A Time to Dance:
Frank O’Hara Reading Edwin Denby

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Abstract
Academic interest in the post-war American poet writers generally gathered together under the label of “the New York School Poets” has never been greater; at the center of this perceived milieu is Frank O’Hara. My article is intended to fill a gap in the critical literature on O’Hara, which has failed to take into account the significant textual relations between his work and the still under-appreciated writings of Edwin Denby. Prompted by O’Hara’s paratextual responses to Denby but above all by the multiple allusions to the latter’s writing which I have found in the 1956 poem “A Step Away from Them,” this essay offers readings that suggest O’Hara’s highly original poetry developed at least partly through a revisionary engagement with the temporal themes and structures he found in Denby’s poetry and dance-themed prose. This article appropriates Clive Scott’s Bergsonian approach in order to illustrate how, contrary to critical responses which emphasize O’Hara’s deliberate lack of “depth,” his poetry’s intertextual engagement with Denby is in fact productive of a highly textured presence of inter-involved memories corresponding to Benjamin’s concept of Erfahrung. Reading O’Hara back through Denby’s already very suggestively phenomenological writings helps us to see the ways in which strategies of silence, of retrospective transformations at the endings of poems, and of the accumulation of perceptual “instants” become the self-protective means by which privileged “moments” of freedom and memorialization can occur. A fuller understanding of these strategies adds to criticism’s recognition of O’Hara’s conflicted relationship with America’s post-war expansionism.

Keywords
Frank O’Hara, Edwin Denby, New York School, time, temporality, Benjamin, Bergson, street photography
Around the middle of Frank O’Hara’s posthumously published *Collected Poems* there appears a short, somewhat enigmatic and rarely discussed poem entitled “To Edwin Denby.” When consulted by Donald Allen, O’Hara’s editor, the poem’s eponymous addressee wrote to say he believed it had been composed in 1957 (see Allen’s note in O’Hara, *Collected Poems* 540). Here is the poem in its entirety:

I’m so much more me
that you are perfectly you.
What you have clearly said
is yet in me unmade.

I’m so much more me
as time ticks in our ceilings
that you are perfectly you,
your deep and lightning feelings.

And I see in the flashes
what you have clearly said,
that feelings are our facts.
As yet in me unmade. (O’Hara, *Collected Poems* 286)\(^1\)

The poem is intriguing for the opaquely psychological and poetic self-portrait it seems to offer of O’Hara (1926-66), who in the first two lines might be thought to be defining himself in contradistinction to the older writer and ballet critic, Edwin Denby (1903-83). The second stanza emphasizes what is, from the beginning, a strikingly intimate sense of inter-involvement with Denby in O’Hara’s act of self-differentiation: the two writers are placed in a shared situation (“as time ticks in our apartment”) that for anyone familiar with their famous milieu is as suggestive of late-night conversations in New York apartments as it is of their universal mortal predicament. But if the first line of the final stanza and the line preceding it hint at a filial or protégé’s humble admiration for a master’s difficult-to-grasp words and powerful depths, the poem’s final line resonates, above all, with a sense of the younger poet’s potentiality to make—and also perhaps unmake—what, in Denby’s

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\(^1\) I have not abbreviated the title of this publication. This is to distinguish it from Edwin Denby, *The Complete Poems*, the title of which I have abbreviated here to “CP.”
case, it seems, has only ever existed at the level of desire or aesthetically unwrought utterance.

O’Hara’s fame and literary stature are such that almost every poem and paratext he wrote potentially has a great deal to tell us about poetological and other literary and aesthetic developments still in process today. As the editors of the recently published collection of essays on his work, Frank O’Hara Now, put it, “he is unique in commanding admiration across the schismatic world of contemporary poetry” (Hampson and Montgomery 1). That book—which includes essays by increasingly influential young poet-academics, with admirers on both sides of the Atlantic, such as Andrea Brady and Keston Sutherland, along with contributions by less recently established figures such as Geoff Ward, Rod Mengham, and David Herd—is itself proof of the seemingly endless academic interest in O’Hara’s work. The current article was written partly with the intention of supplementing those parts of Frank O’Hara Now which increase our awareness of the extent to which O’Hara was influenced by and continued in directions established by continental European Modernism. But it is also intended to fill a gap in that book, which, like previous studies of New York literature, fails to take into account the significant textual relations between his work and Edwin Denby’s poetry and dance-themed prose.²

Prompted by the elliptical statements in the lines quoted above but above all by the allusions to Denby’s writing which I have found in one particularly significant early example of O’Hara’s “mature” work—the 1956 poem “A Step Away from Them”—this essay offers readings that suggest O’Hara was able to

² For instance, in the highly informative Encyclopedia of the New York School Poets the only references to Denby that deal with the issue of a specific influence on O’Hara occur when we learn that “Denby’s early work has something of the conversational, slangy insouciance of FRANK O’HARA” and that O’Hara viewed Denby’s first volume of poems as “an increasingly important book for the risks it takes in successfully establishing a specifically American spoken diction which has a classical firmness and clarity under his hand” (qtd. in Diggory 241). In his introduction to Denby’s Dance Writings (DW), Robert Cornfield advances the bold but unsubstantiated view that the “Americanness” of Denby’s critical works “made him a guiding figure for the New York poets Frank O’Hara, Anne Waldman, James Schuyler, John Ashbery, and Ron Padgett” (6). Only Mary Maxwell (see below) refers to specific thematic relations between O’Hara’s and Denby’s work, though she, too, chooses not to pursue these relations in any great detail. Perhaps Mark Ford and Trevor Winkfield go furthest in establishing a specific connection between Denby’s work and that of O’Hara when, in an introduction to their selection of Denby’s work in the anthology, The New York Poets II, they write of “an almost metaphysical complexity of thought with a pressing awareness of time and the quotidian” before immediately adding, “Denby’s poetry is both original and compelling, and it had a significant influence on both generations of New York School poets. ‘He sees and hears more clearly than anyone else I have ever known,’ declared Frank O’Hara” (2).
develop the poetic mode with which he is most commonly associated) in part through a revisionary (making and unmaking) engagement with the themes and structures he found in Denby’s work. My particular focus here is these two writers’ intimately converging concern with a theme that appears in “To Edwin Denby” in the line “as time ticks in our ceilings”; which is to say, this essay, only the latest in a long line of critical responses to O’Hara’s writing of time, explores the previously under-appreciated extent to which that writing refers back and sometimes ahead to Denby’s temporal poetic mode. As part of its response to this intertextual situation, my article is also an attempt to make close reading account in new ways for the “deep and lightning feelings” that become an issue for the student of O’Hara’s poetry.

When in 1952 O’Hara, only two years out of Harvard and a year out of a Michigan MA program, met Denby (Maxwell 74), the Chinese-born, independently wealthy writer would have seemed to him one of the more exotic and accomplished figures in a dynamically creative and cosmopolitan phase of New York and America’s cultural history that has been evoked in great detail elsewhere. Denby would probably also have appeared the living embodiment of the pre-war European artistic experimentation that was so crucial to O’Hara’s poetic and professional development and which arises so often as a theme and an influence in his poetry. In the late 1920s Denby had lived in Germany, where he was in contact with Brecht and Weil, wrote in German and tried to stage work by Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson. In 1934 in Basel Denby met his life-long friend, the originally Swiss photographer and filmmaker Rudy Burckhardt. The two men, who were originally lovers, left Europe over the following year for New York, where, except for a holiday now and again, Denby stayed until his suicide (apparently as a response to senility) in 1983. It was in this city that he became an early collector of his friend and neighbor Willem de Kooning’s paintings, that he wrote a libretto for Aaron Copland, and collaborated on many mixed-media projects with Burckhardt; here, too, where, between 1952 and 1953, he was briefly the lover of another future great “New York School” poet, James Schuyler, and where he became one of the most influential American ballet critics of the Cold War era, with long-term stints at Modern Music and the New York Herald Tribune.

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3 See, for example, Perloff, Poet; Ward; and Nelson.
4 See, for example, Perloff, Poet, “A Step”; Lehman; Silverberg; and Gooch’s 1993 biography of O’Hara.
5 Unless stated otherwise, biographical and bibliographical references to Denby in this article derive from Ron Padgett’s Introduction in CP.
6 See Schuyler 283-84.
In a 2010 article on Denby, which emerged in the wake of important general introductions to his work by Ron Padgett and Mary Maxwell, I discussed some of the ways in which Denby’s appreciation of both dance and the street photography of Burckhardt gave Denby imaginative resources with which to explore concepts and experiences of time (Deveson 75). The present essay builds on that article’s discovery in Denby’s dance and poetic writings of a complex phenomenological engagement with temporal experience (especially as it coheres around the unit of the day) which made his work comparable to European street photography as analyzed by Clive Scott, not least in the way that a poetic aspiration to achieve expansive urban “moments” of suspension in the midst of other speeds and temporal configurations becomes expressive of a conflicted liberal and more radical relationship with America’s post-war geo-political expansionism (Deveson 75-76). There are occasions when the argument of the present essay necessitates returning to fill out the context of works by Denby that were alluded to in the earlier article, but because of the different focus here this occurs only when, in the most precise sorts of ways, those works enhance our understanding of the implications of O’Hara’s even more accomplished and dynamically reflective writing of and about time.

**Deep Times**

Any form of literary criticism that establishes as one of its goals the understanding of how the radical literature of the first half of the twentieth century developed into the radical literature of the second half of that century and afterwards is one that has good reason to take into account a review that O’Hara wrote in 1957 of a recently published book of sonnets by Denby. The review is of particular interest for its suggestive probing of a temporal theme in Denby’s book which O’Hara introduces by means of the following observation:

*Mediterranean Cities* follows a Proustian progression of sensation, reflection, awareness, spontaneous memory and apotheosis, a progression which proceeds from the signal absorption in locale (“place names”) and its accidental characteristics to the emergence of the poet’s being from his feeling in “the place.” The poet himself eventually is the place. (*CP* 179)
O’Hara returns to the time theme later in his review, noting an interplay in Denby’s volume between the “historical and personal” (179), through which, we are to infer, “the ambiguous nature of temporality [is] made clear by the timeless exertion of consciousness” (180-81).

As has been previously suggested in passing, O’Hara’s language clearly gestures—despite what may be its philosophical imprecision—toward the philosophy of Henri Bergson (Deveson 75). To be more precise about the matter, in the 1950s context of High Modernism’s continuing reception, O’Hara’s language alludes to the specific application that Proust was known to have made in A la recherche du temps perdu of Bergson’s concept of “Pure or Real Duration.” This is the radical heterogeneity of time that Bergson believed becomes available to immediate consciousness before the delimiting, spatializing effects of reflection and language. Bergson glossed this pre-reflective time further as “the form taken by the succession of our inner states of consciousness when our self [notre moi] lets itself live, when it abstains from establishing a separation between the present state and anterior states” (Bergson 74-75). It is a strand of thinking about time that Tim Armstrong, in explaining the influence of Bergson on Modernism, encapsulates thus—“Human time is always a rolling accumulation of traces of previous time, taken up into the body and bound up with intentions directed at the future” (13).

Like many statements by one writer about another writer’s work, O’Hara’s allusion to Proust tells us as much about his own practice as it does about Denby. “[A] Proustian progression of sensation, reflection, awareness, spontaneous memory and apotheosis” functions very successfully as a description of some of O’Hara’s most famous poems in which, as we shall see, a sense of a poet’s being does indeed arise from his feeling in spatial as well as temporal aspects of “the place.” But for an even fuller sense of what may be designated “Proustian” in O’Hara’s work it will be helpful to recall how Walter Benjamin and others after him have responded to Proust’s Bergsonian temporal structures. For Benjamin, Proust’s demonstrations of the triggering of mémoire involontaire by the chance event confronted with voluntary memory (“On Some Motifs” 315) felicitously revealed the continuity between past and present that is a basis for real experience (Erfahrung); they do so by expressing a “cushioned” (318) version of the destabilizing and unconscious experience of shock “instants” (Erlebnis) that are a feature of industrialized modern daily life and which recur in general, outside of art, as the most traumatic types of memory. In this way, Proust remains exceptionally faithful to some self-revealing aspects of Bergson’s philosophy which, in its attempt to “reject any historical determination of memory,” shut out the “alienating blinding
experience of the age of large-scale industrialism” and thus made possible the perception of “a complementary experience—in the form of its spontaneous afterimage, as it were” (314). In their cushioning or redirection of harsh industrial reality, therefore, Benjamin suggests, Bergson (indirectly) and Proust (more directly and also more critically) “furnished a clue” to the privileged and fundamentally exploitative bourgeois experience “which presented itself undistorted to Baudelaire’s eyes, in the figure of the reader” (314).

For critics writing in Benjamin’s wake, his description of the relations between the Proustian kind of Erlebnis and Erfahrung have presented them with a historically sensitive way of giving expression to temporal aspects of bourgeois aesthetic experience. In Scott’s multi-temporal account of the genre of street photography—as relevant to O’Hara as it is to Denby—the connoisseur, or, rather, flâneur, of the street photograph assumes a role much like that of the implied authorial reader of Proust, hidden by the temporally and generically promiscuous text to explore, like Marcel, the interior flow of her own contiguous “perceptual autobiography” (Scott 15) and so, we might add, to participate in an intertextual version of what Paul de Man, following Georges Poulet, called in this context “the play between a prospective and retrospective movement” (de Man 57). This privileged “inner” exploration is possible, Scott argues, because of the way in which street photographs manage to persuade us, as Ezra Pound’s famous Imagist poem “In a Station of the Metro” apparently also does, that its primary materials, Erlebnis, may be transformed into expandable “moments,” which are those perceptual experiences that are actively lived or have been digested over time by us and in relation to “other, adjacent moments” (Scott 43) as part of “our developing inwardness” (i.e., our Erfahrung) (44).

In a way that reflects their shared modernist background, Scott’s language here is in fact accidentally very redolent of some key passages in Denby’s dance writings, which, as we shall see are sometimes as textually involved with O’Hara’s work as certain poems of his are.7 In Denby’s semi-utopian account of ballet spectatorship, instead of the everyday modern American experience of alienation

7 Bergson, in his meditation on the phenomenological insights offered by the dancer, calls this figure “the very essence of superior grace,” wherein “we think we discern an indication of a virtual sympathy, directed toward us, which is always on the verge of offering itself to us” with the effect that “the intensities of esthetic feeling . . . amount to a variety of feelings” (11-13)—a formulation which Suzanne Guerlac helpfully glosses thus: “The dancer figures the change or movement, characterized by multiplicity and flow, which is specific to inner, qualitative experience in general, and figures qualitative change, differences in kind as movement through time”; “The movement of the dancer lets us see the reality of flowing time” (48-50).
from her fellow citizens the dance viewer experiences a “particular moment” (DW 550) based on an “enlarged view” (549) in which her “irrational convictions” seem to be understood (550). It is a “moment” he describes as “being made drunk for a second by seeing something happen” (550), and he also writes of a form of “lucidity” in which “one responds in the moment to the effortless sense of completion and freedom that its spaciousness gives one” (570).

O’Hara’s expressed his enthusiasms for the temporal focus in Denby’s dance writings in an introduction to the 1965 collection of Denby’s prose writings entitled Dancers, Buildings and People in the Streets. O’Hara once again seize[s] on the temporal theme in his friend’s work, this time foregrounding his reception of it by positioning it at the climactic and adulatory ending of the piece:

Much of his prose is involved with the delineation of sensibility in its experience of time: What happens, and how often, if at all? What does each second mean, and how is the span of attention used to make it a longer or shorter experience? Is Time in itself beautiful, or is its quality merely decorable or decorous? Somehow, he gives an equation in which attention equals Life, or is its only evidence, and this in turn gives each essay, whatever the occasional nature of its subject, a larger applicability we seldom find elsewhere in contemporary criticism. (DW 576)

The “larger applicability” of the questioning attentiveness to the temporal aspects of existence, which Denby’s writing so often manifests and which even in this paratext O’Hara memorably appropriates, is something we shall very soon have the opportunity to consider.

**Two Lunch-Hours**

The continuities between Denby’s dance writings and his poetry are apparent in “Elegy—The Streets,” a long poem from Denby’s first collection, In Public, In Private (1948). It is also a poem which suggests that, while intertextual disclosures of Denby’s writings are very far from being the only kinds of memory or “inwardness” in the disjunctive poetic storytelling of “A Step Away from Them,” they represent a more significant element of that poem’s structure than has previously been realized. Having stated that he had been rereading the earlier collection, O’Hara in his review of Mediterranean Cities called “Elegy” a
“remarkable city-poem” (CP 179), and anyone reading it who is familiar with O’Hara will immediately be struck by the way its diaristic recreation of a bustling New York City anticipates elements of his work, not least in the way that it invites the reader to experience the memory of bodies on the streets in terms of choreographed dance movement. On the other hand, the poem manifests a thematic concern with the poet’s bourgeois alienation from “the place” which in O’Hara’s poetry usually remains at a latent or less obviously discursive level of narration.

In a manner that anticipates at the discursive level what Perloff noted at the syntactical level in O’Hara’s poetry, “Elegy” registers a series of “temporal dissolves” (Perloff, Poet 134), starting with “the day’s pleasant thrust”—the day is also described as “Deforming in detail”—from a lunch-hour of unwittingly balletic crowds (“They press up close at crossings, dart at cars, / Some stop, some change direction, and their faces / Display unconsciousness, like movie stars”) to the “summer blaze” of an afternoon (CP 14). After this, a no less explicit temporal disjunction announces, not a little shrilly, a somewhat Eliotic or even James Thomson-like condition of isolation:

But in the night, in an avenue’s immenseness
Emptyed by winter wind and bestial sleep,
I like a dog alone then scan defenceless
The girder-trussed constructions near which I creep. (14)

The feeling of loneliness these skyscrapers induce is presented in explicitly temporal terms that are shown to be those of an individualistic bourgeois capitalism when the speaker declares, “As time one man can own, they isolate / For property is private during the night” (14-15). The crucial turn occurs, however, when the speaker responds to his own statement, “The fears a man has by himself are grand / Who peers about him where the buildings stand,” with the accusatory line, “Grandeur that fakes the scale of my displeasure, / I who, one citizen, came for a stroll” (15). Finally, it seems, this poem will not underwrite a modern American sublime based on industrialized power by wholly endorsing the melancholy (lyrical) individualism of the buildings that power creates to beautify itself. The poet must confront his privileged (and therefore participatory) relation to the metropolis as the bathetic cause of his pathetic partial detachment: he is the haughty stroller brought back down to the level of the street and the working day, although his job is still the one referred to in the poem’s final line: “I go back to my room and tie it down in verse” (15).
Any criticism concerned with describing the complicatedly involved and ambivalent nature of O’Hara’s engagement with American globalized capitalism needs to take account of “A Step Way from Them,” which Ward calls his “first incontrovertibly major poem” (70) and which is of special importance in this context for the extraordinary manner in which it extends Denby’s already temporally rich, ballet-influenced mode of apprehending street life. Written on August 16, 1956—the year before O’Hara’s review of Denby’s poems—it is a poem that places a special narrative emphasis on the precise sequence of everyday events. Its flâneurist perambulations open with a clear (but generally ignored) allusion to Denby’s “Elegy”:

It’s my lunch hour, so I go
for a walk among the hum-colored
 cabs. First down the sidewalk
 where laborers feed their dirty
glistening torsos sandwiches
and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets
on. They protect them from falling
bricks, I guess. Then onto the
 avenue where skirts are flipping
 above heels and blow up over
 grate. The sun is hot, but the
cabs stir up the air. I look
 at bargains in wristwatches. There
 are cats playing in sawdust. (O’Hara, Collected Poems 257)

In Denby’s rather statelier “lunch-hour” (CP 14) poem the “taxis” (not “cabs”) are “foolish” (13) rather than synaesthetically “hum-colored” and we find “glittering glass and signs” (14) instead of “glistening torsos”—which would appear to suggest that a very deliberate eroticisation, modernization, and further Americanization of Denby’s Baudelairean scene was going on O’Hara’s part, were it not for the sense his poem also engenders of a vaguer, even unconscious, relationship with his older friend’s work. For the “cats playing” may enclose a memory of the “fur-faced pets” of “Elegy”, in which animals, a little in the manner of a subdued matinee crowd, “crouch at the side and stare / Till this one afternoon’s one turn is done” (13) or they may refer to another Denby poem, “A Domestic Cat,” with its even more explicitly temporal phenomenological thematizing of feline
bodily presence: “Graceful as the whole sky, which time goes through, / Through going time she wonders” (57). That is a poem which also includes the statement, “We live through time” (57). It may be a little fanciful to suggest that “but the / cabs stir up the air” encloses a faint memory of the elliptical line, “I see it in the air up between the street,” from the tonally proto-O’Haran opening poem of In Public, In Private, “The Climate.” In any case, the author of those snatches is explicitly named a little later on in the poem after a climax of sensory temporal specificity that leaves Denby’s elegy looking like the menu to O’Hara’s easily-taken meal:

On
to Times Square, where the sign
blows smoke over my head, and higher
the waterfall pours lightly. A
Negro stands in a doorway with a
toothpick, languorously agitating.
A blonde chorus girls clicks: he
smiles and rubs his chin. Everything
suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of
a Thursday.
Neon in daylight is a
great pleasure, as Edwin Denby would
write, as are light bulbs in daylight.
I stop for a cheeseburger at JULIET’S
CORNER. (O’Hara, Collected Poems 257-58)

“[T]he poem’s specific allusion to Denby is certainly not coincidental,” as Maxwell puts it in a section of her essay which mainly points out the prosodic differences between Denby’s flâneurist poems and “A Step Away from Them” (71). In fact, the mentioning of Denby the dance critic in connection with the “chorus girl” draws attention to some very specific correspondences between the poem and some of Denby’s work. For anyone who has read Denby’s dance criticism, O’Hara’s allusive salute has the effect of marking out a specific sort of exoticism that, in O’Hara’s poem, first emerges in the mentioning of a “languorously agitating” “Negro.” As the poem continues, that reference is gathered up into a larger multi-racial erotic pictorialism that returns to some of the imagery of Denby’s 1954 essay, “Dancers, Buildings and People in the Streets,” the title essay of the collection for which O’Hara supplied the introduction. It is an essay that
combines admirable phenomenological attentiveness toward the way bodies move through space and time with a tendency toward generalizations about ethnic and cultural difference that has its origins in his poetic travel writing and which overlaps in some unsettling ways with post-war American hegemony. Here is Denby exemplifying what he calls “Dancing in daily life” (DW 553)—a category he later distinguishes from the experience of seeing art but one which at this point in the essay seems sufficiently close to the aesthete’s elision of artifice and nature to justify the associative linking of his name with those “light bulbs in daylight”:

Dancing in daily life is also seeing the pretty movements and gestures people make. In the Caribbean, for instance, the walk of Negroes is often, well, miraculous—both the feminine stroll and the masculine one, each entirely different . . . However, if you were observant, and you ought to be as dance majors,8 you would have long ago enjoyed the many kinds of walking you can see right in this city, boys and girls, Negro and white, Puerto Rican . . . and shoppers at Macy’s.

( DW 553-54)

And these are the penultimate and final stanzas of “A Step Away From Them”:

There are several Puerto
Ricans on the avenue today, which
makes it beautiful and warm. First
Bunny died, then John Latouche,
then Jackson Pollock. But is the
earth as full as life was full, of them?
And one has eaten and one walks,
past the magazines with nudes
and the posters for BULLFIGHT and
the Manhattan Storage Warehouse,
which they’ll soon tear down. I
used to think they had the Armory
Show there.

A glass of papaya juice
and back to work. My heart is in my

8 "This essay was prepared [in 1954] as a lecture to dance students at the Juilliard School but was never delivered. Denby was notoriously shy about public speaking” (DW 548).
Reading O’Hara’s poetry through Denby’s writing helps us to see more clearly the early twentieth-century primitivist roots of O’Hara’s, as it were, domestic travel writing and thus also his own complicity with the expansive power of the post-war American economic-military complex. As the dance historian Gay Morris has shown, Denby celebrated George Balanchine’s “dance of pure movement” with the New York City company (169) in opposition to the more representational and supposedly “rationalist” mode of the Paris Opéra and Moscow Bolshoi in a way that led him to “position American high-art dance within an international vanguard . . . when the US was emerging as a world leader with an eye to dominating art as well as other spheres of influence” (168). When Denby writes of what he elsewhere calls the “inherently American and internationally valid” (DW 514) New York City company’s “on-top-of-the-beat dancing,” “special pressure of pulse” (466) “high-tension stamina” (467) and “lucidity” maintained at “high speed” (466) his comments demand to be read in the context both of America’s vastly superior production output compared to European levels and a general association of modernity with a speeded-up temporality. Denby’s Modernist concerns in some ways retrieve the Futurists’ glorification of the velocities of the machine as well as a more specifically American lived consciousness of time arising from what the trans-national writer Eva Hoffman has ambivalently called that country’s “perpetually renewing newness” and its societal and individual expectations of “imposing control on time’s shaping” (7). Denby’s notion of the passive nature of non-American dance movement in time is captured most memorably and troublingly in his work when he declares, “So one doesn’t see the New York City company dragged by a score’s momentum, with opulent, swooning eyes and arms like a raped Europa” (DW 467).

The terms of Denby’s identification with Balanchine recur in O’Hara’s intense engagement in his prose writings with the “brilliant, clear, incisive . . . brightness and . . . linear speed” of Cathedral (1947) by the Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock (Art Chronicles 29), who is memorialized in the lines quoted above along with O’Hara’s other recently deceased friends, the writer, editor and, for a time, burlesque dancer Violet R. (Bunny) Lang and the songwriter John La Touche.9 In “A Step Away from Them” he follows Denby’s prose in portraying

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9 “For their part, the first generation of New York School poets drew vital inspiration from ‘the cresting of the “heroic” period of Abstract Expressionism,’ as JOHN ASHBERERY called it” (Diggory 2). Diggory quotes O’Hara explaining the connection between his Mayakovsky-derived
non-American bodies as inefficiently mobile in their sexuality ("agitating") and follows Denby’s “Elegy” in its delighted presentation of faces that “Display unconsciousness, like movie stars.” The contrast between the perceived street scene and his own expertly gliding and noticing white American subject-body could hardly be greater: he seems to see the world in a lunch-hour. In fact, it is in O’Hara’s poem’s bravura depiction of the intimate way in which the possibility of lucid perception is related to a body’s freedom to move rapidly through time and space that it seems most reflective about the nature of global and economic inequalities and also potentially most complicit with that imbalanced condition.

The extent of such complicity is very much at issue in the essay of Rod Mengham’s included in Frank O’Hara Now, where he suggests that O’Hara’s primitivism—or “internationalism,” as he calls it—is motivated by the wider phenomenon of consumerism:

Everything is available in New York, everything is seemingly offering itself up for the poet to write about, not because of American cultural superiority, but because of American economic superiority. The poet’s ability to sample other cultures is of a piece with his readiness to investigate bargains in wristwatches. . . . (57)

The real meaning of each (digitalized) second, O’Hara’s responsive poem might be thought to be telling Denby’s writings, is the money I make when I go “back to work,” not “back to my room,” as in Denby’s elegy—the money with which I get to use up whatever takes my fancy in my leisure time. Therefore, the “equation in which attention equals Life” (which of course O’Hara had not yet formulated, publicly at least, in 1956) applies to O’Hara’s poem, we might conclude, especially if the Germanically capitalized “Life” be thought of in terms of a Faustian temporality of permanent striving for the possession of the self’s extending experience or if “attention” be imagined to denote a specular acquisitiveness.

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*technique in Second Avenue* and de Kooning: like him, those European forbears produced “works as big as cities” (2). The precise relations between what Diggory calls the abstract expressionists’ and, by extension, O’Hara’s, “expansive scale” and the politically expansive ambitions of the organizations that promoted them—which included the CIA—have only recently begun to receive sufficient attention by cultural historians of the era. For an insightful and critical overview of the literature on the dealings between post-war artists and American expansionism, see Kodat.
Silent Ground

In fact, Mengham’s reading turns away from the picture it briefly presents of O’Hara’s complicity with the financial center on whose streets the poet’s projected persona takes his pleasure: the poem’s very last word, the name of the French poet, “Reverdy,” is, Mengham argues, a “specifically un-American pivot” around which the many other references to French culture in O’Hara’s poetry run (58). Crucial in the context of this rejection of modern America, Mengham suggests, is the last line’s playful allusion to the phrase “wearing one’s heart on one’s sleeve,” which makes it possible for this parting shot to “set the final seal on O’Hara’s refusal of spurious depth, on his blockage of confessionalism” by parodying and frustrating “a contemporaneous American register of psychological profundity” (58).

Despite the apparent absoluteness of Mengham’s sense of a “final seal,” his annotations fruitfully emphasize the complex and ambivalent relationship between American society and the affective intensities of O’Hara’s work. We are already beginning to see how O’Hara’s intertextual engagement with Denby allows us to think in terms of a developing and individuated presence of inter-involved memories that corresponds to Benjamin’s concept of Erfahrung, especially as that term is interpreted by Scott; Andrea Brady’s brilliantly persuasive essay in Frank O’Hara Now invites us to think about other ways in which subjective “depth” or “innerness” might not always be spurious concepts to apply to O’Hara’s poetry. Like Mengham, she takes account of O’Hara’s stated resistance to post-Freudian American attempts to define individuals’ underlying psychological motivations, but her analysis of O’Hara’s avant-garde early poem, “Second Avenue” (1953) is one that, when it is taken together with a consideration of other texts, including once again some of Denby’s dance writings, allows us to read “A Step Away from Them” and other “mature” O’Hara poems in ways that put serious pressure on Mengham’s robustly anti-depth reading and further complicate that poem’s cultural and political implications. Brady’s argument is that “Second Avenue” and its paratexts’ “rejection of the analytic perspective becomes a compositional principle designed to protect the autonomy and ‘anti-objective impulses’ of the poet” (62). That poem’s straining “to keep up its presentness, as if anything drawn from the past has already fallen prey to the classificatory [psychoanalytic] sickness of memory” (64) is, she suggests, O’Hara’s method of not only avoiding boredom (67) but also claiming back “the textual revelations of the unconscious which his associative technique liberates” (65). In other words, he will do “depth,” but on his own terms.
The relevance of Brady’s approach to O’Hara’s later, less associative work requires substantiation. As it happens, the idea of a particular sort of temporal perception being maintained in order to protect the psyche from externally imposed revelation is one on which O’Hara reflects with a degree of explicitness in “Joe’s Jacket,” one of several day-structured poetic masterpieces that he wrote in August 1959. The reflection occurs when the autobiographical speaker is recounting returning home to O’Hara’s long-term partner (the eponymous Joe) after what appears to have been some sort of betrayal of that person on O’Hara’s part.10

Joe is still up and we talk
only of the immediate present and its indiscriminately hitched-to past
the feeling of life and incident pouring over the sleeping city
which seem to be bathed in an unobtrusive light which lends things
coherence and an absolute, for just that time as four o’clock goes by
(O’Hara, Collected Poems 330)

In this poem, a focus on instant-by-instant particulars such as the speaker’s wearing of Joe’s jacket, which the speaker tells us as “all enormity and life” has “protected me and kept me here on / many occasions as a symbol dies” (O’Hara, Collected Poems 330), becomes part of an acutely self-reflexive portrait of morally compromised evasiveness “when the heart is full and risks no speech” (330). O’Hara also parodically invokes Wordsworthian (“I was some sort of cloud . . .” [329]) and Proustian (“I am there with Haussmann and the rue de Rivoli . . .” [330]) remembrance to restage the exuberantly self-fictionalizing attempt to escape past and future responsibilities apparently involved in this particular act of betrayal or

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10 This interpretation is based on a possibly over-sensitive response to the repeated line “now I will say it, thank god, I knew you would” (O’Hara, Collected Poems 329-30), which for me at least evokes (from different perspectives in time) an anticipated and finally materialized decision on the part of O’Hara and “Vincent” to leave (albeit temporarily) the main scene of the party together. When it repeats the line is followed by the double jump-cut of “and the rain has commenced its delicate lament over the orchards / an enormous window morning and the wind, the beautiful desperation of a tree” (330), which might be thought to function as a psychologically suggestive parody of a Hollywood film’s coy “morning-after” treatment of sexuality. It may be wiser, though, to decide instead that the prospective and retrospective dartings of this poem disclose and conceal the fact that something has happened which makes it difficult for O’Hara to communicate to Joe the fullness of his recent life. As Perloff puts it, “It was the summer he met and fell in love with Vincent Warren”: “This is the background of the poem which . . . alludes obliquely to the complex set of relationships between Frank, Vincent, and Joe” (Poet 148).
diminishing of Joe.\footnote{This reading of the poem borrows from and, in a minor way, extends the argument of Ward, who draws on Paul de Man’s essay, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” to show how Romantic (symbolic) attempts on the part of the speaking voice in poems by O’Hara and Schuyler to banish a sense of death are undone by the (allegorical, ironic and deconstructive) “unveiling of an authentically temporal destiny” (Ward 27). My reading of “Joe’s Jacket” suggests that what this highly ethical poem unveils is, among other things, its speaker’s attempts to banish the disquieting reality of inter-related, multiple temporalities by means of another (purposively limited) experience of time.} The satirical awareness of this poem might appear of an order potentially to destabilize a poem such as “A Step Away from Them,” where the distracting “feeling of life and incident pouring over” is accumulated without explicit self-critique. In fact, the experience “Joe’s Jacket” unfolds, with sober tenderness as well as buoyant deprecation, of attempts to stay present—“to be recent and strong,” as he says of the fashionable party guests, including himself (329)—makes it possible to attend all the more sensitively to the slightly earlier poem’s performative reconstruction of what Virginia Woolf, in The Common Reader (1925), rather disingenuously called “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day” (Kolocotroni 397).

Like many poems that O’Hara wrote around this time, “A Step Away from Them” is a poem that only really begins after we have first finished reading it. Keston Sutherland’s discovery, mentioned in a footnote in his contribution to Frank O’Hara Now, that no book entitled Poems by Pierre Reverdy existed in 1956 (126), should make us especially conscious not only of the fact that the poem’s ending denies readers desirous of authentic self-revelation their satisfying climax (as Mengham argues) but also of what is highly purposive, artful, even theatrical, in this very act of non-revelation. That a poem apparently so fixated on material and corporeal particulars has suddenly left us at an enigmatic point of entry into the imaginary, our further progress blocked by a silence, is a cause for readerly speculation and even suspicion. The teasing lines lead us to read back (and forth) across the apparently lucid poem for where such banished things as an enduring affective intensity and desire—the all-too-gracefully denied “heart”—might actually be, and this is when we perhaps begin to notice the other meaningful silences.

There are in fact several moments of silence or non-saying in the midst of the lines leading up to that ending, beginning from “There are several Puerto / Ricans on the avenue today, which. . . .” The silence can be felt most acutely in the line, “And one has eaten and one walks,” which follows what is already the partial stillness, or coming-to-stillness, in the previous sentence, “But is the earth as full as
life was full, of them”—a self-consciously rhetorical lamentation provoked by the roll-call for O’Hara’s dead friends given in the chronology of their dying: “First Bunny died, then John Latouche, / then Jackson Pollock.” The silence and stillness in and around these lines were probably hard to detect on initial readings of the poem because the O’Hara voice keeps talking and his body—his suddenly now-fed body—is clearly meant to have been walking throughout, except when it was eating. He is apparently stepping away from them, from this thought of them. But in fact, it is precisely because his body has been moving that we are eventually made to become aware of a silence in which the most intimately subjective aspect of his embodied subjectivity, including what it might mean for him to lose his friends, becomes an issue for us and yet is inaccessible to us, protected from us by the flow of data that also marks out its presence. David Herd, in his essay for the Frank O’Hara Now volume, proposes a reading of this poem “as a spatial event” initiated by a sense that the deaths of O’Hara’s artist friends have rendered the “space of the living drastically diminished” (82). This rings true. But attending to the leap forward in time figured in the present perfect tense of “And one has eaten,” followed by the partial resumption of commentary in the initially somewhat abstract “and one walks” as this condition passes, after a temporally disjunctive comma and line-break, into the more concretised form of the next scene (“past the magazine with nudes”) causes us to become aware, above all, of the fully temporalized way in which O’Hara allows the projected thinking of the dead to expand as a moment in reading consciousness.

That the virtual thought of these friends (whom we cannot know as they were known to him) can be felt to permeate the street in the time of the street is partly the result of the disjunctive grammar that introduces the fact of their deaths. The repetition in the past simple tense of the first stanza’s present simple “First . . . / Then . . .” structure here creates a kind of major-minor dissonance that allows the elegiac thinking to endure or resonate, as it were, through the subsequent sequential narration of the poem, even as, or especially when, it comes into contact with the temporality of beauty and warmth radiating from the exoticized Puerto Ricans, without its losing its distinctive shape as a remembering of earthly loss. There is a sense in which the (unconscious) thought of the dead is permitted to color the rest of the experienced lunch-break: such a thought or thinking certainly may be present in the collage of sex and violence created by the proximate sightings of nude magazines and a film poster (we can be put in mind of Bunny Lang’s brief burlesque career as well as the “violence” O’Hara suggested Pollock had been able to transmute in to “a powerful personal lyricism” [Art Chronicles 35]). A vague
feeling of specific death lingers, too, with the O’Hara figure’s proleptic memorial for the Manhattan Storage Warehouse and for his own wandering misconceptions about it, which read as an intentionally downplaying and cushioning version of what, in his reading of Pollock’s “heroic” Blue Poles (1953), he calls “painfully beautiful celebrations of what will disappear, or has disappeared already, from this world, of what may be destroyed at any moment” (Art Chronicles 27).

The temporal aspect of this self-protecting elegiac coloring becomes even clearer when we take into account the way O’Hara’s paratactic memorializing remembers and rewrites the second verse of Denby’s more smoothly hypotactic “Elegy,” where the solitary poet-walker sees himself doing, in essence, “what dead poets did to ease their pain”: “Like them I walk, but now walk streets instead” (CP 13)—a line that, tellingly for the relation it bears to O’Hara’s less nackedly emotional perambulations, is followed by the silent thinking space of a stanza-break. It may also be significant in the context of this self-concealing, self-revealing handheld view of New York that the Balanchine-esque “brightness and . . . linear speed” O’Hara found in Pollock’s Cathedral “protect and signify, like the façade of a religious edifice, or, in another context, the mirror in the belly of an African fetish, the mysterious importance of its interior meaning” (Art Chronicles 29). Thus, it is with a very high degree of historical and personal temporal texturing indeed that the apparently random or spatial perceptual events of O’Hara’s stroll take on the expanded form of those adjacent, mutually reinforcing “moments” within what Scott calls “our developing inwardness” and Benjamin called Erfahrung.

Retrospective and Progressive?

When we reach again, on this subsequent “inner” reading, the papaya-sweetened pill of “back to work” we become newly aware of the relationship between those captured instants from which “moments” grow and the digitalized public clock-times of the American working day (“it is 12:40 of / a Thursday”). For they can both be seen, in Scott’s Bergson-derived terms, as the homogeneously temporal (that is, abstract, spatial) features of the efficiently productive city that may incite a particularized bodily subjectivity to make a contrasting but inclusive move in the direction of its own more mysteriously personal, free-flowing and indeed often unconscious experience of time. Herd makes a similar point in relation to this very poem—but, while in Scott’s account of the Proustian viewing of street photographic viewing the inner durative manipulation of the given external materials is associated with a liberal politics of toleration and self-delighting
jouissance, Herd suggests that a more politically radical act is involved in O’Hara’s perceptual departures:

Against these temporal, and inevitably capitalistic, drivers O’Hara places the step: light and graceful, poised and human; incremental, which means that nothing is taken for granted; “undulating,” which means that in the step’s conduct there is relatedness to perception; creative, in that, in the step away, just sufficient distance for imaginative reconstruction to open up. (85)

This thinking about the imaginative movement of O’Hara’s poetry in terms of a graceful step, sanctioned at the very least of course by poem’s title, keeps in view the neo-classical world of Denby’s modernist ballet. For an even fuller sense of the political ambivalence and ambiguity constituting O’Hara’s temporal poetics we can turn to Denby’s most important piece of dance writing, “Three Sides of ‘Agon,’” which Cornfield reports O’Hara’s having roused Denby into finishing “for a 1959 Evergreen Review” (DW 31). The essay is Denby’s prose-poetic attempt to recreate the experienced particularities of Balanchine’s choreography and Stravinsky’s twelve-tone score. Denby quotes O’Hara in this work,12 and we also seem to see his influence—though we may be responding to temporal images that passed between the two writers many years earlier—in one particularly urbanized passage in which Denby writes, “a fanfare begins, like cars honking a block a way” (DW 460) and “Suddenly the music makes a two-beat cadence and stops” (DW 461), which elongates the phrase “Everything suddenly honks” from “A Step Away from Them,” written a year before Agon’s staging in 1957.

The Agon essay ends, in time with the ballet, with a transcendent perceptual experience as symbolic and iconic as it is concrete and apparently aleatory (to borrow some of Scott’s street photographic temporalities): “Against an enormous background one sees detached for an instant the hidden grace of the dancer’s individual move, a chance event that passes with a small smile and a musical sound forever into nowhere” (DW 465). What the “chance event” passes from—and which thus makes this ending comparable to the graceful teasing out of thought of O’Hara’s ostensibly mock-transcendent ending—is, as in Denby’s earlier dance writings, a sense of the streets, the speed and even the military aggression of the modern America whose dancers are giving the Europeans such a good run for their money: “Meanwhile the boys’ steps have been exploding like pistol shots”; “no

12 “The subject of Agon, as the poet Frank O’Hara said, is pride” (DW 463).
lack of aggressiveness” (460); “you won’t catch anyone onstage looking either French or Greek” (464); “The emotion is that of scale” (465).

What matters, above all, for our sense of the enigmatic silent smile of O’Hara’s poem’s fading lines is the similarity between Denby’s evocation of Balanchine’s scene and those 1940s poems of his that linger over the momentarily transcendent or redemptive intimate gesture noticed in the “oceanic,” “vast,” “wide” and “vacant” cosmic “waste” of the financial metropolis, as it is variously evoked. In several of these poems Denby allows magnitude and subjective intimacy to appear reconciled to each other and in a way that posits modern America in its power as the ultimately benign production site of Erfahrung. The phenomenon can be observed in “A New York Face,” which says of that city’s bridges and related forms, “In echoing darkness their dimensions become sleep,” before concluding, “New York faces have a structure wide as this / Undisturbed by subway or by secret kiss” (CP 7). Such bourgeois reconciliation, as we might call it—the reconciliation of the intimate human feature, and even the unconscious or “inner” life, to what becomes the “gigantic delicacy” of New York (CP 7)—is present again in the parenthetical close of a poem written as a response to a Burckhardt photograph which, we are told, “makes a sign in an American field, / The field of lettering, which reaches each way / Out to the section-line and does not yield” (CP 82). The parentheses create an internalized, belated and even symbolically atemporal effect: “(In the mind, though, this enormous intersection / Moves about like in water a reflection)” (CP 82). The self-conscious refusal of sublime enhancement of bourgeois alienation which we saw in that important intertext for “A Step Away from Them,” “Elegy—The Streets,” is, in these parts of Denby’s oeuvre, however briefly, reversed.

In this context we should not fail to observe yet another correspondence between these two writers’ recreations of the temporal nature of experience. Denby’s essay on “Agon” contains several passages which, like the poem on Burkhardt’s photograph, show his sensitivity to the capacity of the strongly apprehended present “moment” to transform a viewer’s sense of a past, making what was previously an unconscious instant now a part of that continually

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13 The third chapter of Swann’s Way may be a source for the temporal associations of desire, metropolitan possibility, unease and bodily particularity in the word “vast” and its cognates: Marcel recalls how the “perpetual tension” resulting from his uncertainty as to whether Gilberte would be early or late on any particular day “succeeded in making more thrilling not only the entire Champs-Elysées and the whole span of the afternoon, like a vast expanse of space and time on every point and at every moment of which it was possible that Gilberte’s form might appear, but also that form itself. . .” (Proust 488).
expanding moment of “attention” and making language attest to—and perhaps construct—a picture of the mind as the multi-temporal site of transformation. Such passages include his noticing of how during a stillness “the accumulated momentum of the piece leaps forward in one’s imagination, suddenly enormous,” of how “The drive of it now seems not to have let up for a moment since the curtain arose” (DW 463) and, from earlier in the essay, “While you have been dreaming, the same dance of the twelve dancers has been going on and on” (DW 461). Denby’s probing of “anamorphic” effects, as I have called them (Deveson 76), can be usefully compared to O’Hara’s own appropriation of modern dance in “A Step Away from Them,” where the affective status of the accumulated data is modified retrospectively when we reach the final few lines’ graceful moment of release. Reading that ending in the manner of Mengham and Herd, whose essay invokes Heidegger, we might decide O’Hara completes his rejection of public and capitalist temporality, thus aligning himself with the Modernists Lawrence and Eliot, who in Women in Love and Four Quartets respectively had also imagined a means of release from mechanized time. But when we focus our attention on the proximity of Balanchine’s “drive” to the American economic and military productivity that in many ways made Denby’s and O’Hara’s Bohemian and professional lives possible, as well as Benjamin’s caustic responses to Bergson’s essentially bourgeois conception of temporal freedom, we are perhaps more inclined to consider what is self-revealing in the silence after “Reverdy.” Has O’Hara not partly made his peace with a society that allows him this self-delighting and self-cohering memorial time-within-time? And does he not therefore allow us to hear and even enjoy what is historical and contentiously political in that playfully atemporal silent time?

From a literary historical perspective it is perhaps interesting that the sense of retrospective revelation, and the sense, too, of an ending in which New York becomes a “gigantic delicacy,” are felt with particular distinctness in “The Day Lady Died,” which O’Hara wrote in 1959, the same year Denby finally published his Agon essay. In this extremely famous poem, the apparently shocking realization, conveyed in the movement over the symbolic and spatial border between

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14 It was a manifestation of America’s affluence—the 1944 GI Bill—that enabled O’Hara, as well as his fellow “New York School” poet, Kenneth Koch, to go to Harvard. By the time of his death in 1965 he had attained the position of Associate Curator of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and had recently said, in an interview with Edward Lucie-Smith: “But the excitement in America, you see, is that finally there is, there are, some people who have enough money, who are able to travel to places which Europeans were always able to travel to” (O’Hara, Standing 16).
penultimate and final stanza—and amplified by unexpected shifts in tense from the simple to the progressive present—that *Billie Holiday is dead* retrospectively casts an urgent sense of finitude on the daily acts of flâneurie and consumption that the poem has recounted up to this point, giving them the narrative definition and purpose of a particularly revealing witness statement:

I just stroll into the PARK LANE
Liquor Store and ask for a bottle of Strega and
then I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue
and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and
casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
leaning on the john floor in the 5 SPOT
while she whispered a song along the keyboard
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing
(O’Hara, *Collected Poems* 325)

If as readers we feel the very final line’s sudden unpunctuated movement as one leading into a suspended temporal condition of some “depth,” this must be in part a reflection of the way its gathering silence allows us, in a distinctly non-linear way, to conjure both an evacuation and a revolving plenitude of the time- and place-specific day’s events—a “feeling of life and incident pouring over” that seems to appear and disappear in a heterogeneous totality. Capitalization, proper noun brand names, and an almost perversely long and seamless accumulation of paratactically enunciated neutral events clarify our sense of what is held in ambivalently glamorous suspension at the levitating relief from speech here.

**The Luxury of Multi-Temporality**

It would be a mistake to suggest that multi-temporal structures of progression and apotheosis in “A Step Away from Them” and “The Day Lady Died” are strictly defined by their affinities with some of Denby’s writings, or that O’Hara’s parodic refusal of transcendence at his ending collapses completely into straightforward

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15 In the Tang Dynasty poet Wang Wei’s terms, we are, perhaps, invited to hear a “noise in the midst of solitude” that complements a “solitude in the midst of noise” (Jullien 107).
bourgeois sublimity through such intertextual contagion. What we are confronting here, rather, is a politically fluid set of temporal figurations passing between the two poets’ differentiated oeuvres. As I have previously suggested, and as “Elegy—The Streets” reminds us, Denby’s relationship with the economic center is already often an ambivalent and critical one (Deveson 75-76). O’Hara’s poetry of the modern American urban street may be thought to deliver in a newly intensified form what Benjamin called a *dialectical image*, “wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation”—“not progression but image, suddenly emergent” (*The Arcades Project* 462). The characteristic dialectical image of O’Hara’s poetics can be described thus: It provides us with a utopian sense of the present and future possibility of freedom from the constricting and destructive burden of history and labor; in the same flash it reflects a past world written over by the speeding vastness of capitalism which is the world’s consumption of the earth and thus the future possible destruction of being as such.

The ontological register of this response may perhaps be justified, despite O’Hara’s evident distrust of what Theodor Adorno called the jargon of authenticity, as a result of a powerful ambiguity in the last line of “The Day Lady Died.” “[A]nd everyone and I stopped breathing” is not only a memory of shared awe and respect in sight of one of the famous singer’s final, poignantly reduced performances. The line’s radical disrupting of instant-to-instant quotidian existence, facilitated in part by the past tense character of the subordinate clause, manages to project a sense of the speaker’s own future individual and shared death as a virtual memory in the present. Which is to say that at this point in his career, the multi-temporal ways of seeing sentient corporeal movement which he admired in Denby’s work allowed him to present, with particular poignancy, a proleptic and retrospective sense of “every moment [being] viewed as one in which the significance of one’s life is at stake,” to quote one particularly succinct interpreter of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (Mulhall 140). This is the sense we have when in view of our inevitable death we experience the past as the time in which we have already been delivered over to our own Being “as something that is an issue for [us]” (151). It is toward this sense that O’Hara gestures, at the end of a rather chilly and delicate morning-after-the-night-before poem written on September 19, 1959, with the phrase: “each day’s light has more significance these days” (“Getting up Ahead of Someone (Sun)” (*Collected Poems* 341). For sometimes a poet can really tell you in the blinding flash of an instant (becoming an enduring moment) why you get up in the morning, and how one day you really won’t. It is the virtue of O’Hara’s poetry to demonstrate the extent to which, despite his popularity, these and the many other multi-temporal
perspectives of his dazzling poetics are *still* the luxury of the few and not the gazed-upon crowd.

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