

## Frank O'Hara's "Second Avenue" and the Modernist Tradition

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The writing of Frank O'Hara, including his abstract epic, "Second Avenue,"<sup>1</sup> emerged from a period of conflict in US poetry circles in the 1950s. In his acceptance speech for the 1960 National Book Award, Robert Lowell declared that there were two competing poetries in post-war America. The "cooked," he declared, was "marvelously expert ... laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by a graduate seminar"; the "raw," on the other hand, was "huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience ... dished up for midnight listeners."<sup>2</sup> The "cooked" included poets associated with the New Criticism and their academic contemporaries.<sup>3</sup> Arguing for a rejection of "the exuberance and excess of Modernism in favor of poems that were self-contained, ironic, and dense with elaborately constructed metaphors,"<sup>4</sup> they embraced T.S. Eliot's "tradition"—that "no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone"<sup>5</sup>—and complied with his theory that "the poet himself [can] have no necessary role in the poetry he writes."<sup>6</sup> Allen Tate, a noted New Critic of the period, pronounced: "a good poem ... [has] nothing to do with exalted feelings of being moved by the spirit ... [it is] a simple piece of craftsmanship, an intelligible or *cognitive* object."<sup>7</sup> This proto-structuralist understanding of the poem was essential to the New Critics' aesthetic.<sup>8</sup>

On the other side, the "raw" was characterised by the emergence of a new American avant-garde that embraced a poetic freedom of experimentation, which realigned poetry, not with the academy, but with "a revitalized

form of modernism" that embraced "'abstract expressionism' and jazz."<sup>9</sup> Hence, the "doctrine,"<sup>10</sup> or in the words of Kenneth Koch, "dreadful posturings"<sup>11</sup> of New Criticism was actively resisted by this post-war avant-garde that united around a shared concern with "trying to write types of poems either alien or hostile to the poem as defined and explored by Eliot and his heirs and their sons."<sup>12</sup> The new wave of American poets effectively positioned themselves as the primary opponents of academic poetry and, with the publication of Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* in 1960, gained nationwide exposure.<sup>13</sup>

At a cursory glance, the apparently clear-cut division between these two poetic practices would seem to situate O'Hara directly within the avant-garde. In contrast to the heightened, formal rhetoric of the New Critics, O'Hara's poetry was marked by a "spontaneity and casualness" that displayed his skills as a "practitioner of the impulsive,"<sup>14</sup> while his diction was that of everyday speech and, in particular, the New York gay argot of his time.<sup>15</sup> Yet these once seemingly obvious distinctions between the New Critics and this new wave of American poets appear open to question. Although O'Hara's position in the New York School of poetry, and that movement's broader membership in the counter-culture that defined the avant-garde, is commonly perceived as being on the experimental outskirts of an already experimental movement, there is evidence that O'Hara's writing owed a significant debt to the mainstream of both the Anglo-American and European modernist poetic tradition. O'Hara's incorporation of this tradition within his poetry, which is particularly evident in "Second Avenue," expresses crucial links to Eliot's critical theory that perceived the "emotion of art" to be impersonal and, in the end, achievable only through the poet "surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done"—in particular the poet's surrender of the self to tradition.<sup>16</sup> Oddly, considering its satirical and almost whimsical tone, Eliot's impersonality is echoed in O'Hara's mock manifesto, "Personism," where the stated aim is to put the "poem squarely between the poet and the person."<sup>17</sup> This statement encourages a distance between the poet and the poem, which is manifested further in O'Hara's frequently fluctuating lyric "I" that is subsumed, just as Eliot would desire, within his poetry's direct citation of significant precursors. It can then be argued that the conflict and confluence of ideas between the academic poets and the new American avant-garde directly activated O'Hara's practice; this, in turn, illuminates a complexity in the relationship between the two movements that is often overlooked.

Written in March and April of 1953, O'Hara's "Second Avenue" provides a celebrated example of the poetic shift away from the academic style of the period immediately after the Second World War. A "culmination"

of O'Hara's "desire to use a kind of automatic writing to match the epic scale and grandeur built up by accident and subconscious connections in abstract expressionist painting, aleatory music, and French surrealist catalogue poems,"<sup>18</sup> "Second Avenue" is abstract, long, loose and colloquial, piling images, ideas, proper names and snatches of conversation into unruly lines that appear as an impenetrable block on the page. Accordingly, "Second Avenue" is well known for its difficulty, asking at one point: "Is your throat dry with the deviousness of following?" ("SA" 126). Yet "Second Avenue" also overtly reveals a debt to an alternative artistic and poetic tradition that can be seen to align itself with Eliot's tenet that "no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone."<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, "Second Avenue" frequently acknowledges, mimics and parodies the European modernists, namely Stéphane Mallarmé, Guillaume Apollinaire, Rainer Maria Rilke, Arthur Rimbaud and Pierre Reverdy. The poem is dedicated to the memory of the Russian futurist Vladimir Mayakovsky, a vital influence on the dream-like escape into New York that "Second Avenue," in part, strives to effect. As Kenneth Koch points out:

To speak historically, I think *Second Avenue* is evidence that the avant-garde style of French poetry from Baudelaire to Reverdy has infiltrated the American consciousness to such an extent that it is possible for an American poet to write lyrically in it with perfect ease.<sup>20</sup>

The invocation of this tradition provides an undercurrent of purpose and meaning, both symbolic and literal, for the poem that defies the simplistic anti-academic attitude so often attributed to O'Hara and his contemporaries.<sup>21</sup>

Considering the difficulties in locating a coherent line of development in "Second Avenue," it is not surprising that many critics have elected to declare the poem, though brilliant in its way, "an odd ambitious failure."<sup>22</sup> John Ashbery, in his "Introduction" to *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, identifies the "obfuscation" that makes reading it "such a difficult pleasure," and asserts that the sense of experimentation that underlies "Second Avenue" proves "unsatisfactory."<sup>23</sup> In his criticism there is the suggestion that Ashbery considers the poem merely a necessary stepping-stone for his friend to cross before he could escape his early "French Zen" experiments and locate his own voice.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Marjorie Perloff considers "Second Avenue" a "real stylistic advance,"<sup>25</sup> a step in the right direction, claiming that "many lines and passages throughout 'Second Avenue' ... have the immediacy, excitement, and sense of *presence* that characterizes the later poetry."<sup>26</sup> Yet, despite her acknowledgment of the importance

of "Second Avenue" to O'Hara's development, Perloff argues that there is "too little design."<sup>27</sup> She pointedly asks "whether a poem" can be "so insistently nonmimetic" through its "intentional displacement and disorientation,"<sup>28</sup> and whether this "principle of disorientation can keep a poem going for some six hundred lines without boring the reader a little."<sup>29</sup>

One of the few voices of support for "Second Avenue" comes from Alan Feldman in his monograph *Frank O'Hara*.<sup>30</sup> Claiming that the poem is the "purest example of the kind of rapid motion and surprising transitions that characterize" Frank O'Hara's poetry,<sup>31</sup> Feldman finds great satisfaction in reading "Second Avenue" due to its speed, momentum and energy.<sup>32</sup> In particular, he focuses on the surface of the poem as self-constitutive of its own subject, arguing that "Second Avenue" is as much about the process of writing as it is about the poem itself.<sup>33</sup> Focusing on the poem's obvious debt to New York City and metropolis society in general—which O'Hara refers to within the poem as "the most substantial art product of our times" ("SA" 463)—Feldman notes the constant transitions, allusions to visual elements, and the consistent tone of surprise and confusion that are mimetic of the endless variety of a city that refuses to be locked into any sort of pattern. However, Feldman ultimately concedes that "Second Avenue" is somewhat marred by a "wearisome impenetrability."<sup>34</sup> He concludes, like Perloff and Ashbery, that O'Hara's later longer poems "have more defined subjects, and communicate in a more distinctive and personal voice."<sup>35</sup>

"Second Avenue" is notable for obscure, apparently impenetrable lines, like "since going underground is like discovering something in / your navel that has an odor and is able to fly away" ("SA" 11-12), and "those tubby little planes flopping / competitively into the wind sleeve." ("SA" 157-158). These lines display O'Hara's wit, as well as his ability to draw together unlikely elements to form enigmatic pictures and engage with the reader. However, critic and poet Richard Howard argues that these lines "never suggest anything converging, opposing or even subordinating in the kind of tension that makes for unity."<sup>36</sup> There does not appear to be a common link unifying the mass of lines and words into even a semblance of order: "individual sections appear in no particular sequence; scenes and images are juxtaposed without a view of their place in the larger scheme."<sup>37</sup> O'Hara himself acknowledged this, writing in his "Notes on Second Avenue" that he allowed "obscurity" to enter into his poem via "the relationship [between] the surface and the meaning," to purposely keep the poem, in painter's parlance, "high and dry."<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, within the context of the poem this obscurity is not necessarily a bad thing. Perhaps beyond being a reaction to the tightly enclosed poems of the New Criticism, and taking on board the practices of the abstract expressionists O'Hara adored and

championed, the contradictory scenes and imagery of "Second Avenue" create a poem that is self-conscious of its disjointed surface:

You are too young to remember the lack of snow in 1953 showing:  
 "1 Except you react like electricity to a chunk of cloth,  
 it will disappear like an ape at night. 2 Before eating  
 there was a closing of retina against retina, and ice,  
 telephone wires! was knotted, spelling out farce  
 which is germane to lust. 3 Then the historic duel in the surf  
 when black garments were wasted and swept over battlements  
 into the moat. 4 The book contained a rosary pressed  
 in the shape of a tongue. ("SA" 200-208)

The manner in which O'Hara assembles this random assortment of images, ideas and events in numerical order serves to highlight the incoherence within "Second Avenue," as if "consciousness" in the poem "does not flow or stream but is constantly reacting to new shocks."<sup>39</sup> In this case the poem is attempting to deal with each new bewildering statement by framing the passage within a numerical logic completely absent from the content of the words themselves. "Second Avenue" thus emerges as a poem that appears to be aware of itself and attempts, perhaps in vain, to impose upon its randomness of image and event some logic of sense that does not exist within either.

A further aspect of O'Hara's ploy in imbuing his poem with its collage-like surface of disparate images, events and things, is that "Second Avenue" comes to actively resist meaning; its lines seem to act as pure signifiers. Instead, O'Hara is asking the reader to allow the prosody of the lyric to convey its own sense:

What spanking opossums of sneaks are caressing the routes!  
 and of the pulse-racked tremors attached to my viciousness  
 I can only enumerate the somber instances of wetness. ("SA" 54-56)

Inspired by the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and the painter Willem de Kooning, in whose work "the life in the work is autonomous,"<sup>40</sup> O'Hara draws throughout "Second Avenue" from both a poetic and artistic theoretical background that is starkly different to the academicism of the New Critics. Its poetics can be partially related to that of Charles Olson's "Projective Verse,"<sup>41</sup> while its sources in visual art seem most closely linked to the abstract expressionism articulated by Harold Rosenberg's conception of the American Action Painters.<sup>42</sup> These theories, though belonging to different artistic disciplines, are linked by their understanding of the page or canvas

as "OPEN,"<sup>43</sup> a field which provides the poet or painter with "an area to act"; what appears on the page is not so much a picture or a poem as "an event."<sup>44</sup> Hence Olson's slogan that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT"<sup>45</sup> offers an insight into the sibilant passage quoted above. Through just the sound of the words—in particular the sibilant hiss of "spanking opossums," "sneaks," "caressing," "pulse," "viciousness," "somber," "instances," and "wetness"—the passage conveys a sense of frustrated indignation, an anger highlighted by the spitting "viciousness." As the longer vowels take over in the last line and separate the previously clustered s sounds, the sense of the passage is also altered, becoming solemn yet ashamed, ironic in the absurdity of being "somber" while wet. Though the reader may know nothing of "spanking opossums" or "pulse-racked tremors," it may still be possible to derive from these lines a general sense of what O'Hara is saying, since the meaning of the line is so directly tied to its sonic presence.

In this way, O'Hara's practice also seems close to Rosenberg's theories of the Action Painters,<sup>46</sup> whose "innovation ... was to dispense with the *representation* of the state in favour of *enacting* it in physical movement. The action on the canvas became its own representation."<sup>47</sup> In this way, the union of words and their relative positions (near or far away from one another) in "Second Avenue" unite to form their own representation. Or, as Bill Berkson puts it succinctly, "'Second Avenue' and 'Biotherm' are poems of charged surface that draws meaning to them as they go, magnetized by emphatic verbal process."<sup>48</sup> The beginning of Part 8 serves as an ideal illustration of the "charged surface" in "Second Avenue":

Candidly. The past, the sensations of the past. Now!  
in cuneiform, of umbrella satrap square carts with hotdogs  
and onions of red syrup blended, of sand bejewelling the prepuce  
in tank suits, of Majestic Camera Stores and Schuster's,  
of Kenneth in an abandoned storeway on Sunday cutting ever more  
insinuating lobotomies of a yet-to-be-more-yielding world  
of ears.... ("SA" 313-319)

By starting with the adverb "candidly," meaning in this case to be free from reservation, O'Hara allows the temporal dissolution in the next two sentences to seem more natural, as if the past can melt into the mere sensation of the now.<sup>49</sup> Meaning, as Berkson would have it, is thus defined by the poem through this sense of freedom. The overlapping images of the street scene are presented in terms of temporal flux, of things just streaming by. The city is thus present within the poem's significance, as though O'Hara is inscribing the fluid nature of Second Avenue within the form of the poem it-

self. Though “Second Avenue” appears to resist the attachment of concrete meaning, its dynamic surface—acting as an extension of O’Hara’s whims and consciousness during the writing process—becomes a representation of that process.<sup>50</sup> The reader is presented with space to develop their own understanding of the poem, and to determine how the action of writing has created its impact.

As a poem that is consciously self-aware and actively seeking to imitate abstract expressionist painting by avoiding the attachment of referential meaning, “Second Avenue” can still be read as a unified whole. The opening section asserts instantly that the poem is, for the most part, about poetry, or more particularly about the alternative tradition from which “Second Avenue” emerges and with which it contends:

Quips and players, seeming to vend astringency off-hours,  
celebrate diced excesses and sardonics, mixing pleasures,  
as if proximity were staring at the margin of a plea.... (“SA” 1-3)

The lyrical subject, transforming himself into “proximity”—that suggests the speaker is neither involved with what is going on nor very far away from it—, is removed, observing the “quips and players.” These “quips” appear to be rival poems, while the “players” are those poets he admires, as they “celebrate diced excesses and sardonics.” “Diced” conveys a dual meaning, suggesting that the “excesses and sardonics”—which appear to represent at least the content of the poems “Second Avenue” is responding to and celebrating—are whittled into smaller parts that were once part of a greater whole, which is likely the modernist tradition from which “Second Avenue” is emerging. This interpretation is strengthened by “diced” also appearing to act as a reference to Stéphane Mallarmé’s “A Dice Thrown Never Will Annul Chance.”<sup>51</sup>

Considering the reflective, self-conscious nature of “Second Avenue,” “A Dice Thrown” seems an ideal literary forebear for O’Hara to invoke from the outset. Dorothy Betz contends that Mallarmé’s poem locates its “principle source of ... tension [in its] means of expressing the poem on the printed page,”<sup>52</sup> where “the technical aspects of the poem take on a meaning related to its content.”<sup>53</sup> In the case of “A Dice Thrown” the “rectangular boundaries of the book reflect the essential limitations, both intellectual and physical, of man himself.”<sup>54</sup> Mallarmé’s response to this limitation is to challenge the parameters of the page by giving space as much precedence as his words that, in their almost tumbling, scattered appearance, seem to refuse to acknowledge the “formal restraints” of the page. Mallarmé is thus giving his poem a certain sort of autonomous freedom to challenge “distracting literary limitations.”<sup>55</sup> Importantly, the motifs of the “dice”—the

throwing of which represents "human power, and the 'hasard' [chance], which it cannot succeed in mastering, the force that controls the absolute"<sup>56</sup>—and the "constellation"—that in its ability to carry images and meaning "represents true poetry"<sup>57</sup>—assert that the only way to overcome chance and therefore break down man's self-imposed limitations is through poetry. "A Dice Thrown" incorporates both elements into its form: the words cascading down the page resemble both the random, bouncing roll of a falling die and also the sparse, sometimes clustered, appearance of stars in the sky.

With this conception of "A Dice Thrown" in mind, the links between O'Hara and Mallarmé become apparent. In both cases, they are actively imbuing their poetry with a meaning that is derivative of its form. Moreover, O'Hara, like Mallarmé, is seeking to break with the traditional limitations of the composition process. Yet in contrast, and perhaps in response, instead of rejecting chance, which stands in the way of the "absolute," O'Hara embraces it. In an interview with Edward Lucie-Smith, O'Hara claims: "I don't believe in reworking [poetry.] ... [W]hat really makes me happy is when something just falls into place as if it were a conversation or something."<sup>58</sup> Besides asserting the importance of chance in O'Hara's poetry, particularly in his ability to be able to convey automatically his thoughts and feelings on paper, this quote also expresses the Dadaist and surrealist roots that so often characterised O'Hara's earlier poetry. Anna Balakian argues that "all the fantastic and outwardly supercilious manifestos and demonstrations of the Dadists" were largely based on their inversion of the philosophy that had originally challenged "le hasard" "as the force that prevented the artist from organizing his absolute image." Instead:

the futility of his strife was ... turned into a worship of the chaotic force of the universe. If the will had proved incompetent to control "le hasard" through its "coup de dés" [throw of the dice], it would let the "hasard" master its field of influence. Art would become the seventh side of the die. If art could not assimilate something of the power of mystical chance, it would let this same chance engulf its personality.<sup>59</sup>

Hence "Second Avenue" emerges from a background that, instead of challenging chance, gave "a free course to the powers of 'le hasard.'"<sup>60</sup> By incorporating the spontaneity and automatism of surrealism, "Second Avenue's" kaleidoscope of imagery is thus driven by the surrealist tradition that accepts the chaotic forces of chance.

As O'Hara's poem reveals its debt to both Mallarmé and surrealism through the seemingly direct use of the word "diced" and the form the poem



subsequently takes, the relation it shares with Eliot's notion of tradition begins to emerge. In acknowledging and responding to both of these poetic precursors, "Second Avenue" evidently possesses Eliot's all-important "historical sense ... [that] involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence."<sup>61</sup> In locating itself within these two modernist traditions, "Second Avenue" is recognising a specific poetic history. In doing so it sheds its own individual meaning (abstract and impenetrable though it may be) and, instead, takes on a collective meaning that fits within Eliot's central command that there can be no art that has its complete meaning alone. Although the form "Second Avenue" adopts would, presumably, not seem to be one that would have satisfied Eliot's and the New Critic's highbrow tastes, its clear poetic lineage mirrors the central argument within "Tradition and the Individual Talent", which would seem to complicate the apparently clear division between the new American poets and the self-anointed descendants of Eliot. Significantly, O'Hara does not settle with Mallarmé nor an academic understanding of surrealism as chance. Rather, in "Second Avenue," he continues to explore these poetic traditions, while continually introducing new ones and mingling them with previous incarnations. This becomes a poem steeped in Eliot's notion of the artistic past and tradition, even if it is a tradition not necessarily in line with what Eliot, and the New Critics, had in mind.

In continuing to examine the European modernist sources that characterise "Second Avenue," it is perhaps Pierre Reverdy's understanding of the poetic image that is most significant for the poem's employment of Dadaist and surrealist imagery.<sup>62</sup> Though commonly considered a cubist poet,<sup>63</sup> Reverdy is nonetheless quoted directly in André Breton's pivotal, and no less influential, "Manifesto of Surrealism":

The image is a pure creation of the mind  
It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two  
more or less distant realities.  
The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is  
distant and true, the stronger the image will be—the greater its emotional  
power and poetic reality....<sup>64</sup>

Reverdy's statement on poetics asserts the importance of uniting objects and ideas without any direct relationship in the formation of a poetic image. In a similar manner, much of the imagery and action throughout "Second Avenue" appears driven by a logic of "juxtaposed realities". Hence similes, such as "your face has fallen like a waffle" ("SA" 39), "priests with lips like mutton" ("SA" 78), and "he became violent as an auction" ("SA" 192), stand alongside passages that revel in fancifully contradictory descriptions:

You come to me smelling of the shit of Pyrrhian maidens!  
and I as fast come-on for fascinating fleas-in-ice  
become ravenously casual avec quel haut style de chambre!  
("SA" 261-263)

The speaker in the poem intermingles elements drawn from high and low culture, while also invoking contradictory notions of movement ("fast," "fleas") and stillness (the "ice" that traps the fleas). Moreover, he uses the energetic term "ravenously" and juxtaposes it with the more relaxed "casual" to give the impression that the "you" in these lines is both at once. In this way O'Hara is mimicking the poetic theory and poetry of Reverdy who presented "the spectator with a little organism that will take up all experience brought to it, digest it, reorganize it and return it as the aesthetic experience unadulterated."<sup>65</sup> Though the "Pyrrhian maidens" are muse-like figures—implying that "smelling of the shit of Pyrrhian maidens" is a smell of poetic inspiration—the isolated aesthetic experience of the image—the "little organism"—outweighs any further need to attach any significance to it that may impinge on this immediate experience.

Besides providing a source for its imagery, O'Hara's use of surrealist juxtaposition and contradiction in "Second Avenue" also give the poem its "*push* and *pull* interaction."<sup>66</sup> As such, there is a persistent tension in the poem that is exemplified by its references to variable speed and movement.<sup>67</sup> Its long lines attempt to convey the hurrying past of things, people, buildings and various images:

and these are the true tillers of the spirit  
whose strangeness crushes in the only possible embrace,  
is like splintering and pulling and draining the tooth  
of the world, the violent alabaster yielding to the sky,  
the kiss and the longing to be modern and sheltered and different  
and insane and decorative as a Mayan idol too well understood  
to be beautiful. ("SA" 81-87)

Frequently "Second Avenue" turns to the conjunctive "and" to maintain momentum. Instead of letting words rest, they are hurried on as the words crowd each other within the line. Hence "splintering," "pulling" and "draining" are lumped together as the reader skims through them, the "and" serving to separate the verbs only partially. Similarly, "the kiss and the longing to be modern" are fused together with "sheltered," "different," "insane" and "decorative" into two lines that speed by as the "and," in its repetition, comes to carry as much weight as the other various elements of the poem. This hurried effect can be attributed partially to the origin of the poem's writing process. As Kenneth Koch relates,<sup>68</sup> O'Hara had challenged him to

write a long poem, and in doing so revealed his own inclination to do the same:

I had no clear intention of writing a 2400-line poem (which it turned out to be) before Frank said to me, on seeing the first 72 lines—which I regarded as a poem by itself—“Why don’t you go on with it as long as you can?” Frank at this time decided to write a long poem too; I can’t remember how much his decision to write such a poem had to do with his suggestion to me to write mine.<sup>69</sup>

Consequently, the urge to keep the poem going becomes one of the notable tensions within “Second Avenue.” O’Hara continually juxtaposes different states of speed and movement, which effectively confuses and disorients the perception of whatever passes through the poem, while also promoting constant change:

for you, like all heretics, penetrate my glacial immodesty,  
and I am a nun trembling before the microphone  
at a movie première, while a tidal wave has seized the theatre  
and borne it to Siam, decorated it and wrecked the projector.  
To what leaf of fertility and double-facedness owe I  
my persistent adoration of your islands, oh shadowed flesh  
of my smiling? I scintillate like a glass of ice. (“SA” 14-20)

Here “glacial” and “ice,” which in their frozen state suggests stillness, and “islands,” which surrounded by water are all but immobile, are positioned near “tidal wave,” which implies rapid, violent movement, and “trembling” and “scintillate,” which both give the illusion of movement. The poet, then, is speaking of change: his “immodesty” that is “glacial” can only be shifted by the force of a “tidal wave,” which in its raw power moves an entire “theatre” to “Siam.” Even “fertility” continues to imply some element of change through its promise of new life. “Second Avenue” is reacting to stillness by reinforcing change dynamically through movement and speed. Thus the poet “suffers accelerations that are vicarious and serene” (“SA” 30) as he moves “away from all rapturous ice-floes” (“SA” 43). The poem escapes being immobile, and hence having to end, by maintaining a rapid pace.

Ultimately, in its focus on speed, “Second Avenue” can be seen to identify itself with the Italian futurist movement. Moreover, by appropriating modernist notions of motion and technology it expands its already notable connection to the modernist tradition. The relationship between O’Hara’s poem and futurism is evident in the first tenet of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s “Manifesto of Futurism,”<sup>70</sup> which proclaims: “we intend to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness.”<sup>71</sup> Hence, when the

poem turns to "a description of a Grace Hartigan painting,"<sup>72</sup> it turns to it with the violent energy that Marinetti is proposing:

and when the pressure asphyxiates and inflames, Grace de-  
 stroys  
 the whirling faces in their dissonant gaiety where it's anxious,  
 lifted nasally to the heavens which is a carrousel grinning  
 and spasmodically obliterated with loaves of greasy white paint  
 ("SA" 437-440)

The "Manifesto" always asserts "the beauty of speed,"<sup>73</sup> a sentiment that "Second Avenue" supports when the speaker states: "paralysis becomes jaundice and jaundice / is blushing" ("SA" 196-197). As "jaundice" refers to a yellowing of the skin, and is apparently embarrassed when it blushes, it follows that "paralysis" is not only uncomfortable but disfiguring. The ugliness of stillness is opposed by the speaker's association of beautiful things with speed:

My hands are Massimo Plaster, called 'White Pin in the Arm of  
 the  
 Sea'  
 and I'm blazoned and scorch like a fleet of windbells down the  
 Pulasky Skyway,  
 tabletops of Vienna carrying their bundles of cellophane to the  
 laundry,  
 ear to the tongue, glistening semester of ardency, young-old  
 daringness ("SA" 459-462)

The surreal, artistic, and presumably beautiful image of the speaker's "hands" being "Massimo Plaster"—transforming himself into a work of art—is closely related to the sense of speed that is signified by the speaker scorching down the "Pulaski Skyway"—a series of bridges in New Jersey, representing technology and movement. Moreover, the passage conflates notions of energy with "ardency"—characterised by passion and intensity—and is marked by a "daringness" that Marinetti supported in his sixth futurist proclamation: "The poet must spend himself with ardour, splendour, and generosity, to swell the enthusiastic fervour of the primordial elements."<sup>74</sup>

One of the most repeated and consistent motifs of motion and speed in "Second Avenue" is that of flight, which reinforces the poem's debt to the European avant-garde, acknowledging the futurist adoration of technology that understood a "racing car" to be "more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*."<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, this imagery also recalls Apollinaire's key modernist poem, "Zone."<sup>76</sup> This is particularly apparent in the frequent in-

clusion of references to planes and pilots throughout "Second Avenue":

volute filled with airplanes (139)

above the airfield, those tubby little planes flopping (158)

what must the fliers have thought (163)

and the many tasks done and forgotten and famous which,  
as a pilot, he had disdained, trusting to luck always (183-184)

my fellow airlines provocateur (247)

and this tribute to the toughness of the Air Corps is like rain (307)

O paradise! my airplanes known as "Banana Line Incorporal  
dad" (467)

Apollinaire also repeatedly turns to images of flight and, importantly, aircraft:

Has stayed simple like the hangars at Port Aviation ("Z" 6)

Is it Christ who better than airmen wings his flight  
Holding the record of the world for height ("Z" 40-41)

About the pretty flyer the angels fly  
Enoch Elijah Apollonius of Tyana hover  
With Icarus round the first airworthy ever ("Z" 48-50)

Host-elevating priests ascending endlessly  
The aeroplane alights at last with outstretched pinions  
Then the sky is filled with swallows in their millions ("Z" 52-54)

One and all with the machine that flies ("Z" 70)

Within "Zone," the references to mechanical and figurative flight serve to express a "renunciation of the Old World of the entire Western past."<sup>77</sup> As such, the symbolic inclusion of planes—"the machine that flies"—indicates a step towards modernity. Apollinaire, writing shortly before the beginning of the twentieth century, is heralding the coming of a new order; O'Hara's "Second Avenue" also appears to be attempting to break away from the past into a new future. Charged as it is with the "longing to be modern" (86),<sup>78</sup> "Second Avenue" acknowledges the constantly changing nature of the world it is presenting, in this case the growing stature of aircraft. Therefore, as planes effectively decrease physical and temporal distance, "Second Avenue," determined to continually express speed, naturally incorporates them within its structure. In both poems this imagery serves to represent a "euphoric affirmation of the world" as they gather progressive mo-

mentum. The vision both poets convey is one that demonstrates their similar perspective on the world as "ascending like an airplane".<sup>79</sup>

O'Hara continually maintains a sense of elevation in "Second Avenue." This is apparent in his "tribute to the toughness of the Air Corps" ("SA" 307) and his little story about "a flier in his plane over the ocean"<sup>80</sup>:

"Arabella" was the word he muttered that moment  
when lightning had smelled sweet over the zoo of the waves  
while he played on and on and on and the women grew hysterical  
("SA" 185-187)

Ultimately, the speaker in "Second Avenue" is striving for the same "mythical perspective" in which "Zone" positions its modernity. As "Christ" the airman holds the "record of the world for height" in Apollinaire's poem, he successfully "opens the horizon of a new heaven" and "discovers poetry as the possibility of the resurrection and rebirth of the lost world."<sup>81</sup> The planes in "Zone" are therefore effectively an extension of the poet's attempt to widen the scope of poetry and, accordingly, adapt to the desirable modern world it conveys. In "Second Avenue" the poet also attempts to be an "airman," creating a fresh perspective on the world viewed from afar.<sup>82</sup> The disorientating surface of the poem, and its inclusion of anything that enters the poet's consciousness, mimics the experience of observing the world while in flight. The speaker, then, in his inclusion of planes and flight, is pursuing more than just the sensation of speed that is so strong in "Second Avenue": like Apollinaire he actively seeks to embrace modernity and allow it to feed him poetic inspiration.

In his "Notes on Second Avenue", O'Hara writes that "everything" in "Second Avenue" "either happened to me or I felt happening (saw, imagined) on Second Avenue."<sup>83</sup> The importance and presence of the urban setting to O'Hara's poetry, especially New York, is well documented. In his *Partisan Review* article on "Second Avenue," Kenneth Koch contends:

Mr O'Hara is the best writer about New York alive.... [H]e succeeds in conveying the city's atmosphere not by writing directly about it but by writing about his emotions, all of them somehow filtered through its paint supply stores and its inspiring April smog.<sup>84</sup>

This sentiment about the undoubted, yet consistently surreal presence of New York in O'Hara's poetry is echoed by the critic Susan Holahan, who states: "New York for O'Hara has temperature and texture that make it a medium in which life continues only on the city's terms"; within his poems it "has its own light ... rivalling the Florentine."<sup>85</sup> Accordingly, in "Second

Avenue," New York is treated as "the most substantial art product of our times" ("SA" 463) and is seen through the lens of O'Hara's conception of a modernist tradition that loudly embraced technology and modernity, both of which allowed for the construction of the enormous urban space that O'Hara seems to situate in his poem.

In bringing New York so frequently, albeit abstractly, into "Second Avenue," O'Hara invokes the modernist tradition of Vladimir Mayakovsky's urban poetry. Citing Mayakovsky, to whom the poem is dedicated, O'Hara, in his "Notes on Second Avenue," states that where the Russian poet comes "in is that ... [he has] done works as big as cities where the life in the work is autonomous (not about actual city life) and yet similar."<sup>86</sup> The distinction O'Hara raises about Mayakovsky's urban writing is an important one. Referring to the long poem "Vladimir Ilyich Lenin"<sup>87</sup> that tells of the death of Lenin and the Moscow street scenes of grief that accompanied his funeral, O'Hara positions "Second Avenue" within an established modernist poetic tradition that had considered the city to be fundamentally significant.<sup>88</sup> Though Moscow is an enveloping presence in "Lenin," the poem is, nevertheless, not about life in Moscow. Rather, Mayakovsky's lengthy poem reflects the revolutionary history of communism, the importance of the mythic, yet ultimately human Lenin ("They'll rig up an aura / round any head: / the very idea— / I abhor it, / that such a halo / poetry bred / should hide / Lenin's real, / huge, / human forehead"<sup>89</sup>), and the size of the city that mirrors and can barely contain the Russian population's despair at the death of their communist leader and the idealism he propagated<sup>90</sup>:

It's him  
                   they bear  
                             from Paveletsky Station  
 through the city  
                   that he  
                             from the lords  
   released.  
 The streets like a wound  
   that'll worsen and worsen,  
 so the ache of it  
                             cuts  
                                     and hacks.  
 Here every cobble  
                             knew Lenin  
   in person  
 by the tramp  
                   of the first October attacks.<sup>91</sup>

As such, Moscow in "Lenin" becomes something other than just a city; it becomes a symbol of the poem's barely checked grief that in a display of communist unity eventually shrugs off its despair: in the shadow of "the huge / Red Square ... Lenin, / alive as ever, / cries: / 'Workers, / prepare / for the last assault!'"<sup>92</sup>

"Second Avenue" also approaches the idea of being as big as a city, while resisting being about a city. This is evident in the way the poem purposefully resists any stable narrative: O'Hara himself wrote that he did not think it could be "paraphrased."<sup>93</sup> It follows, then, that though "Second Avenue" appears to revolve around imagery of New York, and in many ways is set in that metropolis, it cannot be *about* New York, or *about* "city life," as this would imply that "Second Avenue" has a secure, singular narrative that is noticeably absent among the thrust and parry of imagery and events throughout the poem. Moreover, "Second Avenue" is constantly changing location, as though it is based in a world of flux that is forever relocating. Although the poem returns consistently to New York, it still presents a jumbled geographic surface as it turns to "Siam" ("SA" 17), the land of fire "Tierra del Fuego" ("SA" 98), the "Himalayas" ("SA" 130), a grade school in "India" ("SA" 210), "Pasadena" ("SA" 227), Violet "Bunny" Lang's visit to "l'Hôtel Oloffson" ("SA" 235), "Hollywood" ("SA" 330), "San Remo" ("SA" 344), and so on. This constant change in location appears to undermine any notion of "Second Avenue" being a poem solely about New York, just as Lenin overshadows Moscow in Mayakovsky's poem. Thus both poems—in their size, and utilisation of a complementary exaggerated emotion and tone—seem to allow their respective cities to shape their structure, which in turn allows the other action in the poem to emerge and work against that same structure as the poets' identities are lost within the city that fuels the writing.

Eliot argues that the poet's distinct presence should be objectified within the poem's citing of artistic tradition. "Second Avenue" achieves this subsumption of the poet in two distinct ways. Firstly, it eliminates any definitive lyric "*I*" by effacing it in the face of both the vast semiotic expanse of New York and the constant change of location. Moreover, the latter serves to erode any narrative continuity onto which a singular speaking voice could be attached. Simultaneously, as the poem continues to lurk and jolt back and forth from New York to different random locations, the modernist tradition that the poem belongs to continues to expand as its different authorial voices all wrestle for poetic superiority. What seems to be evident, and importantly in relation to Eliot, is that "Second Avenue" is devoid of a central voice, seemingly also enacting the impersonality called for in O'Hara's "Personism." Indeed, the confluence of its wide-reaching tradition



creates many voices that are then actively confused by the poem's lack of a stable setting. O'Hara's modernist sense of the city in the poem enhances the speaker's displacement and, in conjunction with its tradition, continually undermines any speaking voice as it is continually hurried on and shifted unmercifully about the dynamic surface of "Second Avenue."

Part 3 of "Second Avenue" begins with a query: "And must I express the science of legendary elegies / consummate on the Clarissas of puma and gnu and wildebeest?" ("SA" 73-74). This question, both probing and wearily sarcastic, expresses much of what "Second Avenue" is attempting to do. On the one hand, and throughout "Second Avenue," O'Hara acknowledges the tradition of poetry—its origin and its "science." He recognises that there is no easy way to avoid the influence of, and comparisons with, other poetry, and as such allows them to seep into his own writing. Although not acknowledged directly in the poem, this falls almost directly in line with Eliot's theory of poetry and tradition—that a work of art is a product of the artistic sources favoured by the artist. Yet, by also framing the opening question around the prepositional clause, "must I," O'Hara is expressing his wariness of the presence of a poetic tradition becoming too prevalent in "Second Avenue". Its tone articulates a distaste, and sense of undesirable duty, toward the tradition of "legendary elegies" that might be seen to be encapsulated in Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*.<sup>94</sup> Like the distortion of normality in "Second Avenue," Rilke's poem also gained its "uncanny power" through studying "the everyday, the familiar, to rearrange it unfamiliarly."<sup>95</sup> O'Hara, again, is allowing the modernist tradition access to his poem, even if the speaker in the *Elegies* is wary of it becoming a too-prevalent force in his work.

The angels and animals in O'Hara's "Second Avenue" seem to mirror similar figures in Rilke, particularly in "The First Elegy" and "The Eighth Elegy." Yet O'Hara gives the impression of avoiding sententiousness in his derivations from Rilke, and is careful to maintain the sense of "fun" that drives much of "Second Avenue". The choice of animals, that range from the graceful "puma," to the uncommon "gnu" (a larger breed of antelope), to the bull-necked "wildebeest," appears to be an expression of playfulness, as the speaker brings together an unlikely conglomeration of creatures that undermines the poetic expectation of beauty through unity. This disparity is highlighted by their apparent lack of any concrete position in the world of the poem, as indicated by the cryptic literary reference to "Clarissas." However, in contrast to the confusing choice of animals, the poetic diction that drives these two lines belies the awkwardness of the image. The punchy vowels evident in the first line—"express," "science," "legendary," "elegies"—convey a sense of annoyance characterised by the "must I" clause.

These shorter sounds move into longer vowel and consonant patterns in the next line—"consummate," "Clarissas," "puma," "wildebeest"—that lend the line a stately eloquence that seems to elevate the animals above their disjunctive presence. Through this poetic elevation, "Second Avenue" is perhaps invoking the declaration of Rilke's "Eighth Elegy":

We, only, can see death; the free animal  
has its decline in back of it, forever,  
and God in front, and when it moves, it moves  
already in eternity, like a fountain.<sup>96</sup>

In this way, O'Hara is allowing Rilke's poetic tradition access to his poem, while simultaneously, through his playful choice of animals, appearing to mock it.

Rilke's *Duino Elegies* serve as a significant model of the imagery and structure of O'Hara's poem. In his introduction to *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*,<sup>97</sup> Robert Hass claims that *The Duino Elegies* "are an argument against our lived ordinary lives."<sup>98</sup> According to Hass, this is because "it is as if he [Rilke] were peeling off layers of the apparent richness of the self, arguing us back to the poverty of a great, raw, objective longing."<sup>99</sup> Though "Second Avenue" deliberately evades the *gravitas* of *The Duino Elegies*—a "spiritual loneliness" as Hass calls it<sup>100</sup>—it is nonetheless equally concerned with the self and the attempt to express a world that is far from ordinary. This is the "science" of Rilke's "legendary elegies" that is being directly invoked by O'Hara in "Second Avenue." In a letter written a few years after the completion of *The Duino Elegies*, Rilke states:

*Affirmation of life-AND-death appears as one in the 'Elegies.'* To grant one without the other is, so it is here learned and celebrated, a limitation which in the end shuts out all that is infinite.... [W]e must try to achieve the greatest consciousness of our existence which is at home in *both unbounded realms, inexhaustibly nourished from both....* [T]he true figure of life extends through *both* spheres [life and death], the blood of the mightiest circulation flows through *both: there is neither a here nor beyond, but the great unity* in which the beings that us, the 'angels', are at home.<sup>101</sup>

In this statement, Rilke asserts that his elegies, and perhaps all elegies, are more than poems about death; they are also, necessarily, poems about life. To discuss one without the other is to shut "out all that is infinite." Thus the "true figure" of the poem—"the true figure of life"—is a representation of the world as seen through the form of the elegy and the discerning eye of the poet. As Rilke writes in "The Eighth Elegy":

With all its eyes the natural world looks out  
 into the Open. Only *our* eyes are turned  
 backward, and surround plant, animal, child  
 like traps, as they emerge into their freedom.<sup>102</sup>

Human experience is blinded to a true representation of the world, or the “Open,” that “plant, animal, child” all dwell within.<sup>103</sup> Animals in “The Eighth Elegy” are granted a “vast gaze” that “sees all time / and itself within all time, forever healed.”<sup>104</sup> The poet—he who tries to capture the true essence of the world—is thus trapped between the “Open” and the consciousness of the world in which humanity resides. Accordingly, the ethereal “angels” of *The Duino Elegies*—and, in relation to “Second Avenue,” “The First Elegy” in particular—come to stand for “that creature in whom the transformation of the visible into the invisible, which we are accomplishing, appears already consummated”<sup>105</sup>; the “angels” represent a longing for the “Open”:

Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels’                    hi-  
 erarchies? and even if one of them pressed me  
 suddenly against his heart: I would be consumed  
 in that overwhelming existence. For beauty is nothing  
 but the beginning of terror, which we still are just able to endure,  
 and we are so awed because it serenely disdains  
 to annihilate us. Every angel is terrifying.<sup>106</sup>

The “overwhelming existence” of the “angels’ / hierarchies”—the “Open”—is “terrifying.” Yet, as “the knowing animals are aware,” humanity is “not really at home in / our interpreted world.”<sup>107</sup> And though the alternative—an awareness of death—is “hard work,” Rilke writes: “In the end, those who are carried off early no longer need us: / they are weaned from earth’s sorrows and joys” and “the Void”—the afterlife—“felt for the first time ... enraptures and comforts and helps us.”<sup>108</sup> Although the traditional elegy seems to revolve around the grandeur and existential frustration of death,<sup>109</sup> Rilke appears to be using the form as an affirmation of life: the presentation of a new way to perceive and experience the world.<sup>110</sup> The speaker in “Second Avenue” whispers:

I lead you to a stream which will lick you like a wasp,  
 and there the maidens will uncoil hemp hunters and wires  
 so that your body may recline upon boards of starry nudging  
 (“SA” 127-129)

Here the poem, like *The Duino Elegies*, is inviting the reader to see the world afresh, and similarly celebrates its potential: instead of reclining to

look up at the stars, one rests on those stars that "nudge" as if demanding fresh attention. "Second Avenue" concludes with lines that seem to sum up its Rilkean perception of life: "You've reached the enormous summit of passion / which is immobility forging an entrail from the pure obstruction of the air" ("SA" 478-479).

Rilke's elegies attempt to reimagine the world in terms of dualities—life and death, angel and mortal, human and animal, earth and heaven—with the poet in the middle trying to caress that fine, "terrifying" line between the "earth's sorrows and joys."<sup>11</sup> O'Hara's "Second Avenue" similarly attempts to defamiliarise and transform the world through the viewpoint of its stumbling and unsteady speaker. Moreover, he seems to do this with a conscious acknowledgment of the recurring motifs in *The Duino Elegies*:

is it not the deepest glitterings of love when the head  
is turned off, glancing over a stranger's moonlike hatred  
and finding an animal kingdom of jealousy in parachutes  
descending upon the highway which you are not speeding down?  
Is this silence which returns you to the open fields  
of blandest red honey where the snake waits, his warm tongue.  
Dice! into the lump and crush of archness and token angels  
you burn your secret preferments and ancient streaming,  
as a gasp of laughter at desire, and disorder, and dying.  
("SA" 64-72)

The speaker incorporates elements of Rilke's model of consciousness, and attempts to welcome the "Open," like animals and children, by asking: "is it not the deepest glitterings of love when the head / is turned off." By switching the "head off," one is capable of glancing over "a stranger's moonlike hatred," discovering "an animal kingdom" which already exists in the "the open fields"—Rilke's "Open." Consequently, the speaker is also "finding" Rilke: as the "animal kingdom" descends "upon the highway," the speaker has reason for "jealousy." Though "Dice" appears to be another reference to surrealist chance and Mallarmé, the "token angels" reinforce Rilke's presence. The choice of the word "token," in one sense, suggests something light-hearted, like a token gesture, as if the speaker feels merely obliged to include references to Rilke. Yet "token" could also refer to a characteristic sign or a mark that indicates a quality that distinguishes this "angel" from others. One can understand the following two lines by demonstrating how the reader elects to understand "token." If it is understood from the former definition as tokenistic, the burning of "secret preferments and ancient streaming" seems to indicate a rebellion against the profundity of Rilke, which is merely a "gasp." However, if it is taken in a more serious

manner—as a product of symbology—the final two lines suggest a ritualised burning, a “descent” into the “angels’ hierarchies,” that encompasses Rilke’s concern with the balance of life and death. Life is a “gasp of laughter” that is lived in “disorder” and ends—neither sadly or gleefully, rather matter-of-factly—in “dying. “Second Avenue,” like *The Duino Elegies*, embraces and represents life and, as such, ultimately recognises that it eventually has to end. This simple truth is portrayed as neither an event for celebration nor an occasion for depression, but simply as the inevitable conclusion of a lively journey. Significantly, this approach to the elegiac function of poetry is characteristic of O’Hara’s later writing, where themes of “emptiness, despair, and death”<sup>12</sup> are held in balance by the continuity and momentum of life.

Although O’Hara’s skill as a poet would eventually allow him to move away from the inscribed presence of tradition(s) and, importantly, allow him to craft the “I do this I do that” poems for which he is best known, “Second Avenue” is a poem that is best read in terms of the European modernist tradition within which it deliberately situates itself. The fluctuating and unstable voice of “Second Avenue,” which largely contributes to the difficulty of finding a sense of coherency in the poem, is a product of the confluence of this broad tradition as the influences of figures such as Mallarmé, Apollinaire and Rilke jostle for central position. Consequently, O’Hara’s authorial presence is, as Eliot prescribed, objectified within the tradition from which “Second Avenue” emerges. Though it may not have a distinct narrative structure, the insistent presence of its influences and voices provide it with a unifying theme: the simultaneous celebration and parody of major poems written by the European modernists.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Frank O’Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 139–50. All citations of “Second Avenue” will be given parenthetically in text, with the abbreviation “SA.”

<sup>2</sup> Robert Lowell, “1960 National Book Awards Acceptance Speech,” [http://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech\\_rlowell.html](http://www.nationalbook.org/nbaacceptspeech_rlowell.html).

<sup>3</sup> Eliot Weinberger, “American Poetry Since 1950: A Very Brief History,” in *American Poetry Since 1950: Innovators and Outsiders*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York:

Marsilio Publishers, 1993), 396.

<sup>4</sup> Weinberger, "American Poetry Since 1950: A Very Brief History," 396.

<sup>5</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1919), 41.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Bawer, *The Middle Generation: The Lives and Poetry of Delmore Schwartz, Randall Jarrell, John Berryman and Robert Lowell* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1986), 58.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in James E.B. Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945-1965* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 21; italics in original.

<sup>8</sup> "Proto-structuralist," in this sense, is referring to the literary branch of structuralism that, as Terry Eagleton aptly describes, attempts to "isolate the underlying sense of laws by which [literary] signs are combined into meanings ... [concentrating] on their internal relations to one another" (*Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 84).

<sup>9</sup> Jerome Rothenberg, "Poetry In The 1950s As A Global Awakening: A Recollection & Reconstruction," <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/rothenberg/50s.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945-1965*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Russell Ferguson, "In Memory of My Feelings: Frank O'Hara and American Art," <http://jacketmagazine.com/10/oh-ferg.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Carroll, *The Poem in its Skin* (Chicago: Big Table Publishing, 1968), 207.

<sup>13</sup> This sense of an "attack" on the established poetic practices of the time is clearly articulated by Kenneth Rexroth, as he effectively expresses a younger generation's perception that "the entire educational system [was] in a conspiracy to make poetry as unpalatable as possible" (Kenneth Rexroth, "Disengagement: The Art of the Beat Generation," in *The Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men*, ed. Max Gartenberg and Gene Feldman (New York: Citadel Press, 1957), 327).

<sup>14</sup> Frederick Garber, "Review: Poet Among Painters," *Contemporary Literature* 20, no. 1 (1979): 112.

<sup>15</sup> Marjorie Perloff, "'The Ecstasy of Always Bursting Forth': rereading Frank O'Hara," in *Frank O'Hara: Selected Poems*, ed. Mark Ford (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 171.

<sup>16</sup> Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 49.

<sup>17</sup> Frank O'Hara, "Personism," in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, 499.

<sup>18</sup> Brad Gooch, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 233.

<sup>19</sup> Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 41.

<sup>20</sup> Kenneth Koch, "Poetry Chronicles," *The Partisan Review* 28 (1961): 132.

<sup>21</sup> Koch's sentiment about the French influence is echoed by Thomas Meyer who asserts: "O'Hara, whether we have begun to feel his effort or not, inoculated American poetry with Apollinaire's spirit, and it looks like it could still take, protecting us from a deadly academic lifelessness on one hand and the current sterile,

dry intellectualization of art on the other" (Thomas Meyer, "Frank O'Hara: Glistening Torsos, Sandwiches, and Coca-Cola," in *American Poetry 1946 to 1965* ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1977), 339).

<sup>22</sup> Anthony Libby, "O'Hara on the Silver Range," *Contemporary Literature* 17, no. 2 (1976): 245.

<sup>23</sup> O'Hara, "The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara," ix.

<sup>24</sup> Ashbery also notes the surrealist "Oranges: 12 Pastorals" (*CP*, 1949, 5-9) and "Easter" (*CP*, 1952, 96-100) as related examples.

<sup>25</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters* (New York: G. Braziller, 1977), 72.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>30</sup> Alan Feldman, *Frank O'Hara* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Howard, "Frank O'Hara - 'Since Once We Are We Always Will Be in This Life Come What May,'" in *Alone With America: The Art of Poetry in the United States Since 1950*, ed. Richard Howard (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970), 404.

<sup>37</sup> Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*, 72.

<sup>38</sup> Frank O'Hara, "Notes on Second Avenue," in *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, ed. Donald Allen (Bollinas: Grey Fox Press, 1953), 40.

<sup>39</sup> Feldman, *Frank O'Hara*, 69.

<sup>40</sup> O'Hara, "Notes on Second Avenue," 40.

<sup>41</sup> Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1950).

<sup>42</sup> Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1961).

<sup>43</sup> Olson, "Projective Verse," 387.

<sup>44</sup> Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New*, 25.

<sup>45</sup> Olson, "Projective Verse," 387.

<sup>46</sup> Perloff, in her article on O'Hara's and Ashbery's incorporation of a poetic "aesthetic of *presence*," where the poem becomes *the* subject, parallels this development after their time at Harvard with the inspiration both drew from "the abstract expressionist painters then coming into prominence in New York: Jackson Pollock,

Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Helen Frankenthaler, Franz Kline and their followers" (Marjorie Perloff, "'Transparent Selves': The Poetry of John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara," *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 8, American Literature Special Number (1978), 178).

<sup>47</sup> Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New*, 27.

<sup>48</sup> Bill Berkson, "Air and Such: An Essay on Biotherm," in *Companion to Biotherm*, ed. Andrew Hoyen (San Francisco: The Arion Press, 1990), 8.

<sup>49</sup> In talking about the poem "Music" (*CP*, 1954, 210), Perloff contends that O'Hara's tendency "to maintain the present tense ... regardless, and to supply no adverbial pointers (e.g., 'when,' 'after,' 'before,' 'during') that signal a shift" is a common trademark of his work. (Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*, 122).

<sup>50</sup> This process appears consistent with O'Hara's description of Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* (1957), which he praised for its recognition that "the poet and life herself walk hand in hand. Life is not a landscape before which the poet postures, but the very condition of his inspiration" (O'Hara, "About Zhivago and His Poems," 503).

<sup>51</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, "A Dice Thrown Will Never Annul Chance," in *Stéphane Mallarmé: Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York City: New Directions, 1897).

<sup>52</sup> Dorothy Betz, "Un Coup de Dés: Mallarmé as Poet of the Absurd," *South Atlantic Bulletin* 43, no. 4 (1978): 37.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>56</sup> Anna Balakian, *Literary Origins of Surrealism: A New Mysticism in French Poetry* (New York: New York University Press, 1947), 129.

<sup>57</sup> Betz, "Un Coup de Dés: Mallarmé as Poet of the Absurd," 44.

<sup>58</sup> Edward Lucie-Smith, "An Interview with Frank O'Hara," in *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, ed. Donald Allen (Bollinas: Grey Fox Press, 1965), 21.

<sup>59</sup> Balakian, *Literary Origins of Surrealism: A New Mysticism in French Poetry*, 132.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>61</sup> Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 40-41.

<sup>62</sup> Reverdy is an important presence throughout O'Hara's poetry, culminating in O'Hara's declaration in "A Step Away From Them" (1956) that "My heart is in my | pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy" (O'Hara, "*The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*," 258).

<sup>63</sup> In his essay on Reverdy, Kenneth Rexroth makes the distinction between cubism and Dadaism/surrealism: "But what is Cubism in poetry? It is the conscious, deliberate dissociation and recombination of elements into a new artistic entity made self-sufficient by its rigorous architecture. This is quite different from the free association of the Surrealists and the combination of unconscious utterance and political nihilism of Dada" (Kenneth Rexroth, "The Cubist Poetry of Pierre Reverdy," <http://www.bopsecrets.org/rexroth/essays/reverdy.htm>).



- <sup>64</sup> André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1924), 20.
- <sup>65</sup> Rexroth, "The Cubist Poetry of Pierre Reverdy."
- <sup>66</sup> Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*, 23.
- <sup>67</sup> In general, and as is evident in much of his poetry, movement is central to O'Hara's poetic style. Charles Altieri points out that "O'Hara never dwells on the problems but keeps turning instead to the details of the scene or his own fantasies of future possibilities" (Charles Altieri, "The Significance of Frank O'Hara," *The Iowa Review* 4, no. 1 (1973), 95). Hence O'Hara maintains a certain momentum in his poetry to account for his tendency to skip from image to image and thing to thing.
- <sup>68</sup> Quoted in Gooch, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara*, 234.
- <sup>69</sup> Koch ended up writing "When the Sun Tries to Go On" (1953).
- <sup>70</sup> Filippo Tammaso Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism 1909" (1909).
- <sup>71</sup> Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism 1909," 21.
- <sup>72</sup> O'Hara, "Notes on Second Avenue," 39.
- <sup>73</sup> Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism 1909," 21.
- <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.
- <sup>76</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire, "Zone," in *The Random House Book of Twentieth-Century Poetry*, ed. Paul Auster (New York: Random House, 1913). Henceforth Z; all citations will follow parenthetically in text. The similarity between "Zone" and "Second Avenue" is captured by more than just the inclusion of planes. In writing his poem, Apollinaire, according to Willard Bohn, was attempting "a new literary method of expressing contemporary reality which amounted to nothing less than a totally new-world view.... [T]his new *form*, strove to reproduce the nature of modern existence as perceived by modern consciousness" (Willard Bohn, "Guillaume Apollinaire and the New York Avant-Garde," *Comparative Literature Studies* 13, no. 1 (1976): 43). It could be argued that O'Hara was attempting the same feat in "Second Avenue," as the poem actively attempts to portray the New York of O'Hara's time—growing, moving and utterly modern.
- <sup>77</sup> Hans-Robert Jauss and Roger Blood, "1912: Threshold to an Epoch. Apollinaire's Zone and Lundi Rue Christine," *Yale French Studie* 74, no. Phantom Proxies: Symbolism and the Rhetoric of History (1988), 40 This reference doesn't make sense!.
- <sup>78</sup> Echoing Rimbaud: "let us ask *poets* for the *new*—ideas and forms" (Arthur Rimbaud, "Letter to Paul Demeny no. 6," in *Arthur Rimbaud: Selected Poems and Letters* (London: Penguin, 1871), 240).
- <sup>79</sup> Jauss and Blood, "1912: Threshold to an Epoch. Apollinaire's Zone and Lundi Rue Christine," 41.
- <sup>80</sup> O'Hara, "Notes on Second Avenue," 37.

- <sup>81</sup> Jauss and Blood, "1912: Threshold to an Epoch. Apollinaire's Zone and Lundi Rue Christine," 41.
- <sup>82</sup> This sense of the poet perceiving the world from above also recalls Baudelaire's "The Albatross" that imagines the "Poet" as "a kinsmen in the clouds" who when "on the ground, among the hooting crowds ... cannot walk, his wings are in the way" (Charles Baudelaire, "The Albatross," in *The Flowers of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1857), 17).
- <sup>83</sup> O'Hara, "Notes on Second Avenue," 39-40.
- <sup>84</sup> Koch, "Poetry Chronicles," 130-32.
- <sup>85</sup> Susan Holahan, "Frank O'Hara's Poetry," in *American Poetry Since 1960: Some Critical Perspectives*, ed. Robert B Shaw (Cheshire: Carcanet Press Limited, 1973), 109-10.
- <sup>86</sup> O'Hara, "Notes on Second Avenue," 40.
- <sup>87</sup> Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Vladimir Ilyich Lenin," in *Vladimir Mayakovsky Selected Works in Three Volumes* (Moscow: Raduga Publishers, 1924), 141-206.
- <sup>88</sup> O'Hara also mentions Mayakovsky's "Eiffel Tower" (date!) and "150,000,000" (date!) as other influential poems that incorporate the city into their structure.
- <sup>89</sup> Mayakovsky, "Vladimir Ilyich Lenin," 142.
- <sup>90</sup> "Lenin" also appears to be Mayakovsky's poetic rallying cry to the Russian people to not lose hope in communism after the death of its figurehead. The poem is noticeably politically charged, which is in stark contrast to the apparent (though not necessarily always) apolitical stance of O'Hara's poetry.
- <sup>91</sup> Mayakovsky, "Vladimir Ilyich Lenin," 197.
- <sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.
- <sup>93</sup> O'Hara, "Notes on Second Avenue," 37.
- <sup>94</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, "Duino Elegies," in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. and ed. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1923).
- <sup>95</sup> Jeffery M. Paine, "Rainer Maria Rilke: The Evolution of a Poet " *The Wilson Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1986), 160.
- <sup>96</sup> Rilke, "Duino Elegies," 193.
- <sup>97</sup> Robert Hass, "Introduction to The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke," in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*.
- <sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.
- <sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.
- <sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxv.
- <sup>101</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, "To Witold von Hulewicz," in *Selected Letters, 1902-1926* (London: Quartet, 1925), 373.
- <sup>102</sup> Rilke, "Duino Elegies," 193.
- <sup>103</sup> In discussing the concept of the "Open" Rilke writes: "The animals degree of consciousness is such that it comes into the world without at any moment setting

the world over against itself (as we do). The animal is *in* the world; we stand *in front of* the world because of the peculiar turn and heightening which our consciousness has taken. So by the 'Open' it is not sky or air or space that is meant ... for the human being who observes and judges, [these] are 'objects' and thus 'opaque' and closed. The animal or the flower presumably *is* all that, without accounting for itself, and therefore has before itself and above itself that indescribably open freedom" (Letter to Lev P. Struve, February, 1926, quoted in Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, 329.)

<sup>104</sup> Rilke, "Duino Elegies," 193-94.

<sup>105</sup> Rilke, "To Witold von Hulewicz" 375.

<sup>106</sup> Rilke, "Duino Elegies," 151.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>109</sup> O'Hara's series of elegies to the actor James Dean written in 1955—"To An Actor Who Died" (*CP*, 226-227), "For James Dean" (*CP*, 228-230), "Thinking of James Dean" (*CP*, 230-231), "Four Little Elegies" (*CP*, 248-252)—were influenced by this model of classical elegies, namely Milton's "Lycidas," Tennyson's "In Memoriam," and Shelley's "Mourn not for Adonis" (Gooch, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* 266).

<sup>110</sup> O'Hara appears to use this particular interpretation of the elegy in his poem about the death of Billie Holiday, "The Day Lady Died" (*CP*, 1959, 325)—as much "about the common but sobering feeling that life continues on its bumbling way despite the tragic death of an important artist or some loved one" as it is about Holiday (Carroll, *The Poem in its Skin* 1960).

<sup>111</sup> Rilke, "Duino Elegies," 155.

<sup>112</sup> Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*, 165.