Frank O’Hara’s Ecstatic Elegy:

“In Memory of My Feelings” In Memory Wallace Stevens

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Abstract:

This article engages with two key modes of modernism, abstraction and autonomy, exemplified by the figures of the hero and serpent respectively in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, and with properties modernism largely disavowed, namely the rhetoric of sensibility or sentimentality. The article mediates the seminal readings of modernism of Charles Altieri and T.J. Clark. Clark’s analysis of modernism’s paradoxical dream of returning to the pre-modern “World/Nature/Sensation/Subjectivity” is judged a Romantic dream; O’Hara’s dream, however, is a return to the fundament of sentimentality, the authority of feeling in the body, and in love. The performative rhetoric that supports autonomy, described by Altieri, is transformed by O’Hara’s status as a love poet. O’Hara’s poem is therefore an elegy for feelings, and for modernism, in what Jerome McGann terms the “ecstatic” tradition. Sentimental late modernism is the inability to turn back to the sensibility of love, and the ecstatic elegy for it, the “complete expenditure” that affects an alternative autonomy.
This article argues for Frank O’Hara’s poetry to be situated on a turn from modernism. The reasons for that shift require our engagement with two of the key modes of modernism, abstraction and autonomy (exemplified here in the work of Wallace Stevens), and with properties one strain of modernism to a large extent disavowed, namely rhetoric and in particular the rhetoric of sensibility or sentimentality. I contend that O’Hara’s reincorporation of rhetorical furia (liveliness) is partly a transition from modernist asceticism, and partly the uncovering of the rhetorical power modernism always harbored. O’Hara exceeds the modernist project by turning back to an alternative tradition, one held in the aesthetics of sensibility. Finally, I understand that turn to be a queering of the dominant mode of the heteronormative masculinity of modernism.

Understanding more fully one of O’Hara’s landmark poems, “In Memory of My Feelings”, published influentially in the Evergreen Review and reprinted by Donald Allen in The New American Poetry, provides suitable evidence to mediate two of the seminal readings of modernism, those of Charles Altieri and T.J. Clark. In brief, I introduce an O’Hara who takes the struggle toward autonomy that is the work of abstraction, as exemplified by Wallace Stevens, and described by Altieri, and composes an elegy for it. I also offer Clark’s Farewell to an Idea (which of course takes its title from Stevens) a late modernism that echoes in its relation to modernism
Byron’s sentimental mutation of Romanticism. O’Hara’s relationship to modernism might helpfully be understood as an echo of Byron’s relationship to Wordsworthian Romanticism; not merely a choice of idol in the illicit figure of Byron, but a critique of romantic fidelity and the pleasures of earnestness by the truth of sentimentality; the pressure of deathly promise as the undermining of life as truth value for a kind of ersatz charm (a feeling that death does not so much make life more real as make it more unlikely); and the choice of urban pleasures over the sublimity of nature. O’Hara’s late modernism is Byronian in its hedonistic aestheticism (itself born of the study of Renaissance art) mingled with its knowledge of seduction. I argue that “In Memory of My Feelings” is an elegy, an elegy for the present feelings that depend upon memorial selves; in order, finally, to rid himself of the burden of such Medusan memories, O’Hara seeks an elegy that fails to recover lost time, past lives. I turn, therefore, to Jerome McGann’s theorisation of “ecstatic” elegy, the elegy without redemption, “self-generating, self-consuming”.

Rhetoric is, on the whole, embarrassing to modernists, and I want to argue for O’Hara as a particularly embarrassing late modernist. O’Hara’s late modernism is a return to the early modernism of the fin de siècle. Though that return can be overplayed by an emphasis on a queer history of aestheticism, the first generation of the New York School clearly looked to Walter Pater for certain models of experience, whether felt passionately by O’Hara and John Wieners, or (arguably) dispassionately in John Ashbery. Pater’s model, described in the conclusion to The Renaissance, of artworks persuasive of endlessly new experiences is one of the pillars of Altieri’s understanding of modernism; the novelty of Paterian experience against the marmoreal and memorializing pressures of habit is the most sensual experience that
can be expected of autonomy, though an autonomy based in the oblation of a
grounding history. “In Memory of My Feelings” is O’Hara’s elegy for a
memorializing aesthetics, his turn away from the accretion of experience as statuary
on behalf of new feeling. I want to show why O’Hara’s Paterian autonomy here is
not quite that of Stevens/Altieri: Pater’s experience may seek to be self-fulfilling but
O’Hara is a love poet, and love is the experience of vulgarity, of something shared; as
he writes in “Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets”, “we fight for what we love, nor
are”.

In Farewell to an Idea, T.J. Clark understands the contradictory dreams of modernism
to be to:

lead its audience toward a recognition of the social reality of the sign (away
from the comforts of narrative and illusionism, was the claim); but equally it
dreamed of turning the sign back to a bedrock of World / Nature / Sensation /
Subjectivity which the to and fro of capitalism had all but destroyed.

The first dream involves a contradictory relationship with rhetoric, the essential
question being: how can an audience be lead towards a recognition of the social
reality of the sign without the rhetoric that does the leading becoming the new
illusion, or now also part of the world of signs? This is anti-rhetoric rhetoric, the
instigation of the audience’s autonomy.

I want to uncover in the second dream, which rightly contradicts the first, a
missing crisis: if modernism harbors a dream of returning to the pre-modern
“World/Nature/Sensation/Subjectivity” then we might adjudge its return to be a Romantic one. What if, rather than modernism harboring a Romantic return as its dream-life, we can posit the fundament of sentimentality, that is the authority of feeling in the lowest order of the senses (the body), and in the jurisdiction of love, as its dream? If modernism harbors a Romantic dream-life, does the late modernism of O’Hara similarly harbor a sentimental one? Is the elegy for feelings in O’Hara the recuperative farewell to sentimental attachments in which the return of feeling is built into the nature of the elegy for their loss?

The value of a late modernism of sensibility may lie in its relation to the first part of Clark’s construction, the modernists’ desire to reveal the “social reality of the sign (away from the comforts of narrative and illusionism[…])”. The language of sentiment, with love at its core, can clearly be the source of modernist ire as pure comfort, even if that may include the adolescent comforts of the traumas of love. On the other hand, sentiment offers a particular construction of the “social reality of the sign”; its rhetoric is typically self-reflexive if not self-addressing, and its acts of persuasion are foregrounded or acknowledged as persuasive, which gives it a peculiar kind of honesty (even in the willful fabrications of the pursuit of admiration and affection). This rhetorical ballast is potentially therefore already committed to an understanding of the “social reality of the sign”; love is an autonomy of sociability, if precisely not an autonomy of individuality. The resistance of modernism to rhetoric as persuasion harbored the rhetorical installation of autonomy (according to Altieri) whilst failing to staunch the flood of effective political persuasion for which the last century is renowned. The question remains, how to fight the predation of rhetoric, its persuasiveness, without being persuasive? We might further suggest that modernist
aesthetics was correct in its experiment with form as exemplary of damaging or curtailing persuasion, whilst acknowledging that such exemplary models could not do the work of anti-persuasion on sufficient a scale precisely because of its refusal of the techniques of mass persuasion.

If my thesis is correct, questions follow: what is to be gained in O’Hara’s late-modernist sensibility, the turn to sentimentality as a lost system of signs? Is it explicable as commentary on contemporary society (damage to sentiment in a control society or new models of conformity) or as the use and abuse of the sentimentality of his contemporary world (the sentimental attachments of the nation to its war heroes, or the commodification of sentiment in advertising and consumer culture)? We might see a similar recuperative gesture of late-modernist sentimentality, reflecting the sentimental aestheticisation of politics (in this analogy, the persuasion of modernity), by an experimental damage of the formal properties of sentimentality (the modernist experiment with form). “In Memory of My Feelings” places emotional lives beside the sentimental attractions of a patriotism forged in cultural capital, the statuary of epic histories erect in public parks with spaces secret enough to harbor illicit love-making. Clark suggests that the founding myths (the “structures of belief”) of modernity were the myths that modernism placed under formal pressure, where “form was ultimately a crucible, an act of aggression, an abyss into which all the comfortable “givens” of the culture were sucked and then spat out.” He writes:

The question to put to the art of the present, then, is what does that art appear to see as the beliefs in the culture of our own moment that are similarly
structural, similarly the core of our present ideology; and how does art envisage putting those beliefs to the test?xi

Put simply, the late modernism of O’Hara places under formal pressure the “given” of love and of the love that is friendship.

What effect does this thesis (that O’Hara experiments with the given of love) have on Altieri’s reading of modernist autonomy, found most persuasively for him in the project of Wallace Stevens, whose imagery is found throughout O’Hara’s poem? Altieri’s modernist autonomy is predicated on the loss of the authority of, if not the total absence of, the above categories (nature, subjectivity, etc). Altieri writes tellingly of Whitman’s project: “Whitman’s poetry is probably not expressive in the traditional sense of reporting on feelings. Rather, it offers a mode of desire inseparable from the rhetorical energies that sustain it.”xii This contention is the crux of Altieri’s adjustment of T.J. Clark’s position on modernism: for Altieri, modernist artists understand signs not according to their references or as a logic of representation, but in what they “made visible about the forces impinging upon and organized within the artist’s constructive energies.”xiii Altieri adjusts Clark by shifting modernist art-making from concern with representation to a rhetorically persuasive activity. Here I want to mark the confluence of rhetoric, autonomy and abstraction in discussions of modernism.

In “Why Modernist Claims for Autonomy Matter”, Altieri foregrounds the modernist artist’s struggle for autonomy, and highlights abstraction as the key technique for such self-possession: autonomy “names a principle by which artists claim the right to redefine every element of their heritage by balancing energies and
tensions that are exemplified in the mutual involvement of authorship, audience, work, and world.”

The withdrawal of certain fundamental and/or transcendental truths (belief, nature, a unitary self) provides a vacuum in which to forge an identity and a way of experiencing the world that is, in some ways, a limit point of aestheticism. This isn’t so much art for art’s sake as the use of art to determine how one perceives the world and what the world means to us. It is abstract in the sense that it is a self-supporting suspension of meaning within the vacuum of modernity’s lament for lost truths. Altieri queries the proposition (made in this case by Jay Bernstein, though others would work as well) that nature should be granted special authority; Altieri writes: “For modernists, abstraction was not so much the negation of concreteness as the recuperation of concreteness otherwise lost to habits deriving from the codification of orientations toward nature.” In other words, abstraction is the “codification of orientations” without a prior idea (as far as is possible) of what it is that we are experiencing. Abstraction works (or can work) pragmatically by reduction and withdrawal from presumed structures of experience, but imagines in its pre-history an absence of ideologically determined experiences (‘nature’, say) from which to withdraw; abstraction works backwards, but posits an origin in silence as its telos. Altieri writes: “Autonomy is simply the capacity to replace a melancholy sense of nature lost by relational structures that establish their own kind of objectivity. And sensuous particularity becomes the concrete literalness capable of inducing an audience to dwell on these mutual relations as they unfold.”

Autonomy is thus comparable to elegy, the transference of loss into new paradigms of feeling; to this point I will return.
Altieri argues that, “most major modernist writers turned away from pursuing authority that could be measured by any standard of accuracy. Instead, authority had to be established by the writers’ abilities to foreground how the various levels in their text formed mutually sustaining structures.” xvii That is, the abilities of the text are primarily rhetorical, even if rhetorically within the formal properties of the work, a shift Altieri understands as an inevitable return of the repressed in modernism. The striving for autonomy needs as its technique the powers of rhetoric, even if that power is only to be used for the construction of the self, rather than the manipulation of the crowd. Note that for Altieri rhetoric is an “art of responsiveness to demands for meaning and for direction in circumstances where it is not possible to call upon essences or preestablished rules”. xviii The loss of, in Clark’s formulation, the “bedrock of World / Nature / Sensation / Subjectivity” creates a vacuum in which rhetoric can make manifest a self-supporting structure (and one which supports notions of self). Rhetoric (and this is my interjection) is therefore modernism’s elegiac form, a throwback to an earlier formalism to mark the loss of foundational and transcendental truths (part of my argument turns on O’Hara’s poem is an elegy for a history of sentiment or sensibility). Altieri is the best critic I know at, in his own words “correlating modernist self-consciousness about rhetoricity with its dreams of a distinctive aesthetic immediacy”. xix In his response to Clark’s *Farewell to an Idea*, Altieri writes:

one could argue that the richest modes of immediacy that modernists pursued were not efforts to turn the sign back to a bedrock in sensation. Rather, the relevant immediacy was not in what signs referred to but in what
they did, or in what that doing made visible about the forces impinging upon and organized within the artist’s constructive energies. Artists had to make audiences aware of the conventional features of sign production so that they might free signs from the primacy of reference. A new art could stress the force and resonance established by a work because of how it organized its elements within a performative space. (129)

Rhetoric here enforces models of performativity, a performativity inflected by typically American pragmatist action. Performativity counters the dogma of representation.

Altieri’s work on autonomy and on the recovery of rhetoric is clearly paradoxical; rhetoric as the aesthetics of persuasion must contradict the call of autonomy. Altieri sets rhetoric and poetics one against the other: where rhetoric “relies on shared premises to generate appropriate conclusions”, it is poetry which “relies on invented worlds in order to make possible a sense that sharing extends to the previously un-thought.”xx Poetry is, then, persuasive of kinds of non- or yet to be existent worlds (it cannot, therefore, represent them in any straightforward sense). What happens, though, when poetry is love poetry, as it is for O’Hara, and therefore it is to sensibility it turns? What of poetry’s need of “love’s life giving vulgarity”, xxi that is, its commonality, which cannot fold back into solipsistic performance?

Wallace Stevens
Another space will have to be found for the echoes of Whitman, Crane, Valéry, Auden, Rimbaud, and Symonds in “In Memory of My Feelings”. For now I want to uncover those of Wallace Stevens, because Stevens describes in his poetry two figures that match with this discussion of autonomy and abstraction, the hero and the serpent respectively, and because it is Stevens who is exemplary of Altieri’s argument. I want to preface my reading of poetry, however, with this, from the article “The Relations between Poetry and Painting”. Stevens questions whether or not the origins of poetry, and the origins of the similarities between painting and poetry, are to be found in the "similarities of sensibility", and counters with the following alternative:

Yet if one questions the dogma that the origins of poetry are to be found in the sensibility and if one says that a fortunate poem or a fortunate painting is a synthesis of exceptional concentration (that degree of concentration that has a lucidity of its own, in which we see clearly what we want to do and do it instantly and perfectly), we find that the operative force within us does not, in fact, seem to be the sensibility, that is to say, the feelings. It seems to be a constructive faculty, that derives its energy more from the imagination than from the sensibility. I have spoken of questioning, not of denying. The mind retains experience, so that long after the experience, long after the winter clearness of a January morning, long after the limpid vistas of Corot, that faculty within us of which we have spoken makes its own constructions out of that experience. If it merely reconstructed the experience or repeated for us our sensations in the face of it, it would be memory. What it really does is to
use it as material with which it does whatever it wills. This is the typical function of the imagination which always makes use of the familiar to produce the unfamiliar. What these remarks seem to involve is the ide substitution for the idea of inspiration of the idea of an effort of the mind not dependent on the vicissitudes of the sensibility. [...] The point is that the poet does his job by virtue of an effort of the mind. In doing so, he is in rapport with the painter, who does his job, with respect to the problems of form and color, which confront him incessantly, not by inspiration, but by imagination or by the miraculous kind of reason that the imagination sometimes promotes. In short, these two arts, poetry and painting, have in common a laborious element, which, when it is exercised, is not only a labor but a consummation as well.

This argument, in an essay on a subject of interest to O’Hara, by a poet we know O’Hara admired, and published in New York in 1951, dovetails with "In Memory of My Feelings": Stevens describes the dynamic between the "exceptional concentration" that can foster "lucidity" and the "operative force", the autonomous spirit of the artist, which is not to be found in the sensibility, intriguingly glossed here as the "feelings", but rather in the imagination. If the "constructive faculty" merely "reconstructed the experience[...] it would be the memory"; instead the "constructive faculty" of the imagination is of the will, autonomy. Memory, feelings, sensibility are opposed to the decisive lucidity of the autonomy of the artist; Stevens proclaims the value of the creation of the "unfamiliar" by dint of the imagination.
Though of different generations, it is important to reflect on the proximity of publication of many of the major works of O’Hara and Stevens: *Parts of a World*, including “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War” appeared from 1942, “The Auroras of Autumn” which reworked many of its themes was published in 1950, with *The Necessary Angel*, a collection of earlier essays, available from in 1951 (all from Alfred A. Knopf); O’Hara’s poem was composed in 1956. In section five of “In Memory” we read:

When you turn your head

  can you feel your heels, undulating? that’s what it is
  to be a serpent. I haven’t told you of the most beautiful things
  in my lives, and watching the ripple of their loss disappear
  along the shore, underneath ferns,

  face downward in the ferns

  my body, the naked host to my many selves, shot

  by a guerrilla warrior or dumped from a car into ferns

  which are themselves *journalières*.

  The hero, trying to unhitch his parachute,

  stumbles over me. It is our last embrace. (256)

Stevens’ “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War” provides one of the precursors of these heroic figures:

  It is not an image. It is a feeling.
There is no image of the hero.

There is a feeling as definition.

How could there be an image, an outline,

A design, a marble soiled by pigeons?xxv

The hero is a sentimental affect, a “feeling” impossible to reify into the “marble soiled by pigeons” of statuary or even, presumably, a single linguistic image, hence the under-referenced cataphoric “it”, lacking context, and yet doubly affirmed with the repetition of “There”. The poem is strategically well-wrought, the lines end-stopped, the first precisely cleaved in two, each half then enhanced by the second and third lines respectively. If the hero is to be a figure of autonomy, we might find it in such close control. “In Memory of My Feelings” ends on the abstraction of a devastating quickness in the salvation of the serpent. Can we read the “feelings” to which this is an elegy as the heroic “feeling” of Stevens? “In Memory of My Feelings” is a poem charged with the memorialising or otherwise of heroism, both in O’Hara’s own wartime experience and the broad, epic sweep of civilizations, but the figures of heroism are imbued more with Whitman’s erotic attachment to soldiers of the civil war than a nationalistic splendour; is the “last embrace” by the hero when the speaker of the poem is “face downward” a particularly pleasureful submission? Does O’Hara extract a queer passion in the ambivalent patriotism of Stevens, the penetrative “eye” an outrider for “an emotion”, “hav[ing...] the man”?

The hero is a feeling, a man seen

As if the eye was an emotion,
As if in seeing we saw our feeling
In the object seen and saved that mystic
Against the sight, the penetrating
Pure eye. Instead of allegory,
We have and are the man, capable
Of his brave quickenings, the human
Accelerations that seem inhuman.xxvi

Altieri describes the challenge faced by this poem as “the danger of losing the man to the allegory”.xvii Rather than in allegory, Stevens wishes to locate heroism in a rhetorical abstraction; the possibility of heroism resides in the capacity of the instinctual body for quicknesses that approach the inhuman (the quickness of the serpent’s strike, perhaps). This I gloss as rhetorical because of that “seem”; the “feeling” which is the “hero” is a performative persuasion (as fits with the description of modernism’s rhetorical space above) beyond the recognised limitations of physical possibility; the serpent may well have such speed available to its predation. I am reminded of the passage in O’Hara’s poem:

An atmosphere of supreme lucidity,

humanism,

the mere existence of emphasis,

a rusted barge

painted orange against the sea

full of Marines reciting the Arabian ideas
which are a proof in themselves of seasickness

which is a proof in itself of being hunted.

A hit? ergo swim. (254)

Lucidity, clarity, the shining of eloquence, is taken as a rhetorical mode back into the persuasions of humanism, a humanism which sustains the heroism of warring Marines as well, perhaps, as the covert adulation of Marines in their time in urban centres such as San Francisco and New York. Are the “Arabian ideas” the calculations of geometry required for successful attacks by missiles, or the manipulations of bodies into “algebraic positions in re” (255) of section three? The poem is “philosophically speaking” a reductio ad absurdum of the Cartesian “I think, therefore I am”, or “cogito ergo sum” as “A hit? ergo swim” (254). What more proof required of one’s existence than the knowledge of being hunted? The poet’s “incognito”, proprietor of a Venetian “façade”, both the façade of the “Grand Hotel”, and façade of the man, and for whom the “mail” (male) arrives, writes in memory of those now dead: “But who will stay to be these numbers / when all the lights are dead?” (254). Such a crisis follows the patriotic need for “celebration” as one is “trying desperately to count them as they die” (254). O’Hara, when in the Navy, did see an enemy ship sink. John Wilkinson describes the “anti-monumentalism” of “In Memory of My Feelings” as a response both to “T.S. Eliot’s solicitude for Western civilization” and to Ezra Pound’s Venice, “the transcendent site of art wholly integrated with natural materials and location[…] reduced to a façade sinking slowly into the Grand Canal.” In a way, then, O’Hara’s poem is textbook iconoclasm, the destruction of cultural symbols. The heroic figure for O’Hara is impure; this hero
contains “multitudes” in an echo of Whitman, and his time may be spent in lustful feelings. Section Three of “In Memory” asks, “How many selves are there in a war hero asleep in names?” (255) before going on to describe a number of possible situations for such a hero. The hero might be “under / a blanket of platoon and fleet, orderly”; is the hero the orderly, blanketed by the warm bodies of the army and navy (the Army & Navy blanket)?

We can see a host of echoes of the following passage by Stevens in section five:

_Gazette Guerrière._ A man might happen
To prefer _L’Observateur de la Paix_, since
The hero of the _Gazette_ and the hero
Of _L’Observateur_, the classic hero
And the bourgeois, are different, much.
The classic changed. There have been many.
There are more heroes than marbles of them.
The marbles are pinchings of an idea,
yet there is that idea behind the marbles,
The idea of things for public gardens,
Of men suited to public ferns… The hero
Glides to his meeting like a lover
Mumbling a secret, passionate message.”
Stevens distinguishes between the “classic” and “bourgeois” hero, a class politics we’ll see again in his prose account of nobility; O’Hara echoes the “Guerrière” in his reference to the “guerrilla warrior” who shoots the “body” of the speaker; the Whitmanesque ferns are these “journalières”, both day labourers and perhaps the leaves of the daily news, implying assassinated bodies are dumped from cars as an everyday occurrence. Stevens gives us the “public ferns” in which marble memorials reside, the “idea” for which is a bastardisation of the heroic serpent figure, who “glides[…] like a lover”. O’Hara’s revision exaggerates the codified homosexuality of these lusty meetings in grassy public parks. The body, dying, thrown into ferns, embraces the “hero” one last time. The “men suited to public ferns” are in danger of violent retribution from guardians of homophobic culture, particularly in the parks of pre-Stonewall New York. “Beneath these lives” (255), are “lives” lived as “lies” (“lies” contained within “lives”), beneath the history of humanism, and through its figures of humans, lies (“asleep” (255)) a queer dissonance: the “ardent lover of history hides”. Such a passionate lover, part-man, part-snake, serpentine in its cunning, queer in its low-down pleasure, “tongue out” leaves a “globe of spit on a taut spear of grass / and leaves off rattling his tail a moment / to admire this flag.” In a poised undermining (or overwhelming) of the imbalance of Greek sexual power the subject and object of activity and passivity interchange here; at once the lover is “rattling his [own] tail” and “rattling” the tail of the one he is fucking, only desisting to change position for a more suitable vantage from which to admire the Whitmanian flag. This queer history within humanist history hides in the inflections of the pose of statuary (making out in the public parks which genuflect toward the grand narratives of empire) and so is complicit in history, the same which does so
much to create and condemn homosexuality.\textsuperscript{xxii} The body is “naked host to my many selves” as he lays “face downward”, his generosity of a particular kind, finally open to the “last embrace” by the stumbling “hero, trying to unhitch his parachute”. As John Wilkinson writes: “To be oneself is a great temptation for the post-Romantic artist”, but O’Hara resists with “ceaseless perspicacity the ingenious ploys that contrive erection of the self as phallic monument; he dismembers, corrupts, covers with graffiti.”\textsuperscript{xxiii} This is sexual bathos, the continual lowering of the self, the self as “oneself”, onto the only phallus worth worshipping, the real one. The public erection of phallic monuments to the wars of dominant empires becomes the manifestation of repressed desire for the real love of real men.

“Examination” describes the fate of representations of the hero, in statuary and in the writing of history:

“[…] The marbles of what he was stand
Like a white abstraction only, a feeling
In a feeling mass, a blank emotion,
An anti-pathos, until we call it
Xenophon, its implement and actor.
Obscure Satanas, make a model
Of this element, this force. Transfer it
Into a barbarism as its image.\textsuperscript{xxiv}

The finale to “In Memory” turns on the rejection of the “cancerous / statue which my body could no longer contain / against my will / against my love” (257). The
meanings remain elusive, circling around a figure of Promethean power, or narcissistic regression. The Satanic figure of the serpent coils round heroic statuary, figuring for Stevens “this element, this force” of “anti-pathos”. Does O’Hara’s poem take up such a challenge? Does the serpent saved at the close of “In Memory” act as a Satanic force, an “anti-pathos” free from the restrictions of an emotionally attached ethics, and is this “anti-pathos” autonomy?

Such a move against pathos recalls Lessing’s argument for the separation of the arts, itself based on descriptions of the Laocoön in which two serpents coil themselves around three male figures crying out in pain. For Lessing a statue must not become too painful to perceive; it must remain an “anti-pathos”: a poem is free to move the reader as it sees fit. Stevens recalls here one of Xenophon’s gifts to the Renaissance, the theory of contrapposto, the placement of antithetical characteristics side by side in both rhetoric and art. The following account is drawn from the work of David Summers. In the Memorabilia, which Summers suggests would have been known to Leonardo da Vinci as early as the 1430s, Xenophon purports to record two dialogues, one between Socrates and the painter Parrhasios, and one between Socrates and the sculptor Cliton. In the dialogue with Parrhasios, Socrates puts forward various well-known arguments about aesthetics, before describing how an artwork may (in the words of Summers) “embody through expression and action the workings of the soul, thus making the invisible visible”. To do so the artist must display mastery of contrapposto, quoting Socrates:

Then you have certainly remarked, and that with no little exactness, the natural disposition of all the parts, in all the different postures of the body:
for, whilst some of these are extended, others remain bent; when that is raised above its natural height, this sinks below it; these are relaxed, and those again are contracted, to give the greater force to the meditated blow, and the more these things are attended to, the nearer you approach to life.xxxvi

To evoke “life”, furia, the artwork must move antithetically, as the close of “In Memory” does; the charge of “this element, this force”, which might need to be without sentimental morality, a satanic feeding off the figure of man, of the hero.xxxvii Stevens proffers a “barbarism” of this blankness, the abstract form that he discovers in the serpent. The hero in his death throes may evoke pain (pathos), but the serpents’ turn in the luxury of “anti-pathos”: the ebb and flow of the contrapposto is played out in the antithetical movement to and from pathos, feeling. The “anti-pathos” is a model of autonomy in the poetry of Stevens. If the hero remains agonistic, defiant, his freedom is antithetical; it may generate some other kind of autonomy out of the pathos of its agonism. The “hero” is one figure of autonomy, a personification of autonomy; to continue I’m going to see how the autonomy, feeling and anti-pathos (bathos) in Stevens might require (serpentine) abstraction, and speculate whether O’Hara’s poem is an elegy for that kind of feeling.

“In Memory” lies in post-coital tristesse with the homoerotic (repressed) hero of Stevens, a queer recovery of the source of the “brave quickenings” of heroic feeling, and the concern with the ways the “idea” of heroism calcifies into statuary against the gliding of the “passionate” hero, described below by Emerson. Emerson’s “American Scholar” has been acknowledged as an influence on O’Hara, and must lie behind the poems of Stevens we’ve been reading through.
The sacredness which attaches to the act of creation, the act of thought, is transferred to the record. The poet chanting was felt to be a divine man: henceforth the chant is divine also. The writer was a just and wise spirit: henceforward it is settled the book is perfect; as love of the hero corrupts into worship of his statue. Instantly the book becomes noxious: the guide is a tyrant.xxxviii

Altieri encapsulates “The Auroras of Autumn” as a series of “elaborate elegies to what were the poet’s trusted ideas, and perhaps an elegy to the faith in forming ideas of any kind”.xxxix O’Hara’s poem, too, is a farewell to an idea, or rather to the feelings, including the feelings of dependency on some of his literary progenitors. Between “Our Examination” and “The Auroras of Autumn” we can find the hero and the serpent; the serpent is, arguably, the “barbaric” force or feeling which is the heroic exceeding its bondage in statuary. Altieri writes: “Because ‘the hero is not a person’[...], poetry can only approach a satisfying ethos if it manages to get beyond the entire domain of representational statuary to a very different kind of human presence. This presence consists in what the qualities of speaking make available.”xl Heroism is a rhetorical persuasion in excess of definitions of the human. The hero is one attempt to describe the kind of autonomy as manifestation of rhetorical power; Stevens advances and critiques such a proposition, the “feeling” of heroism set against the statuary it becomes if its rhetorical becoming dies into representation. Section I of “The Auroras” opens:
This is where the serpent lives, the bodiless.

His head is air. Beneath his tip at night

Eyes open and fix on us in every sky.

Or is this another wriggling out of the egg,

Another image at the end of the cave,

Another bodiless for the body’s slough?

This is where the serpent lives. This is his nest,

These fields, these hills, these tinted distances,

And the pines above and along and beside the sea.

This is form gulping after formlessness,

Skin flashing to wished-for disappearances

And the serpent body flashing without the skin.

This is the height emerging and its base

These lights may finally attain a pole

In the midmost midnight and find the serpent there,

In another nest, the master of the maze

Of body and air and forms and images,

Relentlessly in possession of happiness.
This is his poison: that we should disbelieve
Even that. His meditations in the ferns,
When he moved so slightly to make sure of sun,
Made us no less sure. We saw his head,
Black beaded on the rock, the flecked animal,
The moving grass, the Indian in his glade.

Echoes in “In Memory” aren’t hard to find: the “moving grass” here might have a “globe of spit” on it (255); the “Indian in his glade” might be the “Indian / sleeping on a scalp” (256); the “pines above” might be the “pine trees” that have “grown” (256); the “meditations in the ferns” might be the “ferns” in which someone is “face downward” (256), someone who is the victim of a political assassination; and “In the midmost midnight” the serpent may be found, the “serpent in their midst” (257). The first section quoted is elegy for “form gulping after formlessness”, the force of abstraction eating itself. This abstraction cannot be represented, only performed by us, the reader, through rhetorical persuasion, a rhetoric interrupted from its conventional origins and ends – to know its audience, and to know its purpose. For Altieri, “Poetry is always haunted by rhetoric as its internal other”. Though much of Altieri’s article on autonomy takes up the modernist renunciation of rhetoric, the close remains affirmative: “Finally”, Altieri writes, “it does not seem foolish to call for a rhetoric attentive to how its own processes have to be the bearers of many of the most important values we can claim for ourselves.” This search for value requires we turn to the prose works of Stevens, published as The Necessary Angel, and in
particular “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”, which concerns itself with the
relations between reality and imagination.xliv

The value to which Stevens turns is the most aristocratic of all, nobility. He
writes: “the idea of nobility exists in art today only in degenerate forms or in a much
diminished state” (649), due to the “pressure of reality” (650) where pressure means
“any external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of
contemplation” (654). The stakes are high in this instance, because the events
catalogued are those of the Second World War, the potential “collapse of our system”
(655), and the “disclosures of the impermanence of the past suggested, and suggest,
an impermanence of the future” (655). Against such history, and the threat of no
future, Stevens sets the imagination, and its “peculiarity” of nobility, “our spiritual
height and depth” which recalls the antithesis between pathos and anti-pathos
registered above (664). This nobility is “evasive and inaccessible” (664); he writes:
“Nothing distorts itself and seeks disguise more quickly” (664), and hence the
“manner of it is, in fact, its difficulty[...] nobility resolves itself into an enormous
number of vibrations, movements, changes. To fix is to put an end to it” (664). Much
of the preceding discussion presumed rhetoric was a manner of expression
increasing the capacity to persuade, but such persuasion is an act of comprehension
of the audience. Difficulty on the side of the poet is the cultivation of “discomfort” on
the side of the reader: “But the investment in discomfort holds out the hope that
maintaining an indeterminacy in one’s sense of audience makes it possible to
cultivate new ways of seeing and feeling and judging.xlv Difficulty (and concomitant
“discomfort”) in poetry is a way to forestall rhetoric’s understanding, its over-
determining of its audience. Feel how evocative of the conclusion to “In Memory” is this passage from the conclusion to “The Noble Rider”:

It is hard to think of a thing more out of time than nobility. Looked at plainly it seems false and dead and ugly. To look at it at all makes us realize sharply that in our present, in the presence of our reality, the past looks false and is, therefore, dead and is, therefore, ugly; and we turn away from it as from something repulsive and particularly from the characteristic that it has a way of assuming: something that was noble in its day, grandeur that was, the rhetorical once. But as a wave is a force and not the water of which it is composed, which is never the same, so nobility is a force and not the manifestations of which it is composed, which are never the same. Possibly this description of it as a force will do more than anything else I can have said about it to reconcile you to it. It is not an artifice that the mind has added to human nature. The mind has added nothing to human nature. It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives. (665)

Is this violence, this defensive, cunning violent force, the “form gulping after formlessness” of the serpent, for which the first section of “The Auroras of Autumn” is an elegy? Stevens splits the wave (echoed in O’Hara’s poem) into its essence and its accident; water is merely accidental to its existence, whereas its force, its present
rhetoric, recuperaes it as a nobility from its own damaged past. There’s a complex
revisioning of Paterian presentness here, a search for the “out of time” that remains
immediacy. The model of the artform for Stevens is not its “manifestations”, but the
“sound of its words”, a performative rather than an ontological priority.

O’Hara, I suspect, has this description in mind somewhere during the few
days of the composition of “In Memory”. It is a poem obsessed with rejecting the
past which “looks false and is, therefore, dead and is, therefore, ugly”, turning
toward the false grandeur of Venice and of statuary. Where Stevens seeks to
recuperate nobility from its history O’Hara’s aesthetics abhor self-preservation (as
argued in the Wilkinson quotations above). O’Hara chooses to kill off the self, rather
than court “self-preservation”. “In Memory of My Feelings” returns to the necessary
violence of a protective nobility, but one overturned, from nobility to vulgarity,
“love’s life-giving vulgarity” as he writes in “Personism: A Manifesto”. O’Hara
does all he can to be (in the words of Stevens) “Relentlessly in possession of
happiness”, a happiness not of the autonomous isolate imagination, but of love. The
serpent elides the turn to any one particular symbolic content, and exists as
performative decisiveness, the decision at the close of the poem to turn away, and
the concomitant possibility of new emotions, fresh sentiments.

I have argued, therefore, that “In Memory of My Feelings” provides a
complex reading of Stevens, and in particular of Stevens’ depiction of hero and
serpent as paradigms of autonomy, respectively passionate and dispassionate. Both
Stevens and O’Hara, in turn, owe a debt of influence to Emerson’s model of heroism,
but where Stevens seeks “self-preservation” in nobility, O’Hara, I’ll go on to argue,
seeks the persistent differentiation from the reification of self by mobility. The
conclusion to this essay describes why saving *sentimentality* rather than “self-preservation” is, in part, O’Hara’s re-use of Byron’s "ecstatic elegy".

"Ecstatic" Elegy

If modernism struggles with the absent authority of the categories given above (world/nature, etc.), then the dream of love in O’Hara offers a necessary provocation: so long as we can counter a pathological narcissism as love’s engine, it is impossible to love alone. We might love autonomously in that the subject of our affection is outside of our reach, but it is absurd to imagine the dominion of love to be a realm of autonomy. If modernism is formed by the thrilling farewell to (or the crisis at the loss of, depending on your outlook) the fundamentals and transcendentals that had previously stymied autonomy, what kind of loss is the loss of the foundation of sensibility or sentimentality in love, itself a fundamental which precludes autonomy? Note that for Altieri rhetoric is an “art of responsiveness to demands for meaning and for direction in circumstances where it is not possible to call upon essences or preestablished rules”. The loss of, “bedrock of World / Nature / Sensation / Subjectivity” creates a vacuum in which rhetoric can make manifest a self-supporting system of meaning. Arguably rhetoric is, then, modernism’s elegiac form, a throwback to an earlier formalism to mark the loss of foundational and transcendental truths, and to make and suspend new meaning.

Is it possible to gloss O’Hara’s decision-making at the close of this poem to a privileged autonomy where autonomy is “willed distance from claims about nature”? Saving the serpent certainly looks like the reclamation of a slippery
autonomy from under the burden of memorial identities. It is an unfeasibly elusive finale, but the close of “In Memory” sets up the elegiac address: that which is lost, “the scene of my selves”, must be killed, and must be killed by “I myself and singly”; that is, the elegy kills off the lost part, whereas grief or mourning exacerbate loss. Only the killing of loss will resurrect the “present”, what is “always and everywhere”. The “serpent in their midst” is irreducible to either “I” or the “scene of my selves”. The serpent is an expression of the contest or even conflict between the past which loses presentness and the “I” which exists as memorial to that loss. This, ultimately, is the great challenge to Altieri’s extraordinary sensitivity to the project of Stevens: O’Hara is not a lyric poet only of self-invention in the mode of Stevens; he is a love poet, and therefore autonomy is not desired. Autonomy is lack of emotional courage. The serpent is a predator not as autonomy for autonomy’s sake, but to revivify love. To paraphrase O’Hara’s ‘Having a Coke with You’, what use is autonomy if you haven’t got someone to share it with?

Altieri argued that, since Romanticism, poetics has founded itself on constitutive oppositions to rhetoric. I argue that it is not by chance alone that the constitutive oppositions to rhetoric run in parallel to the constitutive oppositions to sentimentality and sensibility. Sensibility is damned for its rhetorical power, and the use of that power towards ostensibly conservative ends, to a hokum emotional slurry, and endless vampiric text feeding off the too-easy empathy of the reader, all the stuff that Ezra Pound despised. O’Hara is not (and nor am I) asking for a return to the sentimentality of Victorian self-sacrifice; in fact O’Hara’s attitude can be described as the refusal to participate in the cultivation of martyrdom to loss. As
with Byron, there is no redemption in martyrdom to pain; not “Even for its own sake do we purchase pain”.¹

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

Jerome McGann takes elegy as a genre crucial to his definition of a poetics of sensibility: his “The Loss of Sentimental Poetry” reads the sentimental as a lost literary style, and finds in elegy an exemplification of its own re-imagining of the economy of loss. McGann’s essay describes the “compensatory schemas of elegy”, opposing a tradition which “carries out or embodies the logic of redemption” against an alternative strain of poetry which establishes loss as loss, and in doing so strangely finds new ways of liberating life, what he calls the “ecstatic” tradition.¹²

Wordsworth’s commitment to “enshrine the spirit of the past / For future restoration” (The Prelude 1805, XI.342-3) is taken to be the normative or “restrictive” form of elegy in which writing is “memorial act” (151) and essentially a form of redemption: that which is lost is redeemed in writing or in the memorial act writing performs for the reader. The ecstatic strain, however, emphasizes “visionary ecstasy as its own reward, self-generating, self-consuming” (here McGann is thinking of Blake in particular) (151). Ecstatic elegy fails to “accrue spiritual rewards”, instead scheduling “complete expenditure”. One of McGann’s key examples is Shelley’s “Adonais”, which he describes as “not the poetry of epitaphs, where the experience
of loss is replaced by the memorial tribute of a shrine of loving language”, but rather as “loss forever” which establishes “all things on a basis of present and immediate life” (152-3).

I am reminded of the following, from O’Hara’s Art Chronicles, which understands the ecstatic relations between the contingency of decisions and the murderous “singleness of purpose”:

This is not a mystical state, but the accumulation of decisions along the way and the eradication of conflicting beliefs toward the total engagement of the spirit in the expression of meaning. So difficult is the achievement that… it seems that a maximum of decisions has already been made in the process, that the artist has reached a limitless space of air and light in which the spirit can act freely and with unpremeditated knowledge. His action is immediately art, not through will, not through esthetic posture, but through a singleness of purpose which is the result of all the rejected qualifications and found convictions forced upon him by his strange ascent.” lii(art chronicles, 25-6)

What of Byron?liii McGann writes: “Indurated Byronic sorrow signifies a loss from which there is no redemption. The traditional figure for such a loss is Satan, to whom, of course, Byron will turn often enough” (156). Satan, or Satan’s representative serpent, is the figure of loss without redemption. “In Memory of My Feelings” is ecstatic elegy in the sentimental tradition, as it is for Byron, for whom “the contemporary equivalent of Satan[…] is an archangel fallen not through an excess of knowledge but through an excess of love” (156). The serpent, whose turn it
is, and who is turning, when referring to the “most beautiful things / in my lives” watches “the ripple of their loss disappear” (CP 256). The poem is the persuasive and deliberate failure to save the memorial past on behalf of new feelings.

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

The distinction between models of elegy is important not only for its own sake; McGann proposes that the sentimental tradition (sensibility), which makes “feeling, and in particular human love, the ground of an experience of perfection”, has been suppressed by institutional modernism (and this has implications for a queer recuperation of a feminine gendered literary practice). The sentimental is
modernism’s guilty secret. By reinstalling sentimentality in late modernism, we can reincorporate the virtues of sentimentality (O’Hara’s dedication to vulgarity), and we can challenge modernism’s logic of the recuperation of classical motifs with the present pleasures of forgetting. Sentimental writing promises the “wisdom of the body” rather than Romanticism’s predilection for love grafted to the “most spiritual of the senses”, the beautiful. Sentimentality prefers the kiss, “where the authority of feeling and the lowest order of the senses asserts itself” (171). We can see it in “You Are Gorgeous And I’m Coming”, the “endless originality of human loss” flowing into “the air the stumbling quiet of breathing”, with “the past falling away as an acceleration of nerves” (CP 331). As O’Hara writes in his Statement for The New American Poetry: “My formal ‘stance’ is found at the crossroads where what I know and can’t get meets what is left of that I know and can bear without hatred” (CP 500).

Byron’s sensibility, according to McGann, remains Romantic for two reasons, because he raises the sentimental to a “spectacular level”, and because his Romantic irony rescues and redeems the “disaster” threatened by his own imagination. In “In Memory of My Feelings” is an elegy for sentimental attachment (“feeling”); its Byronic irony is to use the language and genre of sentiment to write sentiment’s own epitaph, and so save it. The memorial life of feelings must be sacrificed without gain to save the autonomy of feeling.

McGann describes Byron “struggling to break wholly free from his sentimental sufferings – ultimately, to break wholly free from the doomed poetry that expresses and discovers those sufferings” (159). “In Memory of My Feelings” is an elegy to the “feeling heart” that saves sentimentality by its elegiac ardour. O’Hara’s Romantic sentimentality is a revisioning of modernism’s seriousness, with
one major inversion: language of the “feeling heart”\textsuperscript{lvii} martyrs itself to the love of tears and suffering; O’Hara (possibly more compellingly than any other poet) refuses the right of suffering to elevate itself in martyrdom. His poetry is constantly alive to the threat that suffering will make itself loved, and therefore concreted into effigy. This is modernism’s experiment with the forms of sensibility; where the sentimental enjoys its moral handwringing over the felicities of touch (sighs, swoons, blushes, as catalogued by McGann), and furthermore makes guilt the energy of the overwhelming touch, O’Hara refuses the right of suffering to possess the self as a virtue, as proof of depths of sincerity. Clark’s sense of modernism as the inability to turn back to certain prior conditions finds its shadow in O’Hara’s sentimental late modernism. The dream is to turn back to love, which makes of the present a memorial, precisely the kind of cancerous statue the close of the poem defies. Nostalgia for love is precisely not-love: nostalgia for love is the active prevention of present love. Sentimental late modernism is the inability to turn back to the sensibility of love, and the ecstatic elegy for it, the “complete expenditure” that effects an alternative autonomy, a turn. If abstraction is modernism’s struggle toward autonomy, the affirmative response to the crisis of the loss of prior assumptions, then this is late modernism because its turn is back to love’s autonomy, rather than the autonomy of the self. The turn back to sensibility cannot in any simple sense be achieved because of history, because of the experience of modernity, and because its understanding of sensibility is a queer one. Though it is, I think, a questionable term for O’Hara’s style, both because it is not contemporaneous with his work and fails to describe the particularity of the oppression of the 1950s, consider Jonathan Dollimore’s definition of camp as “a parodic critique of the essence of sensibility as
conventionally understood.” Camp, a queer style, feeds off the “essence of sensibility”; the late modernity of O’Hara is queer sensibility, its truth “nothing but a ‘body of falsehood’”, the ecstatic elegy for sensibility’s masquerade of heterosexuality. Sentimental poetry came to be a “pejorative term” standing “in general for writing which made a mawkish parade of spurious feelings.” “In Memory of My Feelings” is the ecstatic elegy for spurious feelings because spurious feelings need no decent parentage, but are born, vulgar, anyway.
Works Cited


Furia is “the ‘living’ quality of masterly execution” and is “apparent life or movement of the image.” David Summers, Michelangelo and the Language of Art (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 60.

On the trope of turning in O’Hara’s poem, see Ladkin, “And now it is the serpent’s turn”: The Rhetoric of the Figura Serpentinata in Frank O’Hara’s “In Memory of My Feelings” (forthcoming).


Clark, Farewell, 9-10.


Clark, “Steam”, 173.


 xv Altieri, “Autonomy,” 4. For discussion of Bernstein’s *Against Voluptuous Bodies* see page 2.


 xviii Altieri describes rhetoric as “shaping deliberation” and “fostering persuasion” in “Rhetoric”, p. 475).

 xix Altieri, “Can Modernism,” 129.

 x Altieri, “Rhetoric”, 476.


xxii On Crane’s influence see Brian Reed in *Hart Crane: After His Lights* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006): 195-224, He goes on to adjudge that O’Hara’s debt for the “controlling metaphor of the poem, the serpent” (207) owes a debt to Crane, in poems such as “Atlantis,” “The River,” “The Dance,” “The Wine Menagerie” and “Passage”. In “The Bridge”,


xxiv All references are to Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997). “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words” first appeared in The *Language of Poetry*, edited by Allen Tate (1942). Other resonances include ‘Angels Surrounded by Paysans’; compare O’Hara’s “When you turn your head/ can you feel your heels, undulating?” to:

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

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

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

For serpents see also ‘The Bagatelles the Madrigals’ (193) and ‘Owl’s Clover’ (152).

xxv Stevens, 248.

xxvi Stevens, 248-9.

O’Hara’s prose account reads: “Borneo loomed nearby then gaped blue under the spatter of what there is a midget submarine blocking the bay if you’re thinking of leaving but the ship ahead just struck a mine and fiss-fiss-fiss-fiss-fiss-fiss-fissspewed feathered fans of earth trees bones skyward in the most abstract of designs you wouldn’t let me go ashore thank god for the Australians everything that comes up goes down hoho right on some Australian’s head” (Early Writing, ed. Donald Allen (Bolinas, CA: Grey Fox, 1977): 126).


(103)

Stevens, 246-7.


Stevens, 247.


Summers here (355) quoting Xenophon, Memorabilia. III, x. The translation is from

xxvii As Stevens comments in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”, “the role of the poet is not to be found in morals.” (660). Stevens was a correspondent of Harvard professor Renato Poggioli in 1953; Poggioli had previously taught O’Hara (see O’Hara, *Early Writings*. Poggioli might well provide the missing link between the historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century and the avant-garde of the New York School, as O’Hara’a teacher and the author of ??? Stevens dies on August 4th 1955, a year before O’Hara writes “In Memory”.


Altieri, “Rhetoric”, 490.

Stevens, 355.

Altieri, “Rhetoric,” 480.

Altieri, “Autonomy,”” 491.

“”The Noble Rider” in Stevens, 643-665.

Altieri, “Rhetoric,” 480.

My use of vulgarity requires a more extended treatment than this article can afford to provide, but the lineaments of its argument include a defiance of Stevens’ nobility, engagement with T.J. Clark’s discussion of vulgarity in *Farewell to an Idea* (371-404), a prioritization of Dantean common tongue/vulgar eloquence, and the fetishisation of male bodies reified by work, class or race (dancers, truck drivers, black men), and the model of social intimacy in Whitman.

Altieri, “Rhetoric,” 475.


Altieri, “Rhetoric”. Altieri quotes from Ezra Pound, who in part understood rhetoric as the art of the “advertising agent for a new soap” (478) and from W.B. Yeats (“We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry”) (479). See also “The Return to Rhetoric in Modernist Poetry: Stevens and Auden” in Altieri’s *The Art of Twentieth Century American Poetry: Modernism and After* (New York: Blackwell, 2006), 126-156.

1 Byron from “[Epistle to Augusta]”, 40): quoted by McGann, *Poetics*, 156.

2 McGann, *Poetics*, 150.


iii The importance of Byron to O’Hara was established by Ward in *Statutes*: “Both Byron and O’Hara understood but were fearful of a Romantic obsession with poetry,
and in both a compulsive, at times manic urge towards Orphic utterance sits at odds with the cooler inclination to get writing in perspective as just one activity in a varied life’ (41). For an extended reading of Byron’s influence on O’Hara see my ”Ornate and Explosive Grief”, *Glossator* (forthcoming).


v McGann, *Poetics*, 159.


viii Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, 308.


x McGann, *Byron and Romanticism*, 57.