

Frank O'Hara's Libidinal Topography and the Nativity of an Orphic Poet*

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Abstract

This essay maps the libidinal landscape that characterizes Frank O'Hara's journey of maturation in his poem "Ode to Michael Goldberg ('s Birth and Other Births)." Written to celebrate the abstract expressionist painter Michael Goldberg's birthday in 1957, the poem also serves as a chronicle of the development of O'Hara's own poetic mind. Evoking William Wordsworth's "Intimations" ode, O'Hara exploits the Thanatos-Eros nexus of the pastoral elegy and its restorative pattern of loss and recompense to delineate the progressive states of his soul, his artistic and sexual awakenings. This essay delves into the way the poet's preoccupation with death is superimposed on the eroticized pastoral rendering of his personal memory, demonstrating how the pastoral elegy's ceremonial function enables O'Hara to enact a poetic self-initiation rite that marks the passages from one status to another.

Keywords

Frank O'Hara, pastoral elegy, initiation ceremony, Eros and Thanatos, postwar American poetry

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“And now that I am initiated I have only to
bury you, my dear doll, before / I set out.”

—Frank O’Hara

“Oranges: 12 Pastorals”

Frank O’Hara has a compellingly dynamic relationship with the pastoral tradition. Besides the recurring references and pervading allusions to the pastoral in his poems, O’Hara inverts the traditional pastoral concept of *locus amoenus* in his depictions of industrialized city space and use of urban signifiers coded with utopian and liberatory potentials.¹ O’Hara also places the pastoral genre within the postmodern context of campy parody; the pastoral posturing in some of his early poems, such as “Two Shepherds, a Novel” and “A Pastoral Dialogue,” is disingenuously boorish and flagrantly erotic. For instance, in “Ode on Saint Cecilia’s Day,” he celebrates the pagan god Pan’s handmade reed pipe as opposed to the “virgin contraption” (*The Collected Poems* 29)² of Cecilia, a Christian martyr and patron saint of music. Portraying the “horns of [Pan’s] forehead” as an erotic phallic symbol, he advocates Pan’s lustful music that inflames passions and “true desire” (28, 29) and dismisses, with a note of playful mockery, what John Dryden calls “Heav’nly harmony” in his famous ode, “A Song for St. Cecilia’s Day.”

The unabashed longing for unbridled sexual hedonism is one of the indispensable subjects of the pastoral, as it characterizes the Arcadian world of pure innocence and primeval felicity that the tradition enshrines. However, as Renato Poggioli observes in *The Oaten Flute*, “[t]o most pastoral poets Eros and Thanatos appear to be twins” (65). The pleasure principle and the death instinct are continually paired in O’Hara’s poetry as well, but in most cases Eros ultimately defeats Thanatos, and the rapturous, amatory registers persistently displace the funereal, mournful components. For instance, in “Oranges: 12 Pastorals,” the poet depicts the pastoral landscape as a frenzied collage built around repulsive images of filth, excrement, and decay, conjuring up a decidedly anti-pastoral scene. Nevertheless, it is not some religious faith in renewal and resurrection but the poet’s amorous vision that activates the cyclicity of nature integral to pastoral logic. It redeems the modern no man’s land, just as the morbid beauty of Ophelia’s floating corpse is immediately eclipsed by the poet’s passionate invocation of Pan, to whom

¹ See Gray on how the pastoral was reinterpreted and reinvented by the New York School of poets, including O’Hara.

² Hereafter *CP*.

the speaker enthuses, “Companion of the beautiful, questioner of the idle, disrupter of the sly, virtuous inseminator, O beloved pimp of our hot flesh, roam throughout the world seeking the salvation of souls!” (CP 7). Despite the overtly anti-pastoral tone of the poem, its yearning eroticism marks the persistent and powerful legacy of the pastoral. Not only that, O’Hara’s vatic pretension—from the visionary “In these symbols lives the world of erection and destruction, the dainty despots of society” to the grand Whitmanian apostrophe “O my posterity!” in the final section (8, 9)—unexpectedly draws on the pastoral tradition in a newly self-referential context.

This essay explores how O’Hara exploits the death-love nexus of the pastoral elegy and its restorative pattern of loss and recompense to delineate the progressive states of his soul, which mark his artistic and sexual awakenings. Focusing particularly on “Ode to Michael Goldberg (’s Birth and Other Births),” I will discuss the way his personal history merges with the ritualistic structure of the pastoral elegy and demonstrate how antitheses and contraries collide and engender the dialectical movements of an initiation narrative. This poem was occasioned by the abstract expressionist painter Michael Goldberg’s thirty-third birthday on December 24, 1957. However, the fact that O’Hara wrote this ode over the span of three months after Goldberg’s birthday suggests that it was, like many of his other poems, more self-interestedly composed than occasional. Still, it is worth noting that Goldberg, as seen in “Why I Am Not a Painter,” often heightens O’Hara’s sense of his profession as a poet. In “Ode to Michael Goldberg,” crucial moments of O’Hara’s personal life are loaded with sensuous images and elliptically arranged in a surrealist montage, each associated yet formally distinct scene riveted together in a kind of cinematic dissolve that leaves the impression of a coherent progression and transformation of the poet.

Celeste Marguerite Schenck’s analysis of the pastoral elegy as an initiation scenario in *Mourning and Panegyric: The Poetics of Pastoral Ceremony* provides a framework for considering the significance of O’Hara’s deliberate or self-conscious mobilization of pastoral motifs and imagery in his (auto)biographical poem. According to Schenck, the epitaphic duality of transcendence and rebirth in pastoral poetry shares structural similarities with the initiation ceremony, which buries the anterior state and supplicates the new. The clearest precursor of O’Hara’s “Ode to Michael Goldberg,” in this regard, is Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” which Schenck describes as “a generically complex pastoral initiation ode incorporating elegiac and epithalamic elements in its evolution of consolation for a lost faculty of the soul” (123). Schenck argues that Wordsworth attempts to infuse his elegiac recollections of childhood with the self-celebratory vocabulary

and panegyric imagery of nuptial poetry, “not only to bring the Ode to a satisfying formal conclusion, but to celebrate, if compensatorily, the imagination’s resurrection in adult form—and its possible immortality through literary products—in a manner designed to sustain the creation of poetry” (129).

If Wordsworth enacts his triumphant initiation into moral and philosophical maturity by conflating diametrically opposite poetic modes, a similar mechanism lies at the basis of “Ode to Michael Goldberg,” in which an anxious obsession with death is superimposed on O’Hara’s eroticized pastoral rendering of a memory marked by a series of disturbing and inspiring encounters. Marjorie Perloff also notes the influence of the English Romantics, arguing that O’Hara’s “Surreal-Autobiographical” poems imitate the “Wordsworthian portrait of the poet as imaginative child” and “Wordsworthian moments of vision” (139). However, Perloff is more concerned with the way O’Hara incorporates surrealist techniques to disrupt normative narrative patterns, claiming that his odes are modeled on a “Shelley-cum-Dada” style injected with “comic burlesque elements” (156).

It is John Wilkinson who illuminates the subtle yet significant influence of the Romantic aesthetic on O’Hara’s distinctly transgressive lyric mode developed in *Odes*. Echoing Hazel Smith’s conception of the hyperscape in O’Hara’s poetry as a form of space that, distinguished by “the co-presence of opposites,” engages radically with “the process of disruption and reconfiguration” (Smith 1), Wilkinson discusses how O’Hara asserts and establishes a self as an artist while persistently resisting a self-monumentalizing impulse. He pays attention to the way O’Hara both imbibes and rejects the Romantic Promethean narrative of heroic rebellion and painful self-sacrifice. In “Ode to Michael Goldberg,” the self-conscious commitment to sublime epiphany is continuously supplanted by a bathetic deflation/dispersal of the self, the accrual of which, according to Wilkinson, ultimately leads to achieving gentleness, an urbane, sophisticated civic quality that is “rooted in an acknowledgement of commonality and exchange” (116).

Whereas Wilkinson puts particular emphasis on O’Hara as “determined a disfigurer as Shelley” who “resists with ceaseless perspicacity the ingenious ploys that contrive erection of the self as phallic monument; he dismembers, corrupts, covers with graffiti” (117), the focus of this study is more on reading “Ode to Michael Goldberg” as a sincere, if sometimes characteristically and purposefully histrionic, chronicle of the development of O’Hara’s own poetic mind. The anti-depth model of subjectivity has often precluded the possibility of fruitful psychoanalytical readings of O’Hara, and the fact that a substantial amount, possibly all, of “Ode to Michael Goldberg” is devoted to explicitly autobiographical

details makes it hard to consider the poem as merely a virtuoso textual performance. I will argue for the reinforcing and reinvigorating effect of the pastoral elegy's death/life or Thanatos/Eros structure underpinning the poem. I will demonstrate how the pastoral ceremonial structure, combined with audaciously erotic renderings of O'Hara's pastoral memory, transforms "the parodic coming-of-age gallimaufry," to borrow Wilkinson's words (116), into a powerful self-initiation rite and enables O'Hara to reassert a unique poetic voice that is at once "gentle" and passionately polymorphous. My analysis will thus serve as an interesting addition, or antidote, to recent studies that focus mainly on the poem's decentering narrative strategy brought into play by the contradictions and alternations that undermine the authority and authenticity of the lyric speaker.

First Encounters: A Glimpse of Darkness and Erotic Enchantment

"Ode to Michael Goldberg ('s Birth and Other Births)" bookends O'Hara's limited collection of *Odes*, published in 1960. Given that the opening poem is "Ode on Causality," originally entitled "Ode at the Grave of Jackson Pollock," it is possible to trace a recuperative narrative arc from death to birth in the collection's structure itself. While "A Step Away from Them," also occasioned by Pollock's death, is characterized by the spontaneous mobility and empirical concreteness of O'Hara's "I do this I do that" opus, "Ode on Causality" demonstrates his tendency toward abstraction, conceptualization, and contemplativeness. In the same vein, "Ode to Michael Goldberg," despite its distance from the formal properties of classical odes, channels the spirit of ceremonial odes with an enriched understanding of the subjects at hand. The poem shows a particular affinity with the Pindaric tradition, in terms of its tonal intensity as well as the "brilliance of imagery, abrupt shifts in subject matter, and apparent disorder of form within the individual sections" characteristic of Pindaric odes (Fogle and Fry 971).

The poem is vigorous and expansive not only in its form but also in content. The retrospective account of the poet's experiences from his childhood in Grafton and early youth in the Navy to adulthood in New York City is highly autobiographical and personal to the extent that much of it is quoted by Brad Gooch, O'Hara's biographer, as anecdotal evidence. In this coming-of-age narrative, the speaker repeatedly encounters "an awakening to a hazardous inversion of values," as Will Montgomery puts it (207), which involves persistent departures from the former selves of each phase of life in order to welcome the new. For this reason,

each ecstatic moment of epiphany that gestures toward the future is inevitably tinged with the profound shadow of death. In other words, initiation requires the self not only to counter an abyss of darkness but also to undergo “multiple miniature deaths,” to borrow Frances Ferguson’s expression in her discussion of Wordsworth’s epitaphic language (xvi). Ferguson contends that “the poet’s spiritual autobiography virtually constitutes a series of epitaphs spoken upon former selves” and the “link between autobiography and epitaph . . . implies that the themes of growth and immortality never stand far from the theme of death” (155). Ferguson’s argument has a particular resonance when one considers the elegiac overtones that dominate O’Hara’s modern nativity ode.

I am particularly interested in how O’Hara carves a niche for himself in the established literary tradition beside the long line of poets who drew on and reinvented the initiation myth of Orpheus in allegorical terms. The figure of Orpheus, evoking the world-making, life-giving power of poetry, has inspired many poets and critics. For instance, Susan Stewart writes that “the cultural, or form-giving, work of poetry is to counter the oblivion of darkness” and likens poetic creation to Orpheus’s song, which compensates for his failed attempt to regain Eurydice from death: “Poetic making is an anthropomorphic project; the poet undertakes the task of recognition in time—the unending tragic Orphic task of drawing the figure of the other—the figure of the beloved who reciprocally can recognize one’s own figure—out of darkness. To make something where and when before there was nothing” (1, 2-3). In O’Hara’s aforementioned poem, “Oranges: 12 Pastorals,” the poet-speaker also mentions Orpheus—“from the firmament streamed the music of Orpheus!” (CP 5)—envisioning another “field” teeming with sensuous beauty and delight beyond the dreary wasteland.

On the other hand, the Orphic task particularly represents a poet’s struggle to transform suffering and adversity into artistic achievement and thus is often viewed in light of a vocational context. Schenck writes that “[t]he orphic task, as understood by the poets, is the search for literary rebirth by means of an initiatory descent. The subsequent recovery (and continuance) of voice is a guarantee of literary immortality” (2). Here, what Schenck focuses on in the Orpheus myth is its charming combination of Eros and Thanatos, as it offers a frame of reference within which the compensatory amalgam of elegy and epithalamium is analyzed as a ceremonial structure that dramatizes a self’s metamorphosis. Sigmund Freud famously postulates in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) that the constant struggle between the death drive and life instinct is what characterizes the process of evolution undergone by human civilization as well as an individual psyche. A

parallel can be drawn with the Orphic myth, in which the conflict between two competing drives eventually leads to the establishment of Orpheus's identity as a true artist. Here, one should note the final victory of the life-sustaining pleasure principle. Herbert Marcuse, echoing Freud, finds in the image of Orpheus a liberating potential, namely "the experience of a world that is not to be mastered and controlled but to be liberated—a freedom that will release the powers of Eros now bound in the repressed and petrified forms of man and nature" (164). As an ur-poet and a model lover, Orpheus might be seen as an archetypal figure who, at the command of Eros, rebels against repressive structures, survives murder and dismemberment, and achieves the pinnacle of his demiurgic art. In short, Orpheus's libidinal journey into the realm of death to achieve a fulfilling rebirth through creativity symbolizes an artist's ritual of liberation as well as initiation.

Being akin to this Orphic task, O'Hara's "Ode to Michael Goldberg" proceeds by alternating between the intimation of death and pulsation of life, between metaphysical impulse and erotic enthusiasm. Beneath the disunited flux of self, there is an awareness of self-transforming continuity that is simultaneously an elegiac recognition of loss and a celebration of compensatory rebirth. Notably, the origin of O'Hara's initial poetic passion in adolescence and its precarious continuance over many years into adulthood are bound up with his sexuality, and the long tradition of pastoral homoeroticism and careerism underpins the connection between the poet's sexual coming-of-age and the liberated vision of his creative maturity.

The poem begins with a vague memory of the speaker's childhood, when the sense of self has not yet been fully differentiated from the external world, which is construed and depicted in pastoral imagery by the mature speaker:

I don't remember anything of then, down there around the magnolias
 where I was no more comfortable than I've been since
 though aware of a certain neutrality called satisfaction
 sometimes

and there's never been an opportunity to think of it as an idyll
 as if everyone'd been singing around me, or around a tulip tree

a faint stirring of that singing seems to come to me in heavy traffic
 but I can't be sure that's it, it may be some more recent singing
 from hours of dusk in bushes playing tag, being called in, walking

up onto the porch crying bitterly because it wasn't a veranda
"smell that honeysuckle?" or a door you can see through terribly clearly,
even the mosquitoes saw through it
suffocating netting
or more often being put into a brown velvet suit and kicked around
perhaps that was my last real cry for myself
in a forest you think of birds, in traffic you think of tires,
where are you?
in Baltimore you think of hats and shoes, like Daddy did

I hardly ever think of June 27, 1926
when I came moaning into my mother's world
and tried to make it mine immediately
by screaming, sucking, urinating
and carrying on generally
it was quite a day

I wasn't proud of my penis yet, how did I know how to act? it was 1936
"no excuses, now" (CP 290-1)

While the speaker ostensibly avoids romanticizing his rural past as "an idyll," there is a nostalgic nod toward its idyllic quality. The evocation of flowers ("magnolias," "a tulip tree," "honeysuckle") adds inviting sensory cues to the pastoral memory, and the same effect is achieved more endearingly later, in the catalog of dogs the speaker used to bring with him when he was young ("the / terrier that bit people, Arno / the shepherd (who used to / be wild but had stopped), the / wire-haired that took fits / and finally the boring gentle / cocker, spotted brown and white, / named Freckles" [CP 292]). More importantly, the reference to flowers has a significant aura of the death-love compound in the pastoral setting, given that flowers, as best demonstrated by the floral catalog in Milton's "Lycidas," often serve as a symbol of grief over the death of a beloved and hope for renewal in the tradition of the pastoral elegy. The "suffocating netting" might indicate the oppressive upbringing of his Irish Catholic background, at which O'Hara chafed. However, as the abrupt question "where are you?" draws a clear distinction between his childhood "in a forest" and his current presence "in traffic," the elegiac *ubi sunt* motif is reclaimed.

The speaker particularly, if hazily, remembers "a certain neutrality called satisfaction" associated with his own infancy. This might indicate the time when his

Karen Morley got shot
in the back by an arrow
I think she was an heiress
it came through her bathroom door

there was nobody there
there never was anybody
there at any time
in sweet-smelling summer

I'd like to stay

in this field forever

and think of nothing

but these sounds,

these smells and tickling grasses

“up your ass, Sport” (*CP* 291-2)

The synesthetic combination of auditory (“silent,” “clattering”), tactile (“wet”), visual (“Yellow,” “blackness”), and olfactory (“hay, smelling faintly of semen,” “flowers”) senses conveys the strong impression that that “morning” left upon the speaker’s mind, and one might also find in the jagged lines and radical enjambments the bewildered excitement the speaker felt in that moment. Amid the overwhelming influx of sensory stimulation, what stands out is the abstract “blackness” that carries the sense of perishability and decay. The speaker’s fleeting glimpse of profound darkness, however, is soon mixed with the sexual instinct (“smelling faintly of semen”) and prevailed over by the compelling experience of overhearing the ribald jokes of the farm workers. Notably, the meticulously detailed scene, with specific names and dialogue, is reduced again to a few imagist objects (“full of cold spring water, sandy hair, black hair”). Here, the primitive sensory landscape is formed to provide a backdrop for the poet’s libidinal journey, and at the same time, a nice fade-out effect is created for the opening of another boyhood memory.

O’Hara juxtaposes giddy, irregular lines with neat quatrains that tell, in a kind of frame narrative, the speaker’s first few movie-watching experiences. If there is an associative link between these sections, despite the drastic formal shift, it is that

these memorable early experiences structured around film and his sexual initiation are presented as both thrilling and strangely terrifying. What the poet remembers in the first movie he saw is that “the hero got his legs / cut off by a steam engine” and in the second, that “Karen Morley got shot / in the back by an arrow.” By conjoining these experiences, the strange tangle of curiosity the speaker feels at his first glimpse of sexual provocation is overlaid with the sense of an existential threat vicariously experienced through the movie hero/heroine *in extremis*. Then, another short trip through a boyhood memory ends on a vaguely pastoral note: “there was nobody there / there never was anybody / . . . / in sweet-smelling summer.” This prompts a smooth return of the narrative to its beginning. As if to offset the sense of life’s tragedy, the speaker once more conjures up rustic agrarian scenery replete with erotic desires and explicitly longs for the pleasant sensations it provides, now with a homosexual focus and again in dispersed lines: “I’d like to stay / in this field forever / and think of nothing / but these sounds, / these smells and the tickling grasses / ‘up your ass, Sport’” (CP 291-2). O’Hara’s deep-seated primordial memory of the eroticized pastoral serves as a counterforce to the shadow of death, and it is continuously recalled at moments of crisis that require a self-shattering or self-fortifying transformation.

Wind, Promethean Inspiration, and the Nascent Poet

Whereas Walt Whitman’s climactic statement, “My own songs awaked from that hour,” gains its effect by concluding the poet’s initiation in “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” O’Hara depicts epiphanic moments several times throughout the poem, most of which coincide with the speaker’s attempts to penetrate the reality of existence and desire. The first of them comes rather naturally after his first sexual awakening at the farm and the subsequent realization in the movie theater of an absurd universe:

Up on the mountainous hill
 behind the confusing house
 where I lived, [...]

the wind sounded exactly like
 Stravinsky
 I first recognized art
 as wildness, and it seemed right,

I mean rite, to me

climbing the water tower I'd
 look out for hours in wind
 and the world seemed rounder
 and fiercer and I was happier
 because I wasn't scared of falling off

nor off the horses, the horses!
 to hell with the horses, bay and black (*CP* 292)

After going through a series of firsts, the speaker feels himself emerging into an astonishingly new consciousness. Another key element that dominates the poem is “the wind,” which here acts as a catalyst for the poet to experience the stunning wildness of the natural world. As a vehicle for liberating creative energy and a vital affirmation of life, the wind helps sublimate the former scenes’ struggle between Eros and Thanatos into a higher unity of self and the external world. O’Hara was well-versed in classical music from early childhood, thanks to his father and aunts. Listening to the sound of the wind, however, he identifies it with none other than the modernist composer, Igor Stravinsky, whose violently experimental music subverted the entire musical tradition. The way the poet recognizes art as “wildness” and “right/rite” not only evokes the brutal dissonance and raw rhythmic force embodied in Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* but also marks one of the early transformative moments in his artistic life, one that would later gravitate more toward avant-garde artists, poets, and painters.

Just as the ascent of high mountains has often been used as a metaphor for the growth of a poet’s mind, O’Hara’s vocational epiphany happens figuratively as he climbs up “the water tower” “on the mountainous hill.” Furthermore, just as standing sublimely on the peak of a mountain awes and enraptures Romantic poets, O’Hara, looking out on the world “in wind for hours,” observes that “the world seemed rounder / and fiercer” to him. Though his poetic sensibility is not yet sufficiently awakened to be addressed directly, his recognition of art as “wildness” parodically echoes “Anecdote of the Jar,” in which Wallace Stevens contemplates a humble human artifact that has the power to contain nature’s chaotic wilderness. As Montgomery points out, however, the wind forces O’Hara to discard the belief that art can tame nature’s “uncontainable incoherence” (209). Instead, the poet is allured by the very ruggedness and abstract grandeur of nature and its spiritual, affective,

and aesthetic force. Alternatively, then, one can find in the young O'Hara's enriched perception of the world an echo of another Stevens's poem, "On the Road Home," where two people's dispute over truth leads them to an ecstatic moment of sensory fullness: "the silence was largest / And longest, the night was roundest, / The fragrance of the autumn warmest, / Closest and strongest" (203). Likewise, O'Hara's speaker is "happier" to encounter, by virtue of the wind, a world free of symbolic depth and transcendental reality; the experience is so enthralling that he is no more "scared of falling off."

As emphasized above, "Ode to Michael Goldberg" does not conclude at this stage but plunges into another sequence of the poetic quest. The fear of "falling off" from the water tower, a sense of fragility that the speaker seems to have comprehended somewhat, triggers another memory related to the fear of falling "off the horses." In this long poem, a radical formal shift usually signals a transition of time and place, yet the modulations do not occur in a drastic way. Rather, a link is maintained between two disparate points of life that makes one moment smoothly merge into another. Whereas such associative moves seem to guarantee the persistence of the poet's self, it is worth noting that a new dimension is continuously added to the self's fluid identity as it repeatedly emerges from the transformative loss of the former self.

The liberating aesthetic awakening at the water tower unexpectedly culminates in the recollection of "horses, bay and black" that were presumably in the stable at his father's farm, and, with the horses offering sensory and emotional stimuli, the poet is transported back to an erotic pastoral scene that converts the threat of death into sexual instinct:

It's odd to have secrets at an early age, trysts
 whose thoughtfulness and sweetness are those of a very aggressive person
 carried beneath your shirt like an amulet against your sire
 what one must do is done in a red twilight
 on colossally old and dirty furniture with knobs,
 and on Sunday afternoons you meet in a high place
 watching the Sunday rivers and the symphonic sadness
 stopped, a man in a convertible put his hand up a girl's skirt
 and again the twitching odor of hay, like a minor irritation
 that gives you a hardon, and again the roundness of horse noises (*CP* 292)

In contrast to the jagged lines and fragments that are conspicuous in the previous

scene at the hay barn, the sleek, arrowhead-like shape of this stanza seems to reflect the advanced state of the speaker's consciousness, though the visual sharpness still conveys a sense of tension and restlessness. Interestingly, this part might be also understood as a brilliant parody of George Herbert's "Easter Wings," a concrete poem shaped like wings. With the form of Herbert's poem rotated 90 degrees counter-clockwise, O'Hara's lustrous lines wittily and subversively reclaim the seventeenth-century religious poem about Christ's resurrection. O'Hara's own poem entitled "Easter" is also worth mentioning in this regard, as the poem begins with a harsh death-evoking prolepsis ("The razzle dazzle maggots are summary" [CP 96]) and concludes by celebrating Eros for its resurrecting power.

While the speaker's first encounter with sex occurs through an unintended glimpse into the farm workers' sexual fantasies and vulgar masculinity, one can find an increasingly voyeuristic fascination in the way he portrays the "trysts" he both had and witnessed. His involvement in the transgressive pleasure of clandestine assignations is translated into the vivid sensory and sensual imagery of a farm stable, and the result is a uniquely erotic amalgam of "the twitching odor of hay," "the roundness of horse noises," and "a minor irritation / that gives you a hardon." Given the recurring appearance of a hay-horse-eroticism mixture, it seems that the pastoral memory O'Hara carries "like an amulet" is firmly entrenched in the primitive "libidinous landscape . . . with its soft stables and vaguely pornographic pastures," to borrow Gooch's words (52).

One might also argue that the very pastoral image of farm stables is constitutive of O'Hara's gay identity. Larry Rivers, one of O'Hara's closest friends, states: "Frank told me that his first homosexual experience was a stable guy, a guy who took care of the horses, when he was sixteen" (qtd. in Gooch 51). It is no coincidence that O'Hara's eroticized rendering of the pastoral setting is in line with the long tradition of imagining pastoral space as a fantasy world of homosexual desire. The homosocial, homoerotic elements in classical and Renaissance pastorals have been studied by many critics, including Gregory Bredbeck, who conceives the pastoral genre as "constantly titillated by transgression." He argues, "one of [the pastoral's] primary interests is its participation in the field of sexual deviation" (200). Similarly, Bruce Smith notes that pastoral Arcadia served as a metaphorical landscape for "homosexual initiation into manhood, a physical passing along of adult secrets" for young men of the Renaissance (115). Young Francis preferred music and poetry to doing chores at his father's farm. However, as Gooch states, "in his erotic life, [O'Hara] seemed to have been drawn back to the very hay bins and farm animals he was so bored by in the workaday world" (52). In short, the idyllic

setting in rural Grafton that stages O'Hara's awakening to his sexuality has become, like the Garden of Eden, a symbolic pastoral space of innocent wonderment and sexual naiveté, forever lost and forever desired by the poet.

O'Hara's jarring entrance into maturity seems to have been marked by a deep disquietude about his tabooed desire rather than furtive excitement about it. Quoting lines by Sergey Aleksandrovich Yesenin, a Russian lyric poet of the revolutionary era, rather flamboyantly in French—"Je suis las de vivre au pays natal" (*CP* 292)³—the speaker expresses a strong urge to break out of "those invisible bonds" (*CP* 293) that constrain him and to live freely as an outcast. That said, his impetuous, youthful impulse to exile himself from his homeland and be rootless compels him to confront the precarity of his identity as well as the unknown territory of human existence:

but there is a glistening
blackness in the center
if you seek it

here . . . it's capable of bursting
 into flame or merely
 gleaming profoundly in
 . . .

the wind soars, keening overhead
and the vestments of unnatural safety
 part to reveal a foreign land
toward whom I have been selected to bear
 the gift of fire
 the temporary place of light, the land of air

down where a flame illumines gravity and means warmth and insight,
 where air is flesh, where speed is darkness

³ "I am tired of living in my native land" (my translation). John Ashbery notes, in his introduction to O'Hara's *Collected Poems*, that O'Hara's early poems are "'French' in the pejorative sense the word so often had in America" (viii). Though Ashbery was pointing out O'Hara's early stylistic experiments, his words illuminate the French influence on O'Hara's histrionic adolescence, an influence O'Hara himself must have recognized. W. H. Auden also criticized one of O'Hara's early poems for its obedience to French surrealism, inspiring O'Hara to write to Kenneth Koch, "I don't care what Wystan says, I'd rather be dead than not have France around my neck like a rhinestone dog-collar" (qtd. in Gooch 261).

and

things can suddenly be reached, held, dropped and known

where a not totally imaginary ascent can begin all over again in tears (*CP*
293)

Having secret and hidden currents of feeling raises an intimidating barrier between the speaker and the world around him, and the consciousness of his own disharmony prompts him to long for escape and oblivion. The speaker therefore wishes that he had “leaped from rafters onto prongs” and “been carried shining and intact / to the Indian Cemetery near the lake” (*CP* 293). However, what he sees there is “a glistening / blackness in the center.” This “blackness,” which has at once sensory, abstract, and semantic qualities, harks back to the “blackness” observed near the hay barn, where the speaker overheard the prurient conversations of farm workers. The oxymoronic tension in “a glistening / blackness” that is “capable of bursting / into flame or merely / gleaming profoundly” adds intensity to its subliminal ambiguity. It seems to represent the entrancing and excruciating struggle of both growing up and apart from his former self, and it also further develops the thematic interpenetration of Eros and Thanatos. The speaker observes the destructively dynamic and vigorously threatening energy of the unknowable in human experiences and desires (“in / the platinum setting / of your ornamental / human ties and hates / hanging between breasts” [*CP* 293]). However, despite the daunting presence of the unknown, he asserts that “the center of myself is never silent,” accepting the incongruity between his own existence and the external world.

In this critical moment of dissociation and the associated crisis of identity, “the wind soars, keening overhead.” As examined earlier, the wind is portrayed in this poem as a sort of uplifting, inspiring agent that resolves, though momentarily, the heightened inner conflict of the self and brings the struggle for maturity and independence to a new level. The resort to natural imagery transmits the Romantic view of nature as a source of imagination and aesthetic experiences, and this second encounter with wind particularly reveals the influence of Romantic visionaries, Percy Bysshe Shelley most notably, as the speaker sets himself the Promethean task of bringing “the gift of fire” to “a foreign land.” O’Hara’s “wind” acquires a symbolic status comparable to the West Wind that Shelley associated with revolutionary power and a prophetic dimension. In fact, the constant interplay between motifs of wind, darkness, and flame in the poem necessarily evokes the myth of Prometheus, especially the version given in *Prometheus Unbound*, where

moment later,” as Perloff puts it (139-40). The consciousness of the poetic subject progresses in this dialectical fashion, through thematic antitheses and tonal alternations. Wilkinson understands O’Hara’s unique mix of bathos and the sublime in his adaptation of Romantic odes as deconstructing the myth of an authentic lyric “I.” In “Ode to Michael Goldberg,” the first-person singular “I” disintegrates into multiple subjectivities (“we,” “you,” “one,” “he”) at the end of the poem “in a transfer of the particulars of one autobiography—O’Hara’s—to another self—Michael Goldberg” (116). Wilkinson’s analysis of this textual strategy sheds light on how O’Hara’s egotistical display of autobiographical elements eventually homes in on the ostensible subject of the poem.

O’Hara’s ambivalent stance vis-à-vis the Promethean myth as reimagined in Shelley’s work is apparent even in the way he continuously seeks to restore a sense of self through erotic and even bawdy recollections of his past. The ambivalence is inherently embedded in the myth of Prometheus: although his rebelliously adventurous attitude was to be condemned with eternal solitude and pain, he would ultimately be freed by another deity. Furthermore, the “gift of fire,” which Prometheus believed would liberate mankind from a state of ignorance and primitive barbarism, contributed to the development of civilization, but it also brought novel forms of human suffering and repression. Therefore, bathetic reconstructions of the sexually vibrant self might be read as an attempt to counteract the diffusive force of O’Hara’s self-imposed, solemn Promethean quest so that the earlier, if naïve, Promethean ideals are “disavowed,” as Wilkinson has it (118). Then, the Orphic themes of tyranny and erotic liberation, of loss and celebration, of dismemberment and regeneration come in to take their place and merge the psychosexual development of the poet with the vocational narrative. The way O’Hara at once disperses his authorial voice by continually deflating himself and assembles his dispersed presence into a tenuously unified, multifaceted self who has his own voice resonates with the “Other Births” indicated in the title of the poem. Consequently, the poem becomes “less an homage to the dead” selves and more of “a self-indulgence of the living” (71), as noted by Diana Fuss about the Orphic elegy.

The Orphic Achievement and Intimations of Liberty

Equally significant, O’Hara’s disjunctive transitions and abrupt shifts can be viewed as engaging the poet’s ambiguous homosexual identities and relations. Despite the presence of a continuous entity that moves through time and space in

when someone you love hits your head and says “I’d sail with you any
where, war or no war” (*CP* 294)

This section of the poem recounts the wartime experience of O’Hara, who joined the Navy immediately after graduation from high school in 1944, served as a Shore Patrolman (“SP”) in San Francisco, and then shipped out to the Pacific aboard the destroyer USS Nicholas. What stands out is the poet’s experience of seeing the dead body of an African American cook while he was stationed in New Guinea, waiting for embarkation. Several sources testify that the incident actually took place, that the mess cook was murdered for dallying with native women.⁴ O’Hara responds to the heinous brutality with surprising equanimity and patience, describing it in a seemingly monotonous manner. Nevertheless, under the surface of the poet’s feigned calmness, the reader is drawn to feel the primitive, symbolic terror at the ghastly sight of castration and mutilation.

Roy Scranton argues that the horror of the cook’s appalling death in O’Hara’s narrative serves as “an emblematic tale of punishment for transgressive sexual desire” (155). While the passage might be interpreted as a cautionary tale that draws attention to the destructive consequence of tabooed sexual longings, there is still a powerfully vertiginous amalgam of Eros and Thanatos implied in the cook’s death when O’Hara reflects on the “killing desire for their women.” Underpinning his recurring thematization of love as a life force that counters death and destruction, the poet states, “but more killing still the absence of desire.” At this point, one notices that the final question of the former passage—“Shit, that means you’re getting kind of ascetic, doesn’t it?”—is what triggers this retrospective wartime memory. O’Hara mockingly likens “the absence of desire” to what “in religion / used to be called hope,” “the lack of hardon, which may be sincerity / or the last-minute victory of the proud spirit over flesh,” only to overturn the pervasive Western dualism that valorizes spirit over the body. In the poet’s celebration of eroticism over impotent asceticism, the death-dealing threat of war is absorbed into the courageous, life-preserving language of lovers (“I’d sail with you any / where, war or no war”).

⁴ O’Hara later recalled the incident along with the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt: “That same week there was a murder. One of the negro mess-cooks, living in their segregated hut with his radio, his soft laugh, and his hat dyed yellow with an Atabrine tablet, was found before their hut, his hands cut off, his testicles tucked neatly in his cheeks, his lips sewed shut. The flag was at half mast” (*Early Writings* 125).

This passage has also inevitably led to sociocultural and ethical debates about O'Hara's tendency to aestheticize and metaphorize racial imagery—in this case, the murder of a black man by Melanesian men.⁵ While such disputes raise necessary questions about O'Hara's proclivity to use racial stereotypes, I want to focus here on the significance of the represented incident for the poet's initiation journey, especially from the vantage point of his homosexual identity. Hazel Smith has shown how O'Hara challenges and dismantles masculine and heterosexual hegemony in "Ode to Michael Goldberg." Claiming that "the presence of non-hegemonic masculinities which undercut the male values of competition, heroism, rationality and virility is a central dynamic in O'Hara's poetry" (114), Smith examines how O'Hara undermines chauvinistic masculine ideals and provides an alternative to heterosexual norms. Following Smith, I read the passage as a piercing critique of the sexual taboo in patriarchal society that caused a needless, brutal, and hideous death. In this light, O'Hara's reflection on the traumatic death of his colleague acts as a therapeutic affirmation of his homosexual identity, a refusal to conform to the heterosexual power structure, and a renewed assertion of the strengthening and unifying power of Eros.

Following the abominable event O'Hara witnessed during his time in New Guinea comes an autobiographical heap of snapshots and snippets of thoughts rather than episodic sequences, fast-forwarding from the war "churning the earth / even under the fathomless deaths" (*CP* 295) to Grafton after his discharge. "[T]o 'return' safe," however, does not provide an assurance of stability and purpose for those "who will never feel safe" (*CP* 296). "[K]nowing it is all / all over but my own ceaseless going," the speaker cannot help but feel displaced and "useless" amid the familiar environment of his hometown. As if to dispel his alienation and dejection after the war, he turns for anchorage to the external world as given in a list of emblematic yet ironically disconcerting places ("King Philip's trail," "Carnegie Hall," "Palisades Park"), a geography that paves the way for his eventual settling in New York City. At this juncture, suddenly but not unexpectedly, "the fierce wind of

⁵ N. R. Lawrence, among others, problematizes the way O'Hara reimagines social space to create a private world of fantasy through radical intersubjectivity, as epitomized in his poem "Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets," where O'Hara purportedly exploits race as "a focus of exoticized images of desire, aesthetic fulfillment, and social energy" (86). Especially with regard to this wartime experience, Lawrence detects the underlying colonial dichotomy not only between American forces and invaded natives but also between black and white Americans, arguing that "[t]he commentary implicit in the body's mutilation makes literal the stereotyped charge of sexual voraciousness leveled against blacks; in an equally lethal manner it inscribes the warning to 'keep your hands off' the native other" (92).

brings to the artist
only a certain kneeness” (CP 297)

This brief passage set off by quotation marks, with its amazing, deliberate typo that turns “keenness” to “kneeness,” both comically and poignantly captures the artistic credo of O’Hara, who was ordinarily shy of making statements about his poetic practice.

Though O’Hara does not negate the powerful influence of radical newness introduced by avant-garde aesthetic experiments, what he underlines here is that the pursuit of artistic novelty is not a blind obedience to the Poundian command to “make it new” but a self-imposed struggle against the state of boredom. When asked by Edward Lucie-Smith if he thought “it’s important to be new,” O’Hara answered, “No, I think it’s very important not to be bored though” (O’Hara, *Standing Still* 9). In other words, stylistic innovation has artistic value only in so far as it upheaves the dull status quo not only politically but creatively, personally. O’Hara’s cautious attitude toward the affectations of mere novelty can also be understood in relation to his deepened awareness of “too much endlessness / stored up, and in store.” In the same interview with Lucie-Smith, O’Hara emphasizes that “Western civilization . . . has really put, laid[,] an awful load on that thing [novelty] because so many things have already been done.” Therefore, “the exquisite prayer / to be new each day” just for the sake of being new is a ridiculously misguided effort, a subservience (“kneeness”) to the modernist imperative that not so much inspires as afflicts an artist. Given some distance by the quotation marks, the “exquisite prayer” marks O’Hara’s newfound autonomy as a self-initiated, independent poet.

The self-mythologizing narrative activated by the tension between contrary drives and forces, such as Eros and Thanatos, life and death, and light and darkness, finally reaches its oceanic finale, with the poet entering into the celebratory lyric mode:

yes! for always, for it is our way, to pass the teahouse and the ceremony
by and rather fall sobbing to the floor with joy and freezing
than to spill the kid upon the table and then thank the blood

for flowing
as it must throughout the miserable, clear and willful
life we love beneath the blue,
a fleece of pure intention sailing like

and incrementally throughout its hazardous career” (130). With this poem, O’Hara appears to have successfully performed himself as an initiated poet, demonstrating not only his knowledge of the Romantic lyric and ancient pastoral tropes but also his prowess in sustaining a modernist long poem that replaces narrative coherence with discontinuous segments and incongruent forms. That said, the poem remains an incisive parody of these traditions rather than a homage. The poet seemingly inherits the Romantic notion of authentic subjectivity in his construction of an autobiographical self-elegy, but the sameness and wholeness of the “I” keep being complicated, diffused, and recreated throughout the poem by virtue of O’Hara’s complex formal dynamics and exaggerated aesthetic poses.

Nevertheless, the poem ends up authenticating the unique sincerity of O’Hara’s lyric self and affirming its mobile, provisional, and metamorphic being on an unabashedly celebratory note. Instead of constructing solid ego boundaries or searching for means to authentic self-expression, O’Hara’s poetic self remains destabilized and volatile, fluctuating with full vitality in response to the various impulses of life, thereby echoing David Bergman’s claim that “the avoidance of ‘self-expression’ becomes paradoxically a powerful expression of gay selfhood” (94). And when O’Hara, like Wordsworth, “salutes a new power that is given him in recompense for his loss” of the former self (Bloom 186), the nostalgic elegy turns into a eulogy of self, and “Ode to Michael Goldberg” culminates in a drama of initiatory self-transformation.

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