8. *Allegoria* here does not mean the understanding of parallel narrative fictions, as in its contemporary usage, but refers, as Carruthers writes, to the "verbal ornament which the rhetoricians called *allegoria* (the 'gems' spoken of by Peter Chrysologus, the 'obscurities' praised by Augustine, which are 'set' in varieties of other, non-allegorical language) and the specifically late-classical exegetical method, deriving from Origen and others, of understanding an entire narrative fiction 'allegorically'" (125).

<sup>146</sup> G. Zanker, "*Enargeia* in the Ancient Criticism of Poetry," *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie Neue Folge* 124.3/4 (1981): 297.

<sup>147</sup> Carruthers, *Craft*, 130.

<sup>148</sup> Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art*, 96.

And yet

I have forgotten my loves, and chiefly that one, the cancerous  
 statue which my body could no longer contain,

against my will  
 against my love

become art,

I could not change it into history  
 and so remember it,

and I have lost what is always and everywhere  
 present, the scene of my selves, the occasion of these ruses,  
 which I myself and singly must now kill  
 and save the serpent in their midst.

Such ornamental energy is held in the patterning of prosody. What follows is one interpretation of the metrical effects that can be readily disputed, and O'Hara is hardly working from a metrical handbook of simple back and forth, stress and unstress. The strong iambic, "And yet", pushed right, ends a pause to revoke the ambition of the preceding poem. The poem will conclude with heavy iambs, too, the four feet of the last line preceded, perhaps, by an implied silent foot. The penultimate line is iambic until that final spondee, "must now kill" with its decisive final strike, before the lingering withdrawal of the last line. It is as though these most traditional of metrical units frame a more various prosodic passage in order to demonstrate the nature of such conviction. With exceptions the section is largely in a varied, perhaps ternary meter, with stronger, triple stresses reserved for a few key moments: "against my will / against my love", translating the force of antagonism into the force of conviction with the metrical repetition "must now kill". "against my love" is followed by "become art", an anapest, before "I could not change it into history / and so remember it", a fairly flattened prosaic couple of lines, denoting, perhaps the necessary "change" of prosaic memory by ornament into poetic knowledge. The ambivalence of history here, whether history and memory are opposed (I remember it because it has not become history) or companionable (I could not change it into history and therefore could not remember it, my "forgotten" loves) is perhaps the twist in this finale that most baffles me. Is this resistance necessary to the *energia* of the finale? My mind remains unresolved. The line "I have forgotten my loves", arguably opens with a pair of dactyls, with "loves", isolated as a single stress by its

comma, before the line continues, perhaps amphibrach, dactyl, dactyl. The variousness is beautifully handled in the line “and I have lost what is always and everywhere”, which plays on binary meters, reading iambic, iambic, before changing its cadence with a pyrrhic set up of the trochee, “always”, the time scale of “always” then varying with “everywhere” back within the iambic order. The trochaic of “present” leads into a pentameter line, the iamb “the scene” I find softening the stress on “my” to allow emphasis on “selves” in a trochee, the line ending with an iamb to trochee, which in its rhythm will be echoed by ““which I” (iamb) “myself” (trochee) “and singly must” (iamb to iamb) allows the transition of seeming autonomy from “selves” above to “Myself” beneath, before the line ends on the spondee “not kill”.

The prosody of the finale is capable of manipulating the speed of the reader, switching between iambic and trochaic rhythms within the cadence of a line, interposed with those striking triple beats, repeated three times. I want to repeat the first term in Carruthers description above, of the ornaments of memory, and here I hark back to Goodman too: surprise. The murderous conclusion to “In Memory” is a surprising conclusion, one which replicates the cunning strike of its serpentine prosodic model. The following quotation is from Paul Valéry’s article, “With Reference to Adonis”:

All these people who create, half certain, half uncertain of their powers, feel two beings in them, one known and the other unknown, whose incessant intercourse and unexpected exchanges give birth in the end to a certain product. I do not know what I am going to do; yet my mind believes it knows itself; and I build on the knowledge, I count on it, it is what I call *Myself*. But I shall surprise myself; if I doubted it I should be nothing. I know that I shall be astonished by a certain thought that is going to come to me before long - and yet I ask myself for this surprise, I build on it and count on it as I count on my certainty. I hope for something unexpected which I designate. I need both my known and my unknown.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Paul Valéry, “With Reference to Adonis,” trans. by Louise Varèse, in *Selected Writings*, 141-2.

The unknown, the forgetting, the elegy to memory, requires the serpentine strike of the surprise, its vicious speed, the speed of the “arrow that feels something” (*CP*, 334). Surprise was a strategy for Valéry, an ornament of his poetry. In “Poetry and Abstract Thought”, published in *The Kenyon Review* in 1954, an essay that it seems likely to have had some influence on O’Hara’s contemplation of abstraction in poetry,<sup>150</sup> Valéry writes: “I sincerely feel that if every man were not able to live a number of other lives than his own, he would not be able to live his own life.”<sup>151</sup> To what purpose is this multiplicity put? Surprise is a strategy for truth:

I find impulses and naive images in them, crude products of my needs and personal experiences. *My life itself is surprised*, and this life must furnish me, if it can, my responses, for only in life’s reactions may there dwell all the power and necessity of our truth.<sup>152</sup>

#### 5. COMMENTARY: “TO HELL WITH IT”

“To Hell with It” can be glossed in a number of ways: to hell with it all, to hell with death or with grief, a Danté-esque descent to hell for Bunny and Gregory. The poem is a confirmation of O’Hara as poet by an impatience with poetry as a sensible response to grief, and yet a reaffirmation by meaning its frustration, to hell with poetry, but by meaning to hell with poetry, poetry as defiant clarity returns.

“it”: Why does both the title and final line end on “it”, and is the subject of that “it”, as well as the word, repeated? How do the cataphoric and anaphoric properties of “it” relate, the sense that “it” gestures to a context that may be available for recuperation, or might refer to a context which is, significantly, too general to be bounded by more precise language. And yet “it” has the clarity of precision, a sound of insight when placed at the end of the line. Definitions: as a “nominative of the verb *to be*, *it* refers to the

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<sup>150</sup> See O’Hara, “Personism: A Manifesto”.

<sup>151</sup> Paul Valéry, “Poetry and Abstract Thought,” *The Kenyon Review* 16.2 (1954): 213.

<sup>152</sup> Valéry, “Poetry and Abstract Thought,” 212.

subject of thought, attention, or inquiry, whether impersonal or personal, in a sentence asking or stating what or who this is" (OED). To clarify, "*It* may refer, not to any thing or person mentioned, but to a matter expressed or implied in a statement, or occupying the attention of the speaker" (OED). The "it" of "To Hell with It" reads as that implied matter, but also the obsolescence of attempting to index, define or describe that matter. To do so, to know and to represent the subject of "it" would be to deny the force of the phrase's attack. This "it" is implied matter and its expression must be refused on behalf of its infinite disdain. The "it" therefore cannot simply "refer" to something, but instead subsumes that something by implying its all-encompassing proclivities: the "it" refers to an unwieldy burden sufficient to empty out its context, leaving it, "cool, decisive, precise" as a mark of disdain. Or "it" "As the subject of an impersonal verb or impersonal statement, expressing action or a condition of things simply, without reference to any agent." (OED). We could say that it is the very lack of *agency* against which O'Hara rails in this poem; the failure of Gregory and Bunny to be sufficiently agents to avoid their own deaths.

To unpack, the second "it", the "it" of "And mean it" gropes for its subject, and finds it back at the beginning, in the title of the poem. How does the "it" of the title relate to the concluding "it", set centrally in the page, "And mean it."? Can these be the same? Not quite. You can say "to hell with it and mean it", of course, in that you can both say "to hell with it" and "mean it" when you say "it", making the poem a closed loop that commits and recommits itself to the apt hatred of the grief O'Hara bares. But the "it" cannot be the same throughout the two sentences. Instead, the second "it" refers back to the entirety of the first statement, not just to the "it" in "to hell with it". The second "it" encloses "to hell with it"; to hell with it and to mean to hell with it.

If "to hell with it" relies on its speed, on its conviction paradoxically matched by the vagueness of its context, to hell with this, to hell with all this, then the final "it" which means "to hell with it" reasserts the force of the first statement. If "to hell with it" opens its arms to gesture at the infuriating world and its grief, in Mayakovsky's words, apart from the simple clarity of the sun, "to hell with everything else", then the second records the meaningfulness which creeps in even amidst sweeping contempt. It does not retract the force of expression of the title; it magnifies it,



We find the poem with a piece of reported dialogue, a comment on appetites in which the season itself is taken to participate. “meaningful hints at dismay”: some recognition of grief, or perhaps a recollection of a moment of forewarning about the death to come of Lang. Such a claim is clearly fanciful, given the little evidence, but the phrase does open itself up to speculation; why is there dismay, and how is dismay couched in the minor affections of sociability? “to be touched, to see labeled as such”: the two anapestics and the rhyme of “touched” to “such” establish a brief building of suspension, before falling into the un-poetic “perspicacious”. The line shifts from “be” to “see”; is this about appetite, the appetite “to be touched” and the desire to see it “labeled as such”? Perhaps this is a reversal of the curator’s usual advice to the art audience, “do not touch” the sculptures or the statuary, against the will of such works to be touched. This little echo of themes of Pygmalion lingers in the material of poetry. “To Hell with It” holds poetry as air and wind in agonistic contest; it is an immaterial yet tangible force with the material “page” as the envoi. Does the poem here desire to be touched, or does O’Hara wish to write a poem that can touch and be touched? How do these desires meet the poem as elegy, the desire to see again the lost lives beyond the dead matter of the deceased? “perspicacious”: discerning, insightful, the ability to behold intensively, to see through, recalling transparency, attributes of Colette and Vladimirovitch who “meet”, but likely not each other, only “sickness and distress”. Is this due to “sunspots on the sun”, the dark shapes that break the sun’s glare? Sunspots are cooler patches, created by magnetic activity, due to which they usually appear in pairs. The deaths come in twos. The line hovers, indented, and with a blank line preceding and following it, which makes the “it” more encompassing: to hell with it, that “it” “because of sunspots on the sun”.

#### 5.1. MOCK POEM: NOTES TOWARDS A GLOSS ON EJACULATING “POETRY AS SPITE”

John Latta doesn’t get too far in uncovering the “Mock Poem”, and it feels a little against the Mock Poem’s wasted expulsion to ask too much of it, but there are a few things to say, partly because it is a poem of contempt (as Latta remarks, “poetry

as spite”), and partly because it is a poem we might need to have contempt for.<sup>154</sup>

The poem is in pentameters, largely end-stopped, and is a “mock” poem, according to the OED: “A derisive or contemptuous action or utterance”. What follows is my preliminary notes before a gloss for future reference.

#### MOCK POEM

One pentative device, and then rebeat  
 To knead the balm, prepucible depense,  
 Be undezithered pouncenance; for face  
 Devapive hoods and blow the pentagon;  
 Foe, steal communion from the Tyche, bless  
 Myth less uncertainty, and when repeal,  
 On bloated regents pour the sacred boonion.

*pentative device*: some combination of tentative, pentameter (five measures), or echoes of repent (OED: “Anglo-Norman *repenter*, Anglo-Norman and Old French, Middle French *repentir*[...] to renounce (something) or cease (to do something) (c1100), (reflexive) to feel contrition or regret for an action, fault, or sin”) Since this is “pentative” not “repentative”, is this reference to a first (original) sin?

*device*: the “pentative device” is presumably the poem, but also the “de-vice”, a way of repenting, a de-sinning.

*rebeat*: Repeat the cleansing of sins? A mockery of poetic meter?

*To knead*: Reference to the making of poetry, the kneading of “subject matter” (as dough) into the risen form of poetry? Obvious pun here on need.

*the balm*: “an aromatic substance, consisting of resin mixed with volatile oils, exuding naturally from various trees of the genus *Balsamodendron*, and much prized for its fragrance and medicinal

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<sup>154</sup> Latta writes: “A Jabberwocky’d belch or spasm, erupting. Surely a combo of that desire to heave *all* of one’s accumulated vocables out into the void simultaneously and indistinguishably (the heaving / erupting imagery ‘mayhap the result’ of O’Hara’s post-”Mock Poem” wryness-”I clean it off with an old sock / and go on”—poetry as jism, *and* that-indistinguishable?—desire to do everything considerably “wrong”—poetry as spite.)” Site accessed May 4, 2013, <http://isola-di-rifiuti.blogspot.co.uk/2011/06/excess-and-mess.html>.

properties.” (OED). To be used on wounds, or perhaps bites and stings. Literary history includes Milton’s *Samson Agonistes*, the chorus: “Counsel or consolation we may bring, / Salve to thy sores: apt words have power to swage / The tumours of a troubled mind, / And are as balm to fester’d wounds.”<sup>155</sup> Or recall the fallen angels in *Paradise Lost* seeking heaven: “And opportune excursion, we may chance / Re-enter Heaven; or else in some mild zone / Dwell, not unvisited of Heaven’s fair light, / Secure; and at the brightening orient beam / Purge off this gloom: the soft delicious air, / To heal the scar of these corrosive fires, / Shall breather her balm.”<sup>156</sup>

*prepuce*: A nonsense word but “prepuce” is not: it means foreskin, and, in a theological tradition, the “state of the uncircumcised” (OED). Its etymology derives from “Anglo-Norman and Middle French *prepuce* (French *prépuce*) foreskin” and “classical Latin *praepūtium*”.<sup>157</sup>

*dépense*: From the French, *dépense*? Expense, expenditure. No wonder kneading some kind of balm or lubricant (see, later, “Hyalomiel”) into the prepuce requires some cleaning up afterwards.

*undezithered*: Doubled negation of “zithered”, playing of zither, an instrument played by the hands and fingers emitting a humming sound. Echo of undelivered?

*pouncenance*: pounce meaning pierced? Perhaps rubbing down?

*for face*: reverses “pouncenance” into countenance?

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<sup>155</sup> John Milton, *The Poetical Works of John Milton*, Volume 3 (London: William Pickering, 1832), 14.

<sup>156</sup> John Milton, *The Poetical Works of John Milton*, Volume 1 (London: 1842), 483, ll. 396-402.

<sup>157</sup> Sir George Henry Savage writes of Dr Yellowlees of Glasgow: Yellowlees “makes a point of attracting the feelings and the sentiments in cases of masturbation, for he transfixes the prepuce in a slow, almost solemn way, at the same time that he preaches a very stirring sermon on the weakness of the vice and the probable results if the habit continued.” Originally from Sir George Henry Savage, “Some Modes of Treatment of Insanity As a Functional Disorder,” quoted in Stephen Trombley, *All that Summer She was Mad: Virginia Woolf and Her Doctors* (London: Junction Books, 1981), 152. My thanks to Sara Crangle for this reference.

*Devapive*: echo of French “devant”, in front of (facing)? Sense of “vapidity”, derived from taste of liquids, meaning insipid, lacking animation, a deadened form? Reference to the poem?

*hoods*: reference back up to foreskin.

*blow the pentagon*: Vulgar dismissal (oral sex) of counting measures in fives.

*steal communion*: Desecration of the host.

*Tyche*: Implies a place, presumably Temple of Tyche. Tyche refers to god overseeing fortunes of a city, its luck. When no cause can be discovered for disasters, it is to Tyche that people turn. Is this some reflection on the senselessness of the loss of Lang and Lafayette?

*bless / Myth less uncertainty*: concatenation of negations (bless[...] less; mythless, mythless certainty). Perhaps, though, there’s more of O’Hara’s grace in this; should we bless mythless uncertainty, however painful?

*repeal*: Repeal laws, or a person previously exiled? Withdrawal? To recall, reinstate, bring back? Relates back to rebat from line 1. Re-peal: Reference back to foreskin of the penis?

*bloated*: bloat: “Old Norse *blaut-r* in the sense ‘soft with moisture, soaked, wet’” (OED). A “bloated regent”? A contemptible ruler? A soft body, perhaps the penis swollen before or flaccid after ejaculation? Refers up by etymology to “blow”.

*Boonion*: Boon: “Old Norse *bón*, the etymological correspondent of Old English *bén*, Middle English bene n., prayer.” (OED) Prayer transformed over time into a “good” or “favour asked”. A request, favour, made on some authority, whether religious or social, or that which is requested or prayed for.

Literary: Chaucer: “The kyng assentede to his bone [*v.r.* boone]” (OED), reflects relation to “bloated regents”. Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*: “Vpon my feeble knee, I beg this boone, with teares not lightly shed.” (OED) Reflection of earlier hint at oral sex.

Conclusion: Though hardly, now, neutered of its nonsensical aspects, its prefixes and suffixes, puns and translations, we can see a little more of the Mock Poem. It is a brief, ejaculated bit of faux beauty, a “poem”, formally, with a mixture of reflexive comments on meter, classical allusions, scattered rhymes and echoes.





other and the audience, like jinxes”? Or are “all things that don’t change” “bowing to each other and the audience”? Are they taking their last bows, in parenthesis? Or is it “How I hate all things that don’t change, photographs, monuments, memories”, since in these “nothing now can be changed”. The doubling of these two sections is apparent in the doubling of “intruding”: “melancholy / intruding on the vigorous heart” followed by “sentiment[...] intruding on form”. Do we therefore read across these passages, or compare them as contradictory? Do we read “melancholy” *and* “subject matter” as examples of “sentiment”, and if so, as seems plausible, do we then take the “vigorous heart” as representative of “form”? At first “the immaculate disgust of the mind” seems to be a plausible capacity for “sentiment”, but it is this “immaculate disgust of the mind” which will be “beaten down by pain and the vileness of life’s flickering disapproval”. That is, we can interpret the poem to consider both “heart” and “mind” as “form”, rather than reading a heart and mind split across the two sections. The “immaculate disgust of the mind” recalls the “immaculate conception”, blurring conception between its seedy fecundity (hence, “disgust”) and the making of concepts in the mind. The hygiene of “immaculate” is connected to “disgust” here to use disgust as a way of clearing out certain ingrained conceptions. Like “sentiment” it’s an ambivalent term; this sentiment is either that which fills the mind with disgust or the disgusting aspects of the mind are part of the sentiment that intrudes on “form”. One interpretation, therefore, is that sentiments, those feelings to which O’Hara struggled to elegize, and which have returned, magnified, in grief, are despised, and hated, and the poet’s dream is for the “immaculate” hygiene of “form”. I read this, however, as a mockery of “form”, in which form is conceptualized as a kind of emptiness, a freedom from the degradations of “subject matter” and “sentiment”. Linking back to Goodman’s essays, there’s a desire here to deal with the “vileness” rather than intellectualize it. The form is then linked to those blank pages, which do not remain so but are instead filled with filth. This is O’Hara’s aesthetics of impurity, an openness to intrusion, an ornate variety and love of imperfection.

Form is parodied above in the “Mock Poem”, and we can hardly judge O’Hara as a formalist à la New Criticism.<sup>159</sup> It’s not

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<sup>159</sup> See O’Hara’s precise put-down of the poets’ of New Criticism in his conversation with Lucie-Smith in *Standing Still and Walking in New York*,

possible, therefore, to have O'Hara take sides in some way for form over content, or content over form. Fair enough. But are we able to simply delete the antagonism, to refer O'Hara back to his contemporary, and perhaps greatest rival in Allen's *The New American Poetry*, Charles Olson (Olson, of course, reporting the conclusion of Robert Creeley): "form *is* content".<sup>160</sup>

There are (at least) two responses. The first is to return to the aesthetics of style, to ponder the age-old questions of form and content.<sup>161</sup> The second is to wonder about all this negative affect ("dismay", "hate", "disgust") and to understand O'Hara's unconventional relationship to it, which I'll consider first. The most extended work on this topic is Richard Deming's necessary essay on the poem "Hatred" (*CP*, 117-120).<sup>162</sup> Reading a later work,

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who have "certain rather stupid ideas about how, about what is the comportment in diction that you adopt" (12). The use of comportment here, its sense of preciousness, could be productively linked into a tradition setting the boundaries of poetic and prosodic license according to decorum. Hellmut Wohl describes the necessary correspondence between form and content in terms of that which is appropriate: "The dictum that form, whether literary or pictorial, should aptly express and correspond to content was fundamental to antique and Renaissance artistic theory" (Wohl, *Aesthetics*, 68).

<sup>160</sup> In his interview with Lucie-Smith, O'Hara comments that Creeley has "made *control* practically the subject matter of the poem. That is your *control* of the language, your *control* of the experiences and your *control* of your thought." [heavy-handed italics from the transcription]. O'Hara adds: "the amazing thing is that where they've [Creeley and Levertov] pared down the diction so that the experience presumably will come through as strongly as possible, it's the experience of their paring it down that comes through more strongly and not the experience that is the subject, you know. In some cases, not in all" (*Standing Still*, 23). Shaw notes an equally critical and helpful comment of Creeley's on O'Hara's work. Creeley was inspired to start a magazine by the "dissatisfaction with the social occasion of writing" (Shaw, *Poetics of Coterie*, 242f7). The implication is that both the medium of exchange, the magazine, and the form of the poetry had to provide an alternative to the "social occasion" so pervasive in O'Hara's work.

<sup>161</sup> On which see Antoine Compagnon, *Literature, Theory, and Common Sense*, trans. Carol Cosman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). My thanks to Peter Nicholls for this reference.

<sup>162</sup> Richard Deming, "Naming the Seam: On Frank O'Hara's 'Hatred'," in *Frank O'Hara Now*, 131-143: "We cannot be made to understand hatred, since there is no perspective from which that would be possible. It is

“Poem (Hate is only one of many responses)” (*CP*, 334-4) serves to clarify the argument *for* hate.

Hate is only one of many responses  
true, hurt and hate go hand in hand  
but why be afraid of hate, it is only there  
think of filth, is it really awesome  
neither is hate  
don't be shy of unkindness, either  
it's cleansing and allows you to be direct  
like an arrow that feels something

The “filthy page[s]” of poetry might not be opprobrium after all. This “unkindness” is “cleansing”, returning us to the “immaculate disgust of the mind”. It is Goodman’s essay that opens up this reading: “endless torment pretending to be the rose / of acknowledgement” is the intellectual inhibition of suffering which results in the martyrdom of the subject. The line is a response to the title of the poem, the insistence on not taking suffering as an intellectual pursuit to be acknowledged and by doing so to reflect back on the individual as though suffering were a source of narcissistic self-aggrandisement. For Goodman, the “struggle” is between “happiness and character”; rather than understand one’s character, its intrusion on happiness must be resisted.<sup>163</sup>

On the first response: we might associate O’Hara’s refusal of the opposition with his final mock-macho thrust in “Personism”: “The recent propagandists for technique on the one hand, and for content on the other, had better watch out” (*CP*, 499). Though not deleting technique, O’Hara provides the parable of “measure and other technical apparatus” as the purchasing of a “pair of pants[...] tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you”. It is a brilliant analogy, in which formal constraints are considered necessary to show off the poem in the best light. It is the fashionable comparative to *sprezzatura*, the nonchalance that engenders and veils subterfuge. *Sprezzatura* means tight trousers; it means making the poem amiably apt, seductive, rhetorically

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enough to recognize that hatred is recognizable. That way, at least, we cannot deny that it has been denied. Only that way can we come to see poetry’s singular means of facilitating acknowledgement.” (143)

<sup>163</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 98.

persuasive, but not because it has sinister, controlling desires, but because wanting to go to bed with each other might be a fun way to spend the night, or the day, and the only dishonesty might be if you dress up your poem in the fashion of metaphysical speculation or martyrish “yearning”, if you convince the one to whom you are speaking that they should go to bed with you because you have the capacity for grandiose suffering. Instead, tight trousers show you what’s on offer: that’s a form of honesty.<sup>164</sup>

Rather than tight trousers, there is another analogy for the relationship of form and content within the poem: the intimate lubricant forced within its enclosing brackets, “((Hyalomiell))”. It’s an hilarious interjection, a reflection, in its way, of the bracketed “(courage)” that follows, and a way of dampening exquisite suffering. Not dissimilar to KY Jelly, its purpose in the poem is a kind of libidinal bathos, a version of the pleasures taken in silent comedy in the second half of the poem. Its brand name sounds partly like a Greek god, and partly like a Jewish expletive, but

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<sup>164</sup> O’Hara, “Personism,” 498. In “Statement for *The New American Poetry*” (*CP*, 500) O’Hara writes that he is not “for any particular technical development”.

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 clarified or made beautiful for myself or anyone else; they are just there in whatever form I can find them.[...] My formal “stance” is found at the crossroads where what I know and can’t get meets what is left of that I know and can bear without hatred.[...] It may be that poetry makes life’s nebulous events tangible to me and restores their detail; or conversely, that poetry brings forth the intangible quality of incidents which are all too concrete and circumstantial. Or each on specific occasions, or both all the time.

The only problem with this statement is that by the time of “Statement for Paterson Society” O’Hara had declared it “mistaken, pompous, and quite untrue” (*CP*, 511), but it’s worth picking on a couple of points. Firstly, the task as O’Hara sees it is one of honesty. Secondly, the “form” of the poem and of the experience are significantly found things, with the attendant sense of care not to damage their discovery by indiscriminate craft. Thirdly, the dynamic between nebulous and intangible, or concrete and tangible, is not so much resolved one way or another as placed into *contrapposto* effect: they move each other.

perhaps like the great example of Lucky Pierre in “Personism”, it explains with an erotic appeal the place of poetry.<sup>165</sup> If we take apart the name we can see its poetic tradition. The poster for Hyalomiel reads: “Gelée à base de Glycérine et de Miel anglais”. The new lyric, lubricated not only by the honey (miel) of the gods, but by glycerine too. The Greek *hyalos* means “glass”, or crystalline: this is a poetry of transparency, clarity, and honey.

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<sup>165</sup> There is a precursor to O’Hara’s analogy between poetry and the telephone from “Personism”, too, in Valéry:

“Faire de la littérature” – c’est écrire pour inconnus. La ligne que je trace est *littérature* ou non selon que je l’adresse à quelqu’un, ou à ce lecteur virtuel – moyen que je me donne. Une personne *imprévue* lisant une lettre à elle non destinée et don’t les êtres lui sont inconnus change cette lettre en littérature.

Translated as:

“To create literature” – is to write for people unknown. The line I write out is *literature* or not according as I address it to someone, or that average, virtual reader – that I invent for myself. An *unforeseen* person, reading a letter not addressed to them and which mentions people unknown to them, changes that letter into literature.

Passages taken from Michael Jarrety, “The Poetics of practice and theory,” in *Reading Paul Valéry*, 112 and 119. O’Hara suggests that whilst writing a love poem “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, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages.” Rather than the poem being a phone-call, as is often assumed, the passage must be read with the earlier description of vulgarity: “[the poem must] address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love’s life-giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet’s feelings towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person” (499). Rather than a telephone call to the lover, the lover is addressed via the abstraction of the poem, but into that poem is poured the displaced love for the person, allowing the poem to become Lucky Pierre, the poem takes on the experiential properties of personhood to both gives and receives pleasure. Lucky Pierre is a figure of the poem as a generosity that requires no sacrifice.



Mayakovsky's "An Extraordinary Adventure which Befell Vladimir Mayakovsky in a Summer Cottage" includes a note to introduce the poem "(Pushkino, Akula's Mount, Rumyantsev Cottage., 27 versts on the Yaroslav Railway.)"<sup>167</sup> As the poem tells us, it was composed by Mayakovsky in 1920 whilst at a cottage in Pushkino, a cottage Mayakovsky rented for several summers. It is, in a tradition O'Hara took to heart, an occasional poem, and one which incorporates its own specificities of date and time and place. At the time of its composition, Mayakovsky was employed by the Russian Telegraphic Agency (the ROSTA) to produce posters and cartoons with slogans and poem fragments that would become famous.

It is hardly a surprise that this poem is lurking in O'Hara's mind, since the famous, and now infamous poem of his, "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island" (*CP*, 306-307) references Mayakovsky explicitly as the first poet whom "The Sun" chooses "to speak to personally".<sup>168</sup> In Mayakovsky's poem it is the poet who, enraged, speaks personally to the sun, not the other way round. Fire Island plays the part of Mayakovsky's "Summer Cottage", though it is now known as the location for O'Hara's death. The summery, beachside locale also brings to mind the composition of the elegies to James Dean I cited earlier. "The Sun" instructs the poet to be "more attentive", and, after briefly scolding him, offers considerable encouragement, punningly saying "Frankly I wanted to tell you / I like your poetry":

Just keep on  
like I do and pay no attention. You'll  
find that people always will complain  
about the atmosphere, either too hot  
or too cold too bright or too dark, days  
too short or too long. (*CP*, 306)

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Basternak's portrait in *Safe Conduct*. For O'Hara's affection for Pasternak see "About Zhivago and His Poems," in *CP*, 501-509.

<sup>167</sup> Vladimir Mayakovsky, *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry*, ed. with an introduction by Patricia Blake, trans. by Max Hayward and George Reavey (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 137-44.

<sup>168</sup> See Kent Johnson's thesis that "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island" is a posthumous homage by Kenneth Koch, in *A Question Mark Above the Sun* (Buffalo: Starcherone Books, 2012).

The most telling advice is perhaps the following:

And  
always embrace things, people earth  
sky stars, as I do, freely and with  
the appropriate sense of space. That  
is your inclination, known in the heavens  
and you should follow it to hell, if  
necessary, which I doubt. (*CP*, 307)

“The Sun” explains that it must go because “they’re calling / me”

“Who are they?”  
Rising he said “Some  
day you’ll know. They’re calling to you  
too.” Darkly he rose, and then I slept. (*CP*, 307)

Though taken to be a premonition of O’Hara’s own death, it may be the lost loved ones, Lang foremost among them, calling. “To Hell with It” is, however, evidence of O’Hara’s earlier dialogue with Mayakovsky, and one closer to the graceful defiance of Mayakovsky. The poem reads:

An Extraordinary Adventure Which Befell Vladimir  
Mayakovksy In A Summer Cottage

(Pushkino, Akula’s Mount, Rumyantsev Cottage., 27  
verts on the Yaroslav Railway.)

A hundred and forty suns in one sunset blazed,  
and summer rolled into July;  
it was so hot,  
the heat swam in a haze—  
and this was in the country.  
Pushkino, a hillock, had for hump  
Akula, a large hill,  
and at the hill’s foot  
a village stood—  
crooked with the crust of roofs.  
Beyond the village  
gaped a hole

and into that hole, most likely,  
the sun sank down each time,  
faithfully and slowly.  
And next morning,  
to flood the world  
anew,  
the sun would rise all scarlet.  
Day after day  
this very thing  
began  
to rouse in me  
great anger.  
And flying into such a rage one day  
that all things paled with fear,  
I yelled at the sun point-blank:  
“Get down!  
Stop crawling into that hellhole!”  
At the sun I yelled:  
“You shiftless lump!  
You’re caressed by the clouds,  
while here—winter and summer—  
I must sit and draw these posters!”  
I yelled at the sun again:  
“Wait now!  
Listen, goldbrow,  
instead of going down,  
why not come down to tea  
with me!”  
What have I done!  
I’m finished!  
Toward me, of his own good will,  
himself,  
spreading his beaming steps,  
the sun strode across the field.  
I tried to hide my fear,  
and beat it backwards.  
His eyes were in the garden now.  
Then he passed through the garden.  
His sun’s mass pressing  
through the windows,  
doors,

and crannies;  
in he rolled;  
drawing a breath,  
he spoke deep bass:  
“For the first time since creation,  
I drive the fires back.  
You called me?  
Give me tea, poet,  
spread out, spread out the jam!”  
Tears gathered in my eyes—  
the heat was maddening,  
but pointing to the samovar  
I said to him:  
“Well, sit down then,  
luminary!”  
The devil had prompted my insolence  
to shout at him,  
confused—  
I sat on the edge of a bench;  
I was afraid of worse!  
But, from the sun, a strange radiance  
streamed,  
and forgetting  
all formalities,  
I sat chatting  
with the luminary more freely.  
Of this  
and that I talked,  
and of how I was swallowed up by Rosta,  
but the sun, he says:  
“All right,  
don’t worry,  
look at things more simply!  
And do you think  
I find it easy  
to shine?  
Just try it, if you will!—  
You move along,  
since move you must;  
you move—and shine your eyes out!”  
We gossiped thus till dark—

Till former night, I mean.  
For what darkness was there here?  
We warmed up  
to each other  
and very soon,  
openly displaying friendship,  
I slapped him on the back.  
The sun responded!  
“You and I,  
my comrade, are quite a pair!  
Let’s go, my poet,  
let’s dawn  
and sing  
in a gray tattered world.  
I shall pour forth my sun,  
and you—your own,  
in verse.”  
A wall of shadows,  
a jail of nights  
fell under the double-barreled suns.  
A commotion of verse and light—  
shine all your worth!  
Drowsy and dull,  
one tired,  
wanting to stretch out  
for the night.  
Suddenly—I  
shone in all my might,  
and morning ran its round.  
Always to shine,  
to shine everywhere,  
to the very deeps of the last days,  
to shine—  
and to hell with everything else!  
That is my motto—  
and the sun’s!

Mayakovsky’s “great anger” at the sun, diligently rising and falling (into, “most likely” a hole beyond the village) overwhelms him, making “all things” dismayed (“paled with fear”), spurring him to address the sun, chastising it for “crawling into that hellhole”.

O’Hara’s use of the poem is fairly brief, but crucial in terms of tone and intent. Mayakovsky’s suspicion that the sun lowers itself into hell meets O’Hara’s invocation, “to hell with it”. The poet relates the sun’s “strange radiance” encouraging the poet to forget “all formalities”, and brokering a fast, comradely friendship. The discarding of formalities relates to poetic form too; as so often, “Personism: A Manifesto” comes to mind, with its injunction, “You just go on your nerve” (*CP*, 498). In answer to his fears and anxieties, the sun encourages Mayakovsky not “to worry” and to “look at things more simply!” To do so is an act of courage:

And do you think  
 I find it easy  
 to shine?  
 Just try it, if you will!–  
 You move along,  
 since move you must;  
 you move–and shine your eyes out!”

In answer to the sun’s injunction to “shine your eyes out!” O’Hara writes: “Wind, you’ll have a terrible time / smothering my clarity, a void / behind my eyes / in which existence / continues to stuff its wounded limbs”. This is hardly a simple triumph for O’Hara, but the clarity, perspicacity, light, the sun, reside “behind my eyes”. As the sun declares:

I shall pour forth my sun,  
 and you–your own,  
 in verse.”

The “commotion of verse and light” pours out, before the protagonists grow tired, “Drowsy and dull”. O’Hara promises to pour his poems onto “one / after another filthy page of poetry.” At the moment of inviting darkness, however, the poet musters his energy, his simplicity, his clarity:

Suddenly–I  
 shone in all my might,  
 and morning ran its round.  
 Always to shine,  
 to shine everywhere,

to the very deeps of the last days,  
to shine—  
and to hell with everything else!  
That is my motto—  
and the sun's!

The “motto” shared by the poet and the sun is “to shine - / and to hell with everything else!” “To hell with it[...] And mean it”.

5.IV. P. B. SHELLEY, POETRY AND WIND

These are the last three stanzas of one of Valéry's most famous poems, “Le Cimetière Marin”:

Non, non! Debout! Dans l'ère successive!  
Brisez, mon corps, cette forme pensive!  
Buvez, mon sein, la naissance du vent!  
Une fraîcheur, de la mer exhalée,  
Me rend mon âme... Ô puissance salée!  
Courons à l'onde en ejaillir vivant!

Oui! Grande mer de délires douée,  
Peau de panthère et chlamyde trouée  
De mille et mille idoles du sleil,  
Hydre absolue, ivre de ta chair bleue,  
Qui to remords l'étincelante queue  
dans un tumulte au silence pareil,

Le vent se lève!... Il faut tenter de vivre!  
L'air immense ouvre et referme mon livre,  
La vague en poudre ose jaillir des rocs!  
Envolez/vous, pages tout éblouies!  
Rompe, vagues! Rompez d'eaux réjouies  
Ce toit tranquille où picoraient des focs! (*Poems*, 220)

No, no! Up! And away into the next era!  
Break, body, break this pensive mold,  
Lungs, drink in the beginnings of the wind!  
A coolness, exhalation of the sea,  
Gives me my soul back!... Ah, salt potency,  
Into the wave with us, and out alive!





The first echo that springs to mind is not a poem, but a film, Buster Keaton's *Steamboat Bill, Jr* (1928) in which the "cool, / decisive, / precise" Keaton balletically rebounds from any number of knock-downs caused by a high wind. It is most famous for a moment when the front of a building sheers off, Keaton's character only surviving by standing in the space of the open window as it falls, but there are several moments approximate to O'Hara's writing above: Keaton is sailed through a barn on a hospital bed, the wind opening the door to allow him to enter and leave freely; at other times the wind "embrace[s]" the poet by its magnitude, Keaton leaning fully into its force; a fence door, rather than a barn door, is the first door to actually go ahead and knock him down.

The film is an apt antecedent because it does two things. Firstly, it conveys the Keaton persona amidst adversity; Keaton's continual war against the accidents and emergencies peppering his world manifests in a laconic yet pathos-laden poetics, a poise and silence (even in a silent movie) amidst consternation. Grace in bathos. James Agee wrote: "In a way his pictures are like a transcendent juggling act in which it seems that the whole universe is in exquisite flying motion and the one point of repose is the juggler's effortless, uninterested face."<sup>171</sup> Secondly, the dynamic between the body of the poet (Keaton) and the wind is at once seemingly violent but ultimately a spur to life. The body of the poet addresses the wind in invocation, and the wind "seeing you slim and gallant, rises / to embrace its darling poet."<sup>172</sup> The wind takes on agency, manipulates with great humour its human charge, both risking his life and goading his ingenuity to survive. Eventually the Keaton character grips the trunk of a tree, which is

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Mystérieuse MOI, pourtant, tu vis encore!  
 Tu vas te reconnaître au lever de l'aurore  
 Amèrement la meme...

Thing of mystery, ME, are you living yet!  
 When dawn's curtain lifts, you will recognize  
 Your same bitter self....

<sup>171</sup> "The last fade-out on the Great Stone Face: Buster Keaton," *LIFE* February 11, 1966, 63.

<sup>172</sup> Out of interest see Jean Day's "The Buster Keaton Analogy" from *The Literal World*, accessed June 10, 2013, [http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/day/day\\_buster.html](http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/day/day_buster.html).

promptly pulled into the air and carries him over into the water from where he can save his love and win the day.

I want to think about the way in which the figure and the wind relate as antagonistic but also dependent terms, developing from Buster Keaton's struggles to those of P.B. Shelley. Thomas M. Greene discerns a significant difference between apostrophe and invocation, a distinction I'm not convinced holds, but is worth repeating:

An invocation typically contains both an apostrophe, an address to an absent or inanimate being, and a summons to appear or to make its influence felt in the invoker's experience. Ostensibly, apostrophes are more common than invocations. But the rarer speech-act, combining specific verbal form with assumed power, may be the more rewarding key to the force of poetry.<sup>173</sup>

Poetic invocations are examples of magical thinking, and for Greene the distinction between apostrophe and invocation relates to the putative origins of human culture, that the poem as invocation is an example not of "aesthetic pleasure but rather [trying] to make something happen (or to prevent its happening)".<sup>174</sup> O'Hara's title is a neutered command, a speech-act wherein the act has become self-reflexive, a curse devoid of a target sufficient to condemn and therefore rebounded as contemptuous, spiteful dismissal. By the time of the apostrophe to wind in the envoi, a target has been chosen. "To Hell with It" is a secular invocation, an invocation after the fact of the deaths of friends in which no claim for efficacy is made beyond the final, courageous commitment to continue, and to continue with poetry. As Greene writes: "the nostalgia for magic, the dangerous returns

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<sup>173</sup> Thomas M. Greene, "Poetry as Invocation," *New Literary History* 24.3 (Summer 1993): 495. Greene cites the following example of poetic invocation, one which is oddly fitting to my earlier reading of "In Memory", or, rather, one that helpfully runs counter to O'Hara's anti-Apollonian perspective. This is the Homeric hymn, "To Hestia: "Hestia, you who tend the holy house of the lord Apollo, the Far-shooter at goodly Pytho, with soft oil dripping ever from your locks, come now into this house, come, having one mind with Zeus the all-wise-draw near, and withal bestow grace upon my song" (quoted, 496).

<sup>174</sup> Greene, "Poetry as Invocation," 496.

of suppressed magic, betray what looks like a perennial human need for signs endowed with potency in themselves”.<sup>175</sup>

Barbara Johnson’s “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion” describes the purpose of apostrophe:

The absent, dead, or inanimate entity addressed is thereby made present, animate, and anthropomorphic. Apostrophe is a form of ventriloquism through which the speaker throws voice, life, and human form into the addressee, turning its silence into mute responsiveness.<sup>176</sup>

Though O’Hara’s work is thrillingly evocative of animacy, of *furia*, it’s worth distinguishing straight away between apostrophic animacy and the elegy to the dead: O’Hara’s poem “continues”, remains alive, but the dead are the “wounded limbs” of “existence” being stuffed into pages of poetry. To continue with the discussion of apostrophe: for Johnson, apostrophe is tied to alternative rhetorical traditions concerned with the evocation of vivacity and animacy, and there’s an intriguing formal replication here of the pervasiveness of both apostrophe and various related terms such as *furia* and *energia*. Apostrophe, *furia* and *energia* are evocations of the living quality in art and poetry. For Johnson, Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” is “perhaps the ultimate apostrophic poem” because it “makes even more explicit the relation between apostrophe and animation”.<sup>177</sup> Johnson’s argument is essentially that Shelley’s apostrophe to the wind is about the animating power of apostrophe, and poetry more generally:

the west wind is a figure for the power to animate: it is described as the breath of being, moving everywhere, blowing movement and energy through the world, waking it from its summer dream, parting the waters of the Atlantic, uncontrollable[...] But the poet addresses, gives animation, gives the capacity of responsiveness, to the wind, not in order to make it speak but in order to

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<sup>175</sup> Greene, “Poetry as Invocation,” 497.

<sup>176</sup> Barbara Johnson, “Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion”, *Diacritics* 16.1 (1986): 30.

<sup>177</sup> Johnson, “Apostrophe,” 31.

make it listen to him - in order to make it listen to him  
doing nothing but address it.<sup>178</sup>

Consider the first stanza:

O WILD West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being –  
Thou from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,  
Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,  
Pestilence-stricken multitudes! – O thou  
Who Chariotest to their dark wintry bed  
The wingèd seeds, where they lie cold and low,  
Each like a corpse within its grave, until  
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow  
Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill  
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)  
With living hues and odours plain and hill –  
Wild Spirit, which are moving everywhere –  
Destroyer and Preserver – hear, O hear!

For Greene, Johnson's reading is limited because it fails to treat death with sufficient attention. Death is the "forerunner of rebirth": the "wingèd seeds" are corpses to bring "Spring". The dialectic of "Destroyer and Preserver" is replayed by O'Hara between the title and last line of the poem, from "To Hell with It" as a spiteful renunciation of poetic speech, to "mean it" as an ironic preservation of its necessity. O'Hara's opening is reported as spoken language, "Hungry winter, this winter". Is O'Hara's poem situated between the Autumn and Spring of Shelley's death and rebirth?

The first three stanzas describe the effects of the wind on three natural symbols, each also connected (respectively) to the material, imaginative or formal creation of poetry: leaf, cloud, and wave. The second stanza describes the winter of a year, and a life in which death ("this closing night / Will be the dome of a vast sepulchre") is a hellish space of "Black rain, and fire, and hail". The fourth stanza restates each of the previous three ("dead leaf[...] swift cloud[...] a wave to pant beneath thy power"), and redoubles that repetition with the line previously quoted:

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<sup>178</sup> Johnson, "Apostrophe," 31.

O lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!  
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!  
A heavy weight of hours has chain'd and bow'd  
One too like thee – tameless, and swift, and proud.

So far so serious. But what of the bathetic slapstick of the “slim and gallant” poet, being hit in the face by the barn door? In “Shelley’s ‘Sometimes Embarrassing Declarations’: A Defence”, Rodney Delasanta reiterates the critical judgement on Shelley’s poetic personae and declarations as “embarrassing”, including the lines “I die, I faint, I fail”, and, from “Ode to the West Wind”, “I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!”<sup>179</sup> For Delasanta the thorns “relate organically to these preparatory images of shed foliage” and are “all that remains of the speaker’s defoliated world after the West Wind, in its role of destroyer, has stripped it”. The wind, however, fails to lift the subject, the poet, since the wind is “too like thee – tameless, and swift, and proud”. O’Hara’s echo is that the “darling poet” gets up “each time” he or she is knocked down by the wind. Rather than “tameless, and swift, and proud” the bathetic poet is “cool, / decisive, / precise”, the conjunctions replaced by graceful falls down and across the page. Judith S. Chernaik, too, spends time countering descriptions of the Shelleyan poetic personae as “shrill”, “hysterical”, “self-pitying”, and “immature”. For Chernaik the “fallen state” is “indisputable”:

[M]ortality, time, passion, are facts of reality. Poetry, like religion, gives meaning to reality by conjecturing a before and after, by naming the present a “fall” from the past. The myth Shelley substitutes for the orthodox fall reflects his sense that the condition of human life must be conceived in terms of loss if it is to be tolerable. It is the nature of the human being to err, he suggests, in seeking to remedy its loss. Yet the single imperative for the imagination is recovery of that Absolute - whether knowledge, love, or beauty - which its own desire asserts to be the necessary source and sustaining power of life.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Rodney Delasanta, “Shelley’s ‘Sometimes Embarrassing Declarations’: A Defence,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 7.2 (1965): 177.

<sup>180</sup> Judith S. Chernaik, “The Figure of the Poet in Shelley,” *ELH* 35. 4 (1968): 584.

Chernaik describes the conviction of “Ode to the West Wind” as a prophecy, “that the living world itself can be reborn”.<sup>181</sup>

Greene understands the penultimate section of Shelley’s ode to describe a “wish for passivity, a wish to lie without volition in the wind’s power” as a “dead leaf”, a “swift cloud” or “A wave”.<sup>182</sup> Chernaik describes the “poetic faculty of profound and unconscious receptiveness to reality - that “wise passiveness” which receives more of the world, more of truth, than sensory perception can admit to consciousness”.<sup>183</sup> In “To Hell with It” the wind is addressed as a lover, a bully, and a comedian. Both poems resolve to transform their passivity into new commitments. The final section of “Ode to the West Wind” reads:

Make me thy lyre, ev’n as the forest is:  
What if my leaves are falling like its own!  
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies  
Will take from both a deep autumnal tone,  
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,  
My spirit! be thou me, impetuous one!  
Drive my dead thoughts over the universe,  
Like wither’d leaves, to quicken a new birth;  
And, by the incantation of this verse,  
Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth  
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!  
Be through my lips to unawaken’d earth  
The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,  
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

The “lyre”, the Aeolian harp synonymous with lyric, plays by the movement of the wind across its strings in a forest scene, a passive music. The poem asks, however, what happens when a storm makes “mighty harmonies” on the lyre, and this “tumult” is matched by the tempestuous creativity of the poem, the “leaves” like so many pages of poetry “falling like its own!”. “To Hell with It” ends with “one / after another filthy page of poetry”. John Hollander describes in detail the relationship between Aeolian Harp and the utterance of the poetic figure. The Aeolian Harp was

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<sup>181</sup> Chernaik, “The Figure,” 584.

<sup>182</sup> Greene, “Poetry as Invocation,” 511

<sup>183</sup> Chernaik, “The Figure,” 588.

a “rectangular flat box with a sound hole and strings stretched across it; the strings, of varying diameter, were all tuned to a unison, and depending upon the velocity of the wind, produced combinations of the natural overtone series.”<sup>184</sup> Describing the position of the poet figure in the ode, Hollander argues that, by turning aside (Hollander does not connect this with the act of the apostrophe played from within the poem) the wind is “not blowing through him, but from behind; his shout is not lost across or against it, but shapes, modulates, and labializes into eloquence the prophetic force, which, blowing across the poet’s figurative strings, rather than his mouthpiece, produces what Geoffrey Hartman might refer to as the lyricism of trans-verse”.<sup>185</sup> As Shelley writes in “A Defence of Poetry”: “Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre, which move it by their motion to ever-changing melody.”<sup>186</sup>

Shelley’s call is for a “Spirit fierce” to answer passivity; he seeks to take up the spirit of the tumultuous wind, the “impetuous one: ‘be thou me’”. The stages of the poem are therefore twofold: first, the passivity of openness; second, the shift to invocation. Greene describes “Be thou me!” as the “pivotal moment for all these shifts”, from falling leaves to sparks, from the wind as enchanter to the speaker as voice, from Autumn to Spring.<sup>187</sup> This is the moment of invocation, neither ironic nor deconstructive.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> John Hollander, “The West Wind and the Mingled Measure”, *Daedalus* 111.3 (1982): 132.

<sup>185</sup> Hollander, “The West Wind,” 132.

<sup>186</sup> Hollander, “The West Wind,” 132. Hollander’s argument takes this further, adding nuance to this passage from “A Defence” by analyzing the ways in which the poet “accommodate[s] his voice to the sound of the lyre” (132), before going on to describe the rhetorical figure transumption and the trope of mingling. He writes: “The revision of prior metaphor, the quickening of old images that have frozen into statues or bric-a-brac, the rebuilding from echoing clay of new living figures, animated by the present breath of voice - this is the allusively originating role of transumption. The kind of figure that gets its strength from the way it both recalls and transcends a prior one is by no means the same as a mere modulation of a topos or commonplace. Thus, while the image of the Aeolian Harp is widespread in nineteenth century European poetry, it is at significant moments in the work of major poets that it is revised” (145).

<sup>187</sup> Greene, “Poetry as Invocation,” 512.

<sup>188</sup> Greene, “Poetry as Invocation,” 512.

My argument is that the spirit of O'Hara's poem, its own "dead thoughts" of "To hell" and the hell of "endless torment" shares Shelley's committed finale: where O'Hara seeks to "stuff" torments onto the "filthy" pages of his poetry, Shelley desires to "Drive my dead thoughts over the universe" like dead leaves in high winds: "Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth / Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!" Shelley's ode halts a generic moment in the elegy between the description of a life and the final internment of the body in death; the transformation of one to the other is the source of the "Ashes and sparks" which will revivify the spirit of the poet if, and only if, the poet can be attentive to that fleeting moment.

In both cases shifts occur between written, spoken and sung poetry. Shelley seeks to answer the wind's force by taking up its music "through my lips", making lips the "trumpet of a prophecy!" The trumpet recalls the first stanza's "clarion", which shares its etymology with O'Hara's "clarity". For O'Hara the wind as poetic breath threatens to be overwhelming, "smothering" the poet, depriving him of the spirit necessary to speak. His craft becomes one of containment: "I make room", recalling the origins of "stanza" as room, sheltering in his void the damaged lives of those he loves.

#### 5.V. "MA VIE DÉPEND DE CE LIVRE": ARTHUR RIMBAUD

O'Hara's poem picks up a line from Arthur Rimbaud which is of particular significance since it is from a poem bidding farewell to poetry.

Rimbaud said of *Une Saison en enfer*, "Ma vie dépend de ce livre" ("My life hangs on this book").<sup>189</sup> Though the composition of *Une Saison en enfer* and *Illuminations* overlapped, the conventional interpretation of the former has seen it as a farewell to poetry. James Lawler describes the work as evoking the "crisis of an individual soul, which also expresses a society[...] and a culture[...] that have been subjected to spiritual, emotional and economic alienation".<sup>190</sup> Robert Cohn writes of the work as "the means of shaking off an insatiable drive to spiritual power which was

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<sup>189</sup> Quoted in James Lawler, *Rimbaud's Theatre of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 202.

<sup>190</sup> Quoted in Lawler, *Rimbaud's Theatre*, 203.

threatening his [Rimbaud's] very existence".<sup>191</sup> The poem is, then, strategically ironic in needing to renounce spiritual energy with some other related form of courage. It is a battle of wills in which the will must not win. This, I argue, was the condition to which O'Hara sought to refer.

The protagonist of the poem "parvins à faire s'évanouir dans mon esprit toute l'espérance humaine" ("contrived to purge my mind of all human hope"), an aspiration we might see in O'Hara's simple "to hell with it".<sup>192</sup> The second half of the prose-poem reads:

Et le printemps m'a approté l'affreux rire de l'idiot.

Or, tout dernièrement, m'étant trouvé sur le point de fair le dernier *couac*, j'ai songé à rechercher la clef du festin ancien, où je reprendrais peut-être appétit.

La charité est cette clef. – Cette inspiration prouve que j'ai rêvé!

"Tu resteras hyène..." etc., se récrie le démon qui me couronna de si aimables pavots. "Gagne la mort avec tous tes appétits, et tone égoïsme et tous les péchés capitaux."

Ah! j'en ai trop pris:- Mais, cher Satan, je vous en conjure, une prunelle moins irritée! et en attendant les quelques petites lâchetés en retard, vous qui aimez dans l'écrivain l'absence des facultés descriptives ou instructives, je vous détache ces quelques hideux feuillets de mon carnet de damné.<sup>193</sup>

And spring brought me the idiot's frightful laughter.

Now, only recently, being on the point of giving my last squawk, I thought of looking for the key to the ancient feast where I might find my appetite again.

Charity is that key.- This inspiration proves that I have dreamed!

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<sup>191</sup> Robert Greer Cohn, *The Poetry of Rimbaud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 401.

<sup>192</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell and the Drunken Boat*, trans. Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions, 1961), 2.

<sup>193</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell*, 4.



continues to stuff its wounded limbs  
as I make room for them on one  
after another filthy page of poetry.

And mean it.

The accidents and emergencies of lives lived “continues to stuff its wounded limbs” into the “void” behind the eyes, but O’Hara’s renunciation of poetry fails in his bid to “make room for them” on paper.

#### 5.VI. TUTIVILLUS, THE PRINTER’S DEVIL AND THE HELLBOX

“To Hell”: O’Hara, with spite, seeks to discard the whole situation of the poem, and yet makes “room for them”, the lost, on “filthy page[s] of poetry” by meaning it. Where or what is this hell, if it is to incorporate the implied expletive of the title?

Amongst the various demons assisting the work of Satan, was the demon who later became known as Tutivillus. Margaret Jennings in “Tutivillus: The Literary Career of the Recording Demon”, describes the fanciful history of the demon.<sup>196</sup> The demon could be found amidst church or monastery choirs, encouraging mistakes in the recitation of scripture, or causing various kinds of disruption to singing. Such demons preyed upon *acedia*, the wandering of the mind through sloth or melancholy (“intruding on the vigorous heart”). The “‘handbook’ of monastic demonology”, the *Liber revelationum de insidiis et versutiis daemonum adversus homines* by Abbot Richalm of Schontal (circa 1270), claimed that, in the words of Jennings, “demons [came] riding like motes in sunbeams and coming down with the rain”, encouraging everything from sins and errors, to “coughing, snorting and spitting”, or simply encouraging people to sleep.<sup>197</sup> Jennings comments that by the end of the Middle Ages, the great majority of demons “are droll but not frightful; they provoke laughter or at least incite a smile, but they create no horror”.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Margaret Jennings, “Tutivillus: The Literary Career of the Recording Demon,” *Studies in Philology* 74. 5 (1977): 1-95.

<sup>197</sup> Jennings, “Tutivillus,” 5.

<sup>198</sup> Jennings, “Tutivillus,” 6-7.

The function of the Tutivillus demon was “registering vaniloquia” (idle talk), in one or both of two ways. Firstly, the demon could be seen during Mass “recording misdeeds” such as gossip by furiously scribbling it down. Secondly, the demon could be seen carrying a heavy sack, into which the “syllables cut off, syncopated, or skipped over by clerics in reciting or chanting the psalms” would be collected.<sup>199</sup> The demon is therefore a messenger to the devil, but also mediates between speech and writing.

One of the surprising aspects of this demon, known as Tutivillus but by various names besides,<sup>200</sup> is that it managed to lurch into the modern world by becoming associated with the printing press in two ways. Firstly the ‘printer’s devil’ is a term for an underling or apprentice whose job is to carry out various chores around the machinery. Secondly, rather than gathering up the misspoken syllables of sermons, or the indelicacies of church gossip, the printer’s devil or demon encourages mistakes in typesetting. Whenever a mistake was found in a printed text, its existence was blamed on the machinations of the demon. Cast metal type, once used by the printer, is thrown into the hellbox, before being put back into the job case by the printer’s devil (the labourer). Later, with the advent of continuous casting typesetting machines, the hellbox became the receptacle for the broken or damaged type, ready to be melted down and recast into new type.

[...] existence  
continues to stuff its wounded limbs

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<sup>199</sup> Jennings, “Tutivillus,” 8.

<sup>200</sup> For the origins of the name Tutivillus see Jennings, “Tutiviullus,” 14-17. Jennings writes: “[By] an unusually complicated system of reference and cross-reference, change and addition, elaboration and omission, the rather diligent but dull “recording devil in church” and his sack-carrying partner became known by a single name—the well-known one of Tutivillus, the young, infernal humorist of the Towneley Cycle[...]. Though his description may be partially rooted in Apocalypse 20:12 [...] and in the material gleaned from folk tales and monastic fears, Tutivillus’ development is a literary one. Like the Grail quest, Langland’s visions, the Wyf of Bath, and other medieval “unforgettables,” he came to life in the imaginative constructs of contemporary storytellers, and his characterization stayed alive only as long as they and their world could support it.” (8)

as I make room for them on one  
after another filthy page of poetry.

O'Hara's opening gambit, his title, is to discard, to scatter the remnants of his art, his type: to the hellbox with the materials of poetry! O'Hara pondered, whilst at Harvard, after reading St Jerome, whose side he was on, that of Satan or God.<sup>201</sup> The "void / behind my eyes" is a hellish space, into which "existence / continues to stuff its wounded limbs". Tutivillus is the demon of sinful and mistaken language, the "syllables and syncopated words and verses" and "ffragmina verborum" [sic],<sup>202</sup> the bundled fragments of language, the scattered type of impropriety. Recall, Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind":

And, by the incantation of this verse,  
Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth  
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!

The Shelleyan wind is powerful enough to scatter the "ashes and sparks, my words". Are these not the ashes and sparks beaten out of metal when forging type? The "ashes and sparks", like so many mortal ashes, strewn rising and falling onto the "unawakened earth" are pounded out of the matter of language. O'Hara's return from demonology and his own descent into hell to that spat-out "existence" culminates in the agency required to make room for the "wounded limbs", the bones of the discarded type, scattered onto the rags of "one / after another filthy page of poetry."<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> "I am reading, slowly, Saint Jerome, and I know now that Satan lives, and I have not yet made up my mind which side I am on." ("A JOURNAL: October-November 1948 & January 1949," in *Early Writings*, 98.

<sup>202</sup> *The Towneley Cycle*, accessed February 13, 2013, [http://machias.edu/faculty/necastro/drama/towneley/30\\_judgement.html](http://machias.edu/faculty/necastro/drama/towneley/30_judgement.html).

<sup>203</sup> Though hardly fit to match it, this reading recalls Jerome McGann's extraordinary reading of Yeats's "The Circus Animals' Desertion," in *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 3-8, a reading which uncovers the material history of the final lines:

I must lie down where all the ladders start  
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

O'Hara's famous injunction, "the slightest loss of attention leads to death", feels the surveillance of the Tutivillus demon, taking down the broken language of the poet when fallen into a state of *acedia*, apathy, boredom, or inattention.<sup>204</sup>

#### 6. CONCLUSION: PAUL GOODMAN AND EXPLOSIVE GRIEF

And here's where we can re-introduce the delicious ouroboros of the title ("To Hell with It") and conclusion ("And mean it"): the force of its insult is an expression of its feeling insulted by the senseless deaths it would otherwise, as an elegy, contain in self-aggrandising intellection; O'Hara's work refuses to make the poet, in the words of Goodman, "somewhat magnified" by identifying with the "depriving power".

To say, insultingly and by way of summation as a title, "to hell with it" *and* "to mean it" conclusively and candidly, uses the vapid ambiguity of "it" against "it", thus hollowing it out, refusing to learn anything from, or to try to understand anything about it. The poem's energy is in its contradiction: to hell with all of this, to hell with everything, *and* to mean it, thus inaugurating once more the hellish task of poetry, the task of language, the task of experience; poetics is making meaning. The poem refuses to sympathise with the cause of loss, to "identify himself with the depriving power" which is death. What a magnificent elegy this is, then? How else to be on the side of life except by the delicious insult to death which is the refusal to understand death? That is, to harbour oneself as the poet of death, to internalize it in self-aggrandisement as part of the "*P*": "endless torment pretending to be the rose / of acknowledgement". O'Hara's sentimental struggle is to refuse to martyr oneself to one's own feelings, to prevent suffering from being loved, and therefore to maintain feelings as in some sense outside, exterior to, the self. "O'Hara" feels no pain, but his feelings do. As we know, "sentiment is always introducing on

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W.B. Yeats, *Selected Poems*, ed. with an introduction and notes by Timothy Webb (London: Penguin, 2000), 224.

<sup>204</sup> O'Hara, from the television film *David Smith: Sculpting Master of Bolton Landing* (1964), reprinted in Frank O'Hara, *What's With Modern Art?*, ed. Bill Berkson (Austin: Mike & Dale's Press, 1999), 27.

form”, so “clean it [form] off with an old sock” and “stuff its [sentiment] wounded limbs” into poetry. “To Hell with It” is a great example of the absolute “conviction that there is a real, present object of anger and grief”, even when, or especially when, that grief “is for an object present by its felt absence”.<sup>205</sup> To encourage the “explosive release of strong feelings”,<sup>206</sup> their purging, O’Hara makes the “object of passion concretely present”, or in the case of grief the “felt absence” of that object present, or at least present to the mind, the fractured grief isolated from its explanations, “last crying no tears will dry”. Rather than be “tired, miserable but not dissatisfied, enjoying the satisfactions of the usual standards”, Goodman encourages one to be “surprisingly miserable”.<sup>207</sup> Rather than drawing “back from the feeling of loss” in explanation and letting “his grief dribble away” “ennobled by understanding” but without purging strong feeling and therefore being “less open to love”, O’Hara seeks to mourn “enough to be able to live again”, to fail to explain grief but to say “To Hell with It”.

How does Goodman explain the paucity of experience of the intellectual? He asks, “Why would such a man want to be surprisingly miserable?”<sup>208</sup> Generic satisfactions of being “tired, miserable but not dissatisfied” are insufficient.<sup>209</sup> O’Hara refuses what Goodman describes as the “classical solution”, which is to turn grief and anger into something “theoretical or ideal”, namely “intellectual love”, one variant of which is to “achieve stoical *apatheia*, the dissociation of emotion altogether”.<sup>210</sup> Such apathy is anathema to O’Hara’s poetics. Let us interject with perhaps the most famous credo attributed to O’Hara, spoken in relation to the sculptor David Smith: “Don’t be bored, don’t be lazy, don’t be trivial and don’t be proud. The slightest loss of attention leads to death.” It was, of course, central to one of the earliest academic responses to O’Hara’s work, that of Marjorie Perloff.<sup>211</sup> The

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<sup>205</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 94 and 93.

<sup>206</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 93.

<sup>207</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 102.

<sup>208</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 102.

<sup>209</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 102.

<sup>210</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 94-5.

<sup>211</sup> Marjorie Perloff, “Frank O’Hara and the Aesthetics of Attention,” *boundary 2* 4.3 (1976), 779-806.

significant inspiration of Goodman's essay to O'Hara's can be determined by the shared hatred of boredom:

Let us distinguish acute and chronic boredom. In general, boredom is fixing the present attention on what cannot be interesting because eros is attached to something outside of attention. In acute boredom, the unconscious attraction is definite, claims attention, and must be actively repressed – e.g., being somewhere and really wishing to be elsewhere.<sup>212</sup>

Acute boredom might be helpful, since it is “often the reactive opposite of a guilty attraction actively repressed” and is therefore a condition of “lively pain”.<sup>213</sup> The other, chronic boredom, is, however, “spiritless”, a constraint which is “both peculiarly relentless and peculiarly anonymous”.<sup>214</sup> Whereas acute boredom can be answered with a strength of will, with abrogation, for the latter it “is the self that must relent”. As discussed above the “standards of the relentless self” are held in “the need to be always right; to be consistent; unwillingness to be a fool; satisfaction with the situation as it is when it is well enough.”<sup>215</sup> Against such “rationalizations” we can see O'Hara's love:

But that's not why you fell in love in the first place, just to hang onto life, so you have to take your chances and try to avoid being logical. Pain always produces logic, which is very bad for you.<sup>216</sup>

“In Memory of My Feelings” is a painful elegy for past feelings, dead sentiments, a purge so that one can be “open to love[... and] able to live again”. “To Hell with It” is the “explosive grief and anger” not of the “smiling insensitive adult” who has been trained from childhood to “fear the consequences of his anger and is shamed out of crying”.<sup>217</sup> Goodman encourages childlike

<sup>212</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 103.

<sup>213</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 103. Is this “guilt” here a consideration of repressed homosexuality?

<sup>214</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 103.

<sup>215</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 104.

<sup>216</sup> O'Hara, “Personism,” 498.

<sup>217</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 96 and 95-6.

behaviour, O'Hara's "last crying no tears will dry" matching Goodman's claim that children "often flare up and often cry":

Faced with even a temporary delay or absence, children pound and scream and bawl; but as soon as the situation changes, they are bafflingly sunny, and take their gratification with relish, or feel secure again when mother returns. It is said that "children cannot wait," but just the contrary is true. It is children who *can* wait, by making dramatic scenes[...]. They have a spontaneous mechanism to cushion even minor troubles. Rather it is the adults who have inhibited their spontaneous expression, who cannot wait; we swallow our disappointment and always taste what we have swallowed.<sup>218</sup>

O'Hara tries not to "be anxious about blind passion itself" preventing the "intensity of appetite, grief, anger" from being controlled and "made to *dribble away*, partly in reasoning". What is the significance of that seemingly throwaway line, "I clean it off with an old sock"? Goodman writes: "The mechanism of dribbling away makes us think of the last-minute inhibition of orgasmic surrender and ejaculation. Correspondingly, at the last minute he withdraws from contact."<sup>219</sup> Instead, O'Hara cleans ejaculate off all of the contemptuous passion of "To Hell with it", "and go[es] on".

I want to end where I began, with the comments of Alberti. Alberti here is speaking to the task of art to evoke *furia*, or liveliness, against a merely representational or mimetic model of aesthetics. The following describes the quality, shared by O'Hara, of grace, and the "functions of life", namely "movement and sentiment", brought to mind with two moments from the two poems featured here by O'Hara, a poet determined to "get up" each time the barn door hits him the face, "since to move is to love" and "sentiment is always intruding on form":

The members of the dead ought to be dead even to the  
fingernails, and the living ought to be alive in every part.  
A body is said to be alive when of its own accord it has

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<sup>218</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 94.

<sup>219</sup> Goodman, *Utopian*, 96.

certain movements. It is called dead when the members may no longer carry out the functions of life, that is, movement and sentiment. Then the painter who wishes to express life in things will make every part in movement. But of all the movements that are charming and graceful, those movements are most graceful and most lively which move upwards toward the air.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> Alberti quoted in David Summers, "Maniera and Movement: The Figura Serpentinata," in *Readings in Italian Mannerism*, ed. by Liana De Girolami Cheney (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 294.

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