

1974

# New Thresholds, Old Anatomies: Contemporary Poetry and the Limits of Exegesis

Marjorie G. Perloff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Perloff, Marjorie G.. "New Thresholds, Old Anatomies: Contemporary Poetry and the Limits of Exegesis." *The Iowa Review* 5.1 (1974): 83-99. Web.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.1627>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

# New Thresholds, Old Anatomies: Contemporary Poetry and the Limits of Exegesis

Marjorie G. Perloff

—How I hate subject matter! . . .  
and all things that don't change. . .  
—Frank O'Hara, "To Hell with It"

Despite the increasing sophistication of American literary theory, its growing assimilation of European critical concepts, whether Phenomenologist, Structuralist, or Marxist, and its exciting debates on hermeneutics and communication theory in the pages of *New Literary History* or *Diacritics* or *Poétique*, the *practical criticism* of contemporary poetry continues to be largely a matter of old-fashioned explication. Pick up, say, John Fuller's *A Reader's Guide to W. H. Auden* (1970) and open to the chapter on Auden's 1966 collection, *About the House*. We read:

Symbolical meanings are lightly touched on in the next pair of poems in the sequence, "Down There" and "Up There." The cellar is the deep area of our resources, our "safe-anchor" ("a father sends the younger boys to fetch something / For Mother from down there"), but such a journey suggests less a psychological quest than a piece of controlled spiritual husbandry, whose counterpart is the attic's disorganized detritus of the past which the feminine instinct has hoarded.<sup>1</sup>

After such knowledge what forgiveness? Perhaps there is always a certain time lag between the formulation of literary theory on the one hand and its practical applications on the other, but surely in our time theorists and practical critics often seem to be talking a different language. In any case, the current climate of practical criticism is such that, despite all the shouting about "exciting new voices" in poetry, the real innovators are all too often ignored or attacked. Thus, when in 1960 Donald M. Allen published *The New American Poetry*, which was the first anthology to devote considerable space to the poetry and poetics of the Black Mountain group, the San Francisco poets, and the New York school, the Academic Establishment reacted with silence or scorn. In the *Hudson Review*,<sup>2</sup> Cecil Hemley declared that Allen's selection was a downright insult to those of us who recognized that "This is so obviously *not* the new American poetry." Frank O'Hara, for example, is grudgingly admitted to be "gifted," but, says Hemley, "It is apparent from O'Hara's stated aesthetic that he is not interested in writing good poetry in the usual sense. He has committed himself to the somewhat dubious task of tracing his experience in all its solipsistic grandeur. Since most of his experience, like everyone else's, is disjointed and incoherent, the

<sup>1</sup> (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), p. 243.

<sup>2</sup> "Within a Budding Grove," *Hudson Review*, 13 (Winter, 1961), 626-630.

better he follows his theory, the worse his poems become." What poets, then, should have been represented in Allen's anthology? Hemley's list includes Richard Wilbur, May Swenson, Jean Garrigue and Louis Simpson—poets whom we would consider today to be, if anything, refiners of an established mode rather than innovators. Not surprisingly, Hemley's favorite poet in the Allen anthology is Denise Levertov, whose poems have what he calls "a classic firmness which is particularly remarkable when one realizes that she composes exclusively in free verse." Surely this is an odd statement, for "classic firmness" and "free verse" seem to be wholly incompatible entities, and it is precisely the orderliness—or perhaps tameness—of Levertov's short, chiseled poems that critics are now beginning to question.

"Every author," said Wordsworth, "as far as he is great and at the same time original, has had the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed." For "Genius is . . . the application of powers to objects on which they had not before been exercised, or the employment of them in such a manner as to produce effects hitherto unknown."<sup>3</sup> As critics of contemporary poetry, we should take these words to heart, for surely in the 1970's the weight of the previous literary age lies heavy upon us. Brought up on Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature*, and trained to define the musical structure of *Four Quartets* or the role of the persona in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," we naturally fall into the trap of judging the poetry of our own time according to the criteria of the preceding age, to apply a Symbolist aesthetic to a poetry defiantly written in a post-Symbolist idiom.

It is a commonplace of current literary theory that the New Criticism is dead. But if the New Criticism has failed contemporary poetry, it is not, as is argued all too frequently, because the New Critics insisted on the autonomy of the text and its uniquely literary status, ignoring all historical, political and social considerations, but because their conception of the very nature of the poetic text was derived from the great poetry of their own time, that is, the dense symbolist mode of Yeats, Eliot and the early Pound. One must remember that many of the New Critics—Tate, Ransom, Warren—were themselves poets and that their criticism was less a reasoned system than a direct response to the poetry they most admired and imitated. At its best, theirs was what Eliot called, referring to his own literary essays, "workshop criticism." As such, it served a centrally important purpose as disseminator of the then avant-garde. By the same token, however, the New Criticism cannot meet the demands inevitably created by the New Poetry.

Because the New Criticism is so often misleadingly identified with Formalism, we tend to overlook the central fact that the New Criticism was, despite its concern for aesthetic structure and intrinsic value, first and foremost concerned with the analysis of meaning. Take, for example, W. K. Wimsatt's famous essay, "What to Say About a Poem," which Sheldon Grebstein, the editor of an important anthology of contemporary criticism, calls "virtually a synopsis of the

---

<sup>3</sup> "Essay Supplementary to the Preface," *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 750.

formalist method.”<sup>4</sup> Wimsatt writes, “At the outset what can we be sure of? Mainly that a poem says or means something, or ought to mean something.”<sup>5</sup> Everything that Wimsatt says about Blake’s “London,” his sample poem, follows from this initial premise. Such formal properties of verse as meter and syntax are considered important, but only insofar as they enhance or qualify what the poem says. The Wimsatt-Brooks *Literary Criticism, A Short History* (1957) is built on precisely the same premise: that the central value of poetry is cognitive, that, as Robert Marsh put it in a brilliant review of the history, “poetry is a verbal-semantic substance, in its essence metaphorical, which . . . is actually a superior kind of creative philosophy.” At its best, poetry is a “concrete, tensional reconciliation of opposites, and so is the human reality of which it is a refraction.”<sup>6</sup> The ultimate criterion for literature, according to Wellek and Warren in *Theory of Literature*, is “inclusiveness, imaginative integration” and “amount (and diversity) of material integrated. The tighter the organization of the poem, the higher its value, according to formalistic criticism, which indeed often limits itself, in practice, to works so complex of structure as to need and reward exegesis.” Note that despite the reference to “formalistic criticism,” the real emphasis here is again on the need for exegesis. “The maturity of a work of art,” write Wellek and Warren, “is . . . its awareness of complexity, its ironies and tensions.”<sup>7</sup>

This view of literature can, of course, be traced back to Eliot, the inventor of the New Criticism as well as of what Graham Hough called, as recently as 1960, “the new poetry.”<sup>8</sup> It was Eliot, after all, who insisted that in a successful poem, the doctrine, theory, belief, or ‘view of life’ presented . . . is one which the mind of the reader can accept as coherent, mature, and founded on the facts of experience,” and that “The ‘greatness’ of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards.”<sup>9</sup>

The New Criticism, in short, never practiced what it so insistently preached: that “A poem should not mean but be.” On the contrary, the elucidation of meaning, the more complex and elusive the better, has been the primary concern of critics as otherwise diverse as Tate and Ransom, Blackmur and Wimsatt. Thus, when the New Criticism has come under the attack of what we might call the New Hermeneutics, we must understand that the central quarrel between a theorist like E. D. Hirsch on the one hand, and Brooks and Wimsatt on the other, is how one arrives at the proper construction of a poem’s meaning. For Hirsch,

<sup>4</sup> *Perspectives in Contemporary Criticism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 80.

<sup>5</sup> *Reports and Speeches of the Eighth Yale Conference on the Teaching of English*, April 13 and 14, 1962, ed. Edward Gordon (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962); rpt. in *Perspectives in Contemporary Criticism*.

<sup>6</sup> “The ‘Fallacy’ of Universal Intention,” *Modern Philology*, 55 (1957-58), 263.

<sup>7</sup> *Theory of Literature*, 3d ed. (New York: Harvest Books, 1962), pp. 243, 246.

<sup>8</sup> *Image and Experience: Studies in a Literary Revolution* (Lincoln, Nebraska: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1960), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), p. 96; “Religion and Literature” (1935), *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1953), p. 388.

the correct meaning is always the author's intended meaning; for the New Critic, only the text itself can yield up its various possible meanings; in both cases, however, the axiom that a poem exists primarily to convey a meaning is never questioned. Carried to its extreme, this view of poetry leads to Hirsch's recent assertion that "literature has no independent essence, aesthetic or otherwise. It is an arbitrary classification of linguistic works which do not exhibit common distinctive traits. . . ." Indeed, "The only activity attendant upon criticism that has a privileged character is the construction of meaning. . . ."<sup>10</sup>

The results of this position have been far-reaching. Certainly, the lingering assumption that the central value of poetry is cognitive lies behind Cecil Hemley's outrage at Donald Allen's *New American Poetry*. A more sophisticated example may be found in William H. Pritchard's essay, "Wildness of Logic," presented at the 1969 English Institute. "Wildness of logic," a phrase Pritchard takes from Robert Frost, is somewhat reminiscent of Allen Tate's "tension in poetry" or Brooks' "language of paradox." "The first mystery," according to Frost, "was how a poem could have a tune in such a straightness as meter, so the second mystery is how a poem can have wildness and at the same time a subject that shall be fulfilled."<sup>11</sup> Using this New Critical criterion as his touchstone, Pritchard not surprisingly finds such oracular poets as Roethke, Wright, Bly and Kelly unsatisfactory: they "short-circuit Frostian tensions between rhythm and meter or wildness and fulfilled subject, and move instead toward Pure Assertion" (p. 138). Of contemporary poets, only Lowell, according to Pritchard, manages to make his poetry "from gestures of revelation *and* of reticence, of straight talk and obliquity: the lyric impulse to soar in contention and cooperation with a wryly satiric and earthbound one, dream and fact engaging in their endless argument" (p. 150). Here in 1969 is the very same argument Robert Penn Warren put forward in his 1943 essay "Pure and Impure Poetry": Romeo needs Mercutio, Juliet must be complemented by the Nurse—no semantic obliquity, no poetry.

The critical response to the poetry of William Carlos Williams is another example of the failure of a Symbolist aesthetic to come to terms with post-Symbolist poetry. The most widely discussed of all Williams' shorter poems, according to a recent checklist,<sup>12</sup> is that most atypical of his lyrics, "The Yachts." "Here," says Babette Deutsch admiringly, "is a spectacle that cannot be accepted for its surface values alone. . . . The poem is representative not of contending yachts . . . but of an inner conflict in the mind of the poet. He rejoices in the elegance and freedom symbolized by a yacht race even while he is appalled by the misery of

---

<sup>10</sup> "Some Aims of Criticism," *Literary Theory and Structure: Essays in Honor of William K. Wimsatt*, ed. Frank Brady, John Palmer and Martin Price (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 52, 51.

<sup>11</sup> Frost, "The Figure a Poem Makes," cited by Pritchard, "Wildness of Logic in Modern Lyric," *Forms of Lyric: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. Reuben A. Brower (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970).

<sup>12</sup> Jack Hardie, "'A Celebration of the Light': Selected Checklist of Writings About William Carlos Williams," *Journal of Modern Literature: William Carlos Williams Special Number*, 1, no. 4 (May, 1971), 593-642.

those who have no share in it, who are, in fact, destroyed by the abuse of the power that makes the race possible."<sup>13</sup> The poem succeeds, in short, because it isn't really about yachts at all but about something else which the yacht race symbolizes: we can translate an *a* into a *b*! James Dickey similarly singles out "The Yachts" as one of the few really successful Williams poems, arguing that, whereas most of the shorter poems have a "monotony and arbitrariness, which proceed from what looks suspiciously like the notion that to *present* were sufficient," "The Yachts" presents a scene that has "symbolic possibilities."<sup>14</sup>

Ironically, Dickey's suspicions are well-founded; for Williams, to present is indeed, as Hillis Miller has so beautifully demonstrated,<sup>15</sup> sufficient, and it is precisely the presentational nature of Williams' poetry which has effected what Miller calls "a revolution in human sensibility." Yet despite such rare studies as Miller's and James Breslin's,<sup>16</sup> most of the so-called critical studies of Williams and his followers continue to be, as Paul Mariani has noted,<sup>17</sup> basically running commentaries that try to elucidate the more difficult symbols in the text. The most amusing example that comes to mind concerns Robert Creeley's little poem, "I Know a Man":

As I sd to my  
friend, because I am  
always talking,—John, I

sd, which was not his name, the darkness sur-  
rounds us, what

can we do against  
it, or else, shall we &  
why not, buy a goddamn big car,

drive, he sd, for  
christ's sake, look  
out where yr going.<sup>18</sup>

Some years ago, an anonymous reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* posited that the John of this poem must surely be John the Baptist, and the "I"

<sup>13</sup> *Poetry in Our Time*, 2d. ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1963), p. 112.

<sup>14</sup> "First and Last Things," *Poetry*, 103 (Feb. 1964), 321-322; rpt. in *Babel to Byzantium: Poets and Poetry Now* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), pp. 191-192; "The Yachts," in Oscar Williams (ed.), *Master Poems of the English Language* (New York: Trident Press, 1966); rpt. in *Babel to Byzantium*, p. 246.

<sup>15</sup> "William Carlos Williams," *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1965; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1969), pp. 285-359.

<sup>16</sup> *William Carlos Williams: An American Artist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

<sup>17</sup> "Towards the Canonization of William Carlos Williams," *Massachusetts Review*, 13 (Autumn, 1972), 661-675.

<sup>18</sup> *Poems 1950-1965* (London: Calder and Boyars), p. 38.

accordingly none other than Jesus Christ. Creeley's own protestation that he had in mind two friends, a painter named John Altoon and a sculptor named John Chamberlain, that his meanings, in short, were purely literal, seemed quite beside the point.<sup>19</sup>

I have been arguing that the New Criticism with its sophisticated apparatus for the elucidation of metaliteral meanings cannot cope with the intentionally "literal" poetry of the present. This does not mean, however, that we should revert to the opposite extreme by simply accepting anything that calls itself New Poetry as the New Gospel, by assuming that if a poet announces he intends to do something, then surely he is doing it. This Intentionalist mode of criticism is, of course, even less effective than Symbolist exegesis. The Intentionalist, who is invariably an apologist for the poet or poets in question, assiduously collects, cites, paraphrases and explains the poet's own statements as to aims and methods, assuming that if, say, Williams declares his prosodic unit to be something called the "variable foot," then, by God, Williams' poetry must be written in variable feet, whatever those may be. The recent publication in book form of ten interviews with Robert Creeley, conducted over a ten-year period by ten different interviewers, exemplifies this solemn-eyed approach to contemporary poetry. Not only does Creeley inevitably repeat himself over and over again since the different interviewers naturally ask pretty much the same questions, but one begins to wonder where in Creeley's rather slim poetic output all those tremendous innovations and revolutionary devices, of which he so lucidly and charmingly speaks, could possibly be found.

How, then, to approach contemporary poetry? My own view is that we have much to learn from the Russian Formalists, themselves defenders of Futurist and Cubist poetry against what they considered to be, in the early 1920's, the outmoded literary school of Symbolism. In many circles Formalism, erroneously used as a synonym for the New Criticism, has become a dirty word for a reductionary approach to literature, a method that turns the poem into an autotelic object, a mere surface divorced from an informing consciousness, from the very life that nourished it. Yet Viktor Shklovsky, the first and probably the greatest of the Russian Formalists, defined art not as the creation of well-made objects but precisely in its intimate relation to life. Let me cite a passage from his famous 1917 essay "Art as Technique." For those of us who know no Russian, the English translation, evidently a fairly free one, of this essay by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis should be compared to the French version by Tzvetan Todorov as well as to Gisela Drohla's excellent German translation, entitled "Kunst Als Kunstgriff."<sup>20</sup> What follows is my own collation of these three:

---

<sup>19</sup> See Michael André: "An Interview with Robert Creeley," in Robert Creeley, *Contexts of Poetry: Interviews 1961-1971*, ed. Donald Allen (Bolinas: Four Seasons Foundation, 1973), pp. 207-209.

<sup>20</sup> See Shklovsky, "Art as Techniques," in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. and ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln, Nebraska: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 12; Tzvetan Todorov, "L'Art comme procédé," in *Théorie de la littérature: Textes des Formalistes russes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1965), p. 83; "Kunst Als

In order to restore to us the sensation of life, to make us feel things, to make the stone stony, there exists that which we call Art. The purpose of art is to impart to us the sensation of an object as it is *perceived* and not merely as it is *recognized*. To accomplish this purpose, art uses two techniques: the defamiliarization (*singularisation, verfremdung*) of things, and the distortion of form so as to make the act of perception more difficult and to prolong its duration. For the process of perception is an end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the coming into being (*devenir, Werden*) of an object; that which has already become what it is is not important for art.

This definition of art, which is the basis of Shklovsky's studies of the process of "making it strange" in specific poems and novels,<sup>21</sup> seems to me one of the real watersheds in literary theory. For Shklovsky understood, as have few modern theorists, that poetry can stand in direct relationship to life without existing primarily to make a cognitive statement, to convey a complex set of meanings subject to interpretation. The "purpose" of an image, says Shklovsky, "is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object—it creates a 'vision' of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it." This insistence on the perceptual nature of art looks ahead to contemporary poetics, particularly to the aesthetic writings, however informal, of Frank O'Hara, whose own definition of poetry oddly echoes that of Shklovsky: "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."<sup>22</sup>

O'Hara's own poetry seems so literal, matter-of-fact and trivial that it has baffled critics who accept Symbolism as the poetic norm. His work is best understood in the context of his role as Curator of the Museum of Modern Art and champion of Abstract Expressionist painting. In his essays on the great New York painters of the fifties and early sixties, O'Hara erodes the myth that non-figurative painting is somehow bloodless and that formalist criticism is no more than a narrow-minded defense against painful social and political realities. On the contrary, O'Hara's poetry and prose testify to the truth that an overriding concern for formal aesthetic properties can go hand in hand with the expression of intense personal emotion.

---

Kunstgriff," *Theorie Der Prosa*, ed. and trans. Gisela Drohla (Frankfurt, S. Fischer, 1966), p. 14. In "The Contribution of Formalism and Structuralism to the Theory of Fiction," *Novel*, 7 (Winter, 1973), 134-151, Robert Scholes points out that the cited passage is not very accurately translated. His own version of the last sentence is "Art is the meanings for experiencing the making of the thing, but the thing made is not important in art" (140).

<sup>21</sup> See Lemon and Reis, pp. 3-5; Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History and Doctrine* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1955), Chapter 10 *passim*.

<sup>22</sup> Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," p. 18; O'Hara, "Statement for *The New American Poetry* (1960); rpt. in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), p. 500. This text is subsequently designated as CP.



For O'Hara, as for Shklovsky, the key to art is *attention*, the recovery of the sensation of life. From the painter Larry Rivers, for example, O'Hara says he learned "to be more keenly interested while I'm still alive. And perhaps this is the most important thing art can say."<sup>23</sup> He admires Jasper Johns, whose art expresses "a profound boredom . . . with the symbols of our over-symbolic society,"<sup>24</sup> and Claes Oldenburg, whose loving creation of giant baked potatoes and ketchup bottles "arouses the fondness one feels for a found object, challenging in intimacy as well as structure all the autobiographical associations that a found object embodies."<sup>25</sup> But O'Hara's predilection is not, as is often thought, for Pop Art, whose "smugness" and "crackerbarrel cheerfulness" he finds superficial and boring.<sup>26</sup> His favorite contemporary painter is Jackson Pollock, and his comments on Pollock's Action Painting shed much light on his own poetry.

Pollock's *Number 29*, a "painting-collage of oil, wire-mesh, pebbles and shells composed on glass," is, according to O'Hara, "unique in that it is a masterpiece seen front or back, and even more extraordinary in that it is the same masterpiece from opposite sites of viewing":

What an amazing identity *Number 29* must have!—like that of a human being. . . . Its reversible textures . . . the tragedy of a linear violence which, in recognizing itself in its own mirror-self, sees elegance, the open nostalgia for brutality expressed in embracing the sharp edges and banal forms of wire and shells, the cruel acknowledgement of pebbles as elements of the dream, the drama of black mastering sensuality and color, the apparition of these forms in open space as if in air, all these qualities united in one work present the crisis of Pollock's originality. . . .<sup>27</sup>

The artist, in other words, enters his art directly; line, color, texture, object, spatial relationships can, without *representing* anything, enact the artist's inner violence, brutality, sensuality or elegance. And perhaps it is the new use of line that is the secret:

In the past, an artist by means of scale could create a vast panorama on a few feet of canvas or wall, relating this scale both to the visual reality of known images . . . and to the setting. . . . Pollock, choosing to use no images with real visual equivalents . . . struck upon a use of scale which was to have a revolutionary effect on contemporary painting and sculpture. The scale of the painting became that of the painter's body, not the image of a body, and the setting for the scale, which would include all referents, would be the canvas surface itself. Upon this field, the physical energies of the artist operate in actual detail, in full scale. . . . It is the physical reality of the artist and his activity of expressing it, united to the spiritual

---

<sup>23</sup> "Larry Rivers: A Memoir" (1965), CP, p. 515.

<sup>24</sup> "Art Chronicle," *Kulchur*, 2 (Spring, 1962), 86.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>26</sup> "Art Chronicle," *Kulchur*, 3 (Spring, 1963), 59.

<sup>27</sup> *Jackson Pollock* (New York: George Braziller, 1959), pp. 26-27.

reality of the artist in a oneness which has no need for the mediation of metaphor or symbol. It is Action Painting (pp. 28-29).

I cite these long statements because they point so graphically to what O'Hara does in his poetry. Here, for example, is "Essay on Style," written in 1961:

Someone else's Leica sitting on the table  
the black kitchen table I am painting  
the floor yellow, Bill is painting it  
wouldn't you know my mother would call  
up

and complain?

my sister's pregnant and  
went to the country for the weekend without  
telling her

in point of fact why don't I  
go out to have dinner with her or "let her"  
come in? well if Mayor Wagner won't allow private  
cars on Manhattan because of the snow, I  
will probably never see her again

considering  
my growingly more perpetual state and how  
can one say that angel in the Frick's wings  
are "attached" if it's a real angel? now  
I was reflecting the other night meaning  
I was being reflected upon that Sheridan Square  
is remarkably beautiful sitting in JACK  
DELANEY'S looking out the big race-track window  
on the wet

drinking a cognac while Edwin  
read my new poem it occurred to me how impossible  
it is to fool Edwin not that I don't know as  
much as the next about obscurity in modern verse  
but he

always knows what it's about as well  
as what it is do you think we can ever  
strike *as* and *but*, too, out of the language  
then we can attack *well* since it has no  
application whatsoever neither as a state  
of being or a rest for the mind no such  
things available

where do you think I've  
got to? the spectacle of a grown man  
decorating

a Christmas tree disgusts me that's  
where  
that's one of the places yetbutaswell

I'm glad I went to that party for Ed Dorn  
last night though he didn't show up do you think  
,Bill, we can get rid of *though* also, and *also*?  
maybe your

    lettrism is the only answer treating  
the typewriter as an intimate organ why not?  
nothing else is (intimate)

  no I am not going  
to have you "in" for dinner nor am I going "out"  
I am going to eat alone for the rest of my life

(CP, 393-394)

If we look for symbolic design in "Essay on Style," we are bound to be disappointed. For unlike those "sawdust restaurants with oyster shells" which so devastatingly symbolize the death-in-life of J. Alfred Prufrock, O'Hara's "JACK DELANEYS" is just another bar; it refers to nothing outside itself. Again, unlike Frost's "blanker whiteness of benighted snow," the symbolic equivalent of the poet's own secret "desert places," or Stevens' Snow Man, who perceives the "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is," O'Hara's snow is just—a weather condition that mercifully prevents his mother from entering Manhattan. Indeed, the poem shifts ground constantly as if to insist that there is nothing *behind* the items presented. If the kitchen table is black and the floor yellow, this is not to suggest that there is an implicit conflict between, say, the black of death and the yellow of sunlight. The table could just as well be white and the floor blue. Similarly, the reference to the Leica as "someone else's" does not hint coyly at a relationship between poet and absent lover; the camera someone has left behind sits on the kitchen table for no better reason than that our apartments and lives are indeed cluttered with such paraphernalia.

Since O'Hara's images thus resist symbolic interpretation, we must make do with their literal meanings. But how do we proceed? Conventional explication would provide something like the following. "Essay on Style" is a stream-of-consciousness meditation on the relation of art to life. The scene is O'Hara's Village apartment, the time, the Christmas season during a snowstorm so heavy that Mayor Wagner has ordered private cars not to enter Manhattan until the streets have been cleared. Bill and Edwin are, respectively, Bill Berkson and Edwin Denby, both close friends and fellow New York poets. As Frank and Bill are busy painting, the phone rings. It is Frank's mother, complaining about the behavior of her pregnant daughter, his sister, and begging to see him. The snowstorm provides a convenient excuse and anyway Frank is preoccupied. He ponders various artistic problems he has been trying to solve: the fuzzy terminology used in describing kinds of sculpture, the similar futility of function words such as "but" and "also" in poetry. He recalls an evening discussing his poems with Edwin Denby over drinks at Jack Delaney's; he thinks of last night's party for Ed Dorn, which Dorn himself didn't bother to attend, and of Bill's theory that typographical effects are central to the new poetry. Wholly engaged in these questions of aesthetic, the poet mentally rejects his mother's request and opts for total privacy.

The theme that seems to emerge from this running commentary is the artist's need to maintain his integrity, to concentrate on his craft, sidestepping the petty demands of his bourgeois family. A subsidiary and related theme is the need to "purify the language of the tribe," to create an art free from cliché and dead matter. Such statements may describe what the poem *says* but they give us little impression of the way it *works*. For the originality and distinction of "Essay on Style" depend upon what Shklovsky called "defamiliarization" or "making it strange"—the removal of objects from the "automatism of perception."<sup>28</sup> Not the meanings of individual words or word groups but the *structure* of these meanings should be our concern.

The poem's central structural principle, I would posit, is the comical non sequitur, the repeated raising of an expectation only to deflate it. Thus what begins as a still life ("Someone else's Leica sitting on the table") immediately gives way to an unrelated series of conversations, memories and incidents. Reading "Essay on Style" is like watching one of those film cartoons in which an object is initially presented only to fly apart, revealing a whole string of new objects we never knew were inside it. When our expectations are thus countered, we are forced to pause and concentrate on each item presented, to become *aware* of it. The kitchen table, for example, is at first a backdrop for the new camera; then it moves into the foreground with the yellow floor as new backdrop. Charles Olson's famous dictum in "Projective Verse" that "One perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception" is perhaps the central norm that governs O'Hara's poetic structures.

Consider the syntax. "Essay on Style" avoids all commas, colons and periods; grammatically, it is one long run-on sentence. The emphasis, as in Pollock's paintings, is on process, but it is important to understand that process is not equivalent to progress. There can be here no question of a beginning, middle and end. Such systematic progression is impeded by various devices. We may note, to begin with, that the only form of punctuation used in the poem is the question mark, which occurs six times in fifty-one lines. The questions, being chiefly rhetorical, do not constitute sharp structural breaks; they serve, rather, as brief deflections from the forward movement, as gentle hesitations that make us pause to reconsider a given image. Linear progression is further resisted by what we might call the "floating clause" or phrase. In line 2, for example, "I am painting" refers either to "the black kitchen table" or "the floor yellow" or both. The same technique occurs in lines 8-10 where "in point of fact" can relate back to "telling her" or forward to "why don't I go out. . . ." Like the "reversible textures" O'Hara admires in Pollock's *Number 29*, these floating word groups, poised in mid-air, force us to look at them from both sides, to "read" them in a new way.

A related device is the incomplete declarative statement. "My sister's pregnant," the poet reports, comically paraphrasing his mother's telephone tirade, "and went to the country for the weekend without/ telling her." Telling her what? That she was going to the country? That she was pregnant? Or a third

---

<sup>28</sup> See Lemon and Reis, pp. 12-13.

revelation? Later in the poem, the speaker remembers looking out of the “big race-track window” of Jack Delaney’s “on the wet.” Wet what? It doesn’t matter because the word “wet” quickly modulates into “cognac”—another wet substance.

O’Hara’s conjunctions, for that matter, are usually pseudo-conjunctions, as if to suggest that we instinctively relate items that have no relationship. In the phrase cited above, “my sister’s pregnant and/ went to the country,” we stop for a moment to puzzle out the connection between the two predicates only to realize that there is none. Similarly, in line 16, the poet’s “growingly more perpetual state” (how can something “perpetual” be described as “growingly”?) suddenly gives way to the unrelated question about the Frick angel, the word “and” again acting as false connective.

The pronouns in “Essay on Style” have a similar indeterminacy. In line 3, the phrase “Bill is painting it” seems to refer to the floor, but “it” can also refer to the Leica on the kitchen table. The referents of given pronouns shift repeatedly so that the characters are viewed from different angles. Thus Bill is originally viewed in the third person, later becomes “you,” and finally, in the last few lines of the poem, is replaced by another “you” who is the poet’s mother. Such mistrust of pronouns, like the pointless use of conjunctions, is related to the poet’s declared retraction of function words even as he uses them. The words, “well if Mayor Wagner won’t allow private/ cars on Manhattan” come back to haunt the speaker twenty lines later when he declares “then we can attack *well* since it has no/ application whatsoever.” This retraction process gradually speeds up, culminating in the question, “do you think/ ,Bill, we can get rid of *though* also and *also*? Such acceleration (the first word takes twenty lines to retract, the last only two words) points to the poet’s growing agitation.

O’Hara’s verbal landscape is, then, characterized by incompleteness, contradiction, indeterminacy. Repeatedly, the poet asks, “wouldn’t you know?”, “do you think?”, “where do you think I’ve got to?”, “do you think Bill?”, “why not?” What starts out as a still life and a poem about painting turns into one about poetry: the typewriter supplants the camera. Nothing is what it seems to be: “how/ can one say that angel in the Frick’s wings/ are ‘attached’ if it’s a real angel?”; Ed Dorn doesn’t attend his own party; grown men decorate Christmas trees; Jack Delaney’s has a “race-track window”; when one reflects on something, one is really “being reflected upon.”

Such willful confusion makes it impossible to take the poem as a serious rejection of petty family ties in the interests of art. For the poet is not making judgments about his querulous mother. Their conversation is not meant to shed light on his neurosis as it would in, say, a Lowell confessional poem. When the poet playfully puts the blame for not being able to see his mother on Mayor Wagner, he is merely striking a pose. In another mood, at another time, he might, after all, want to see her. Similarly, when O’Hara talks about cleaning up the language, he is not trying to tell us that art is superior to the messiness of life, a proposition he vigorously and continuously denied in his writings. If the intimacy of mothers palls, so, the comic non-sequiturs suggest, does the intimacy of the typewriter. Who is to say which one should be rejected first?

Helen Vendler has argued that one of O'Hara's real limitations is his "radical incapacity for abstraction."<sup>29</sup> But how can a poet who believes, as does O'Hara, that to prolong a sensation is to kill it, deal in abstractions? I would argue that, on the contrary, the avoidance of abstraction is central to O'Hara's poetic achievement. For, just as in Pollock's art "the scale of the painting becomes that of the painter's body, not the image of a body," so in O'Hara's poetry the "scale" becomes the poet's consciousness itself, not the ideas on which that consciousness meditates. "Essay on Style" enacts the poet's awareness that anything that inhibits the immediacy of response—whether his mother's phone call, or going to the same bar with the same friends, or the use of function words like "but" and "well"—destroys one's sense of immanent presence. Style, for O'Hara, is thus a matter of suppressing all the connectives that impede the natural flow of life, that freeze its momentum. Hence there can be no fixed meters, no counting of syllables, no regularity of cadence, no sound repetitions at set intervals. Just as the syntax must be as indeterminate as possible, so no two lines must have the same length or form. Thus the verse forms themselves enact the poet's basic distrust of stability, his commitment to change.

So far, I have been talking about a single O'Hara poem, and one can of course object that Formalism is all very well when dealing with an isolated text, but that, in Fredric Jameson's words, "the Formalistic model is essentially synchronic, and cannot adequately deal with diachrony, either in literary history or in the form of the individual work."<sup>30</sup> The Formalist, we are told, can only deal with the smaller discrete forms; when it comes to the long poem, play or novel or, more important, the total oeuvre of a given writer or a whole literary movement, the limitations of the method become all too evident. Opponents of Formalism will point with distaste to, say, Roman Jakobson's 1970 monograph on Shakespeare's Sonnet 129 ("Th'expence of spirit in a waste of shame"), which goes to the most ingenious lengths imaginable in describing all the possible phonetic, syntactic and semantic symmetries and oppositions—for example, the binary opposition between anterior and posterior strophes—that constitute what Jakobson senses to be the mathematically perfect structure of this sonnet.<sup>31</sup> Yet it was also Roman Jakobson who insisted, in a 1937 essay on the structural function of the image of the statue in Pushkin's poetry, that every poet has his own fundamental intonation, his unique mythology made up of recurrent images used in special combinations. If we wish to come to terms with a poet's individual vision, Jakobson argues, we must "by careful internal and immanent analysis" discover those constants, appearing in however different surface forms, that provide the key to his imaginative universe. The important thing is not to explain what the

---

<sup>29</sup> "The Virtues of the Alterable" (review of the CP), *Parnassus*, 1 (Fall-Winter, 1972), 5.

<sup>30</sup> "Metacommentary," *PMLA*, 86 (January, 1971), 12.

<sup>31</sup> Roman Jakobson and Lawrence G. Jones, *Shakespeare's Verbal Art in "Th' Expence of Spirit"* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1970).

key images, taken as isolated entities, mean, but to establish their relationship to one another within the context of the poet's total oeuvre.<sup>32</sup>

Jakobson's brilliant analysis, too complex to summarize here, of the destructive statue as intermediary between the poet-lover and the object of his desire, as embodiment of the central conflict between movement and stasis, life and death, in Pushkin's work, an analysis which makes use of the poet's biography and social milieu as well as of linguistics, looks ahead to certain modern Phenomenological and Structuralist studies of literature, particularly Jean-Pierre Richard's great essays on Baudelaire and Rimbaud. It provides an excellent model for the study of recurrent motifs in the work of contemporary poets.

In charting the contours of O'Hara's poetic landscape, we might begin with any of the elements discussed in the case of "Essay on Style"—for example, the use of indeterminate pronouns—and trace them through the poet's work. But since my time is limited, let me follow Jakobson's lead and say something about O'Hara's characteristic imagery. A well-known poem about a Jackson Pollock painting, "Digression on Number 1, 1948," begins:

I am ill today but I am not  
too ill. I am not ill at all.  
It is a perfect day, warm  
for winter, cold for fall.

A fine day for seeing.

(CP, 260)

Here, as in the case of "Essay on Style," is O'Hara's obsessive concern for change, surprise, defiance of expectations. "A fine day for seeing" must be an offbeat or quirky day—"warm/ for winter, cold for fall." In the same vein, O'Hara's favorite hour is not a Yeatsian midnight or a Rimbaldian hour of dawn, but, of all things, lunch hour—the busiest, noisiest hour of the day when one has to squeeze so much activity—lunching, looking, loving—into such a short time span. Much has been written about O'Hara's so-called love affair with New York but we must be careful not to sentimentalize his attitude. New York does not symbolize some superior force or beauty; it is quite simply and literally the place where more happens in less time and space than anywhere else in the world. In a late poem called "Walking," the poet says:

the country is no good for us  
there's nothing  
to bump into  
or fall apart glassily. . . .

(CP, 476)

This motif—bumping into things or watching them fall apart "glassily"—per-

---

<sup>32</sup> "La statue dans la symbolique de Pouchkine," trans. by Marguerite Derrida from "Schoa v. symbolice Puškinově," *Slovo a slovesnost*, III (1937), 2-24, in Roman Jakobson, *Questions de poétique*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973), pp. 152-189. See esp. pp. 151-154, 185.

meates O'Hara's poetry from its beginnings. On the first page of the *Collected Poems*, we read: "We lay against each other/ like banks of violets/ while the slate slips/ off the roof into the/ garden of the old lady/ next door" (CP, 3). And in "Memorial Day 1950," the poet declares irreverently: "I hear the sewage singing/ underneath my bright white toilet seat and know/ that somewhere sometime it will reach the sea:/ gulls and swordfishes will find it richer than a river" (CP, 17).

To enjoy the contemplation of one's own waste products becoming food for swordfish is indeed to yearn for life in any and all its myriad forms. And to be a poet is, accordingly, "to be quick," to "scare/ you clumsily," to "deepen you by my quickness" (CP, 49). The goal is to "have the immediacy of a bad movie,/ not just a sleeper, but also the big,/ overproduced first-run kind. I want to be/ at least as alive as the vulgar." The poem from which these last lines are taken, "My Heart," ends with the words, "you can't plan on the heart, but/ the better part of it, my poetry, is open" (CP, 231).

Openness, quickening, change—these are the qualities O'Hara treasures in film, the reels of celluloid that roll on and on, providing us with those marvelously inane images of "Sue Carroll as she sits for eternity on the damaged fender of a car/ and smiles" or of "Eric von Stroheim, the seducer of mountain-climbers' gasping spouses" (CP, 232). Like action painting, film is a model art for O'Hara because here everything can move, dissolve, cut into something else, fade in or out. When he isn't going to the movies or looking at paintings, the poet opts for the dissolves and fade-outs of real life: the "luminous humidity" of the Seagram Building, the "hum-colored tires" of the cabs on Fifth Avenue, the fountain in front of the Plaza, instant coffee, cigarette smoke.

Yet the pleasure one takes in these phenomena is qualified by one's sense of their transience. Deciding that it is too nice a day to attend the funeral of his oldest aunt who "will be buried from a convent," the poet declares:

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

(CP, 244)

And there's the rub. The very space that is full of life when the poet is with someone he loves, or is hurrying off to meet his lover, can just as quickly turn into a threatening void. Alone at his window, unable to make contact with a lover, the poet fears the clear night sky: "My eyes, like millions of/ glassy squares, merely reflect./ Everything sees through me,/ in the daytime I'm too hot/ and at night I freeze" (CP, 225). Here is a day that is patently not "a fine day for seeing." When the poet is in this mood, the light, usually soft and golden, "hardens"; the fountain "forms solid arcs and the snow will settle/ like a sheet over all live color." Even the wind is no longer a source of exhilaration for "a mild gale would/ break every fiber in me." Indeed, there is nothing to be perceived, no object of attention: "Only/ my own face stares back/ from the window, the/ record, this white paper" (CP, 40). New York, scene of those delight-



fully frantic lunches with Leroi Jones or Barbara Guest, is also the place where one gets stuck in traffic until “mud clammers up the trellis of my nerves” (CP, 360). The once charming sewage is now frozen in the “Horrible, soundless, cold” vault of the incinerator (CP, 22), an image that appears frequently in O’Hara’s poetry.

Taking the *Collected Poems* as a whole, the seemingly random items O’Hara catalogues can be seen to fall into two opposing groups. On the one hand, there is all that quickens: liquids, whether Coke, coffee, rain or snow; lunch hours; warm days in December and cold days in June; action painting; French film; the buzzing telephone; speeding cars; sex. On the other, there is all that hardens and freezes; ice, mirrors, cars that won’t move, empty beds, St. Bridget’s steeple, stale prose. “Early on Sunday,” written in 1961, is a fine example of the second mood modulating back into the first:

It’s eight in the morning  
everyone has left  
the *New York Times* had put itself to bed on Wednesday  
or Thursday and arrived  
this morning I feel pale  
and read the difference between the Masai and the Kikuyu  
one keeps and identifies  
the other keeps and learns  
“newfangledness” in Wyatt’s time was not a virtue was it  
or should I get up  
go out into the Polish sunlight  
and riot in Washington Square with Joan with the “folk”  
if you like singing  
what happened to the clavichord

with hot dogs peanuts and pigeons where’s the clavichord  
though it’s raining  
I’m not afraid for the string  
they have their hats on across the street in the dirty window  
leaning on elbows  
without any pillows  
how sad the lower East side is on Sunday morning in May  
eating yellow eggs  
eating St. Bridget’s benediction  
washing the world down with rye and Coca-Cola and the news  
Joe stumbles home  
pots and pans crash to the floor  
everyone’s happy again

(CP, 404-405)

“Early on Sunday” does not profit from the sort of close reading we have all learned to apply to, say, Stevens’ “Sunday Morning” or Lowell’s “Waking Early Sunday Morning.” The *New York Times* does not symbolize anything; it is

simply the paper everyone in New York reads on Sunday morning. The Masai and Kikuyu add no anthropological dimension to the poem; they are named merely so that we can follow the process whereby the poet drearily and dutifully forces himself to read newsworthy items in the paper. Again, the poet's momentary longing for the clavichord is not comparable to, say, Pound-Maubert's nostalgia for "Sappho's barbitos," that beautiful instrument so irritatingly replaced by the pianola in our crass century. For O'Hara, the lower East Side on Sunday morning is a sad and lonely place only because he himself is sad and lonely. Once Joe stumbles in and the pots and pans crash to the floor, "everyone's happy again." Who needs a clavichord?

The pleasure of reading an "action poem" like "Early on Sunday" is, I would posit, one of participation; what the poem says is much less interesting than the process whereby the poet responds to the items in his environment. As readers, we can enter the poem's action; we are *there*, forcing our way through the *Times* out of sheer boredom, annoyed by the ugly people across the street, then suddenly transfigured by Joe's return.

In the case of a poetry which deliberately avoids symbolic density in favor of literalness, a poetry of simultaneity and process, the construction of meaning in the traditional sense is bound to be a thankless task. But this is not to say that Symbolist exegesis, which has provided us with some of the best studies we have of Yeats and Eliot, Stevens and Frost, does not have an important function. I merely wish to suggest that although literary theory may—and perhaps should—aspire to the condition of science, it must be flexible enough to incorporate new literary movements.