

Poetry of Inner Space:

Dimensions of The New York Schools

Yasmine Shamma

Linacre College

University of Oxford

D.Phil. in English Language and Literature

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ABSTRACTPoetry of Inner Space: Dimensions of the New York Schools

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This study examines the presence of poetic form in First and Second Generation New York School Poetry. Because New York School writing—where its existence is conceded—seems formless, it has yet to be viewed under a formal lens. Therefore, this study is the first of its kind.

In what follows, works by Frank O'Hara, Ted Berrigan, Alice Notley and Ron Padgett are contextualized and closely read for form, with an attention to the shaping propensity of inhabited spaces. While it is agreed that the external environment has the potential to influence shapes and forms of writing, domestic spaces also offer parameters which are traceable onto the page.

New York School poets lived in and wrote from alternative domestic spaces—untidy, disordered, congested apartments in downtown New York City. The forms of their poems are accordingly untraditional. New York School stanzas often take on the contours of these spaces, becoming linguistic rooms riddled with the tensions of indoor urban life. After outlining New York School poetry and addressing contemporaneous urban theories, this study asks: what role does the space of writing have on the shape of writing? More specifically, are New York City apartments reflected in the forms of New York School poems? Through close-reading and formal analysis, it becomes possible to affirm that New York School Poetry is formal, and that its form is distinctive in that in its variances, it makes it possible for the tensions and dynamics of living within the constraints of inner urban spaces to be fully pronounced and inflected. This is a study of the formal representations of those inflections.

*... I'm not crazy
about the emptiness of outer space. I have to live
here, with finite life and inner space and with
the horrible desire to love everything and be disappointed*

-Ron Padgett¹

¹ Ron Padgett *How to Be Perfect* (New York: Coffee House P, 2007) 48.

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Introduction

You asked me if I was a member and what about the New York School. Was I in it? Did it really exist. And I said, "Absolutely." "Certainly." "Of Course." I used to tell people they could join for five dollars, and they would write a certain kind of poem. Then I had an idea that the New York School consisted of whomever I thought. And I could have that idea, see, because there was no New York School.

-Ted Berrigan¹

¹ *Talking in Tranquility: Interviews with Ted Berrigan*, ed. Stephen Ratcliffe and Leslie Scalpino (Bolinas, CA: Avenue B; Oakland, CA: O Books, 1991) 90.

The New York Schools of Poetry have come to be defined by their members, instead of by their poetry's form. This is partly because form is not immediately apparent in poems that mock form. A reader looking for form in the poetry of The New York Schools tends to be confronted, instead, with lines like Frank O'Hara's: "measure shmeasure know shknew."² This study aims to show that it is possible to "measure" such New York School lines as formal, and that the New York School's form is distinctive in that it is shaped by lived-in city spaces. While Samuel Taylor Coleridge warns that "there is a difference between form as proceeding and shape as superinduced,"³ poems of The New York Schools reconcile this difference, offering poems that impart the sense that outward shapes and inward sensations of form are equally generative.

Examining the forms of four kinds of New York School poetries, permits the poems to come to surface as bearing imprints of the rooms and architectural structures they are written out of. In reading New York School poetry for such form, it may become possible to better "measure" this school that has been so difficult to "know."

Most studies of The New York Schools of Poetry begin by defining what they mean by "The New York School," and subsequently questioning that definition. Geoff Ward's 1993 *Statues of Liberty*⁴ begins by outlining the cultural, physical and intuited atmosphere of 20th century New York City. Ward writes:

As emblem of a contemporary condition of toxicity, New York is an infernal *primus inter pares*; the most concentrated ... present in more

² Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: U of California P, 1971) 436.

³ Samuel Coleridge, *The Literary Remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Vol. 1, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge, (London: William Pickering, 1836) 229.

⁴ Geoff Ward, *Statues of Liberty: The New York School of Poets* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993).

diluted form elsewhere, be it vagrancy or insider trading, crime or vanguard art. It is the city to which other cities look for a sign, most often a warning, of the episodes to come in their own unfolding narrative. In one sense a triumph over Nature, its skyscrapers and subway system *are* the Nature, as fields of concrete and forests of scaffolding dwarf the species that created them ... (1)

Ward's study was one of the first comprehensive looks at the school, and in it he consistently outlines the school's relationship to the city, peripherally noting the relationship it inhabited with The New York School of Painting and European surrealism,⁵ while accounting for its differences. Ward's study argues that Frank O'Hara's "great poetry" reflects an American Renaissance: "To read O'Hara, Ashbery and Schuyler as they deserve, is to open their work to, and see refracted in it, the full retrospect of the American Renaissance, and of the changing structures of European poetry from Romanticism to the present" (4). Ward continues to explain his intentions in writing *Statues of Liberty*: "I wrote this book in order to express, however inadequately, my sense that the poetry of Frank O'Hara is demonstrably great poetry" (5). Implicitly, Marjorie Perloff had already agreed, as she was the first to extensively examine O'Hara's poetry (in 1977). Perloff's *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*⁶ defines the school by its alliances with other twentieth century American movements, and posits O'Hara as its transcending figure,⁷ eventually acknowledging that, "the label, 'The

⁵ "This study touches on painting only incidentally," notes Ward before explaining how the relationship The New York School of Poetry had to the New York School of Painting was one "defined by antithesis as much as continuation" (3).

⁶ Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998). This book was originally published in 1977.

⁷ "Indeed, just as it is no longer enough to read O'Hara's poetry as the verbal counterpart of New York Abstract expressionist painting, so it no longer seems satisfactory to view him primarily as a founding father of New York Poetry, a school allied, in Donald Allen's *New*

New York School,' always something of a misnomer, is no longer meaningful"

(Perloff 228). David Lehman's 1998 *The Last Avant-Garde*⁸ tells the "story of the New York School" mostly as a story of camaraderie:

The story of the New York School of poets is a study in friendship, artistic collaboration, and the bliss of being alive and young at a moment of maximum creative ferment. It is also the story of the last authentic avant-garde movement that we have had in American poetry. (1)

As Lehman's story unfolds, it looks closely at this "creative ferment" in terms of friendship (in a story-like way, often without citations), and acknowledges the paradoxes within his avant-garde's title:

The 'New York School of Poets' was always, on the face of it, an incongruous label. Here was a group of poets who were born elsewhere, went to college elsewhere, and contrived—all except Frank O'Hara—to abandon New York City for long stretches in Europe. In the poems that poured out of him in the 1950s, O'Hara wrote with incessant exuberance about New York; his buddies rarely did. Yet for all of them the artistic life of the city seemed to function as a stimulus and a necessary backdrop. (19)

After pointing, like preceding studies of The New York School, to how the school's title doesn't fit its poets, Lehman accepts the title's convenience.⁹

American Poetry (1960), primarily with Black Mountain, the Beats, and the so-called San Francisco Renaissance. Rather, we can now see that this 'master of peripheral vision,' as Coolidge refers to O'Hara (BB 184), devised linguistic structures that anticipate the poetics of our moment" (Perloff 16).

⁸ David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

⁹ "John Bernard Myers, the flamboyant director of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, came up with the New York School moniker in 1961, hoping to cash in on the cachet of the world-conquering Abstract Expressionists. "The idea was that, since everybody was talking about the New York School of painting, if he created a New York School of poets then they would

William Watkin's 2001 *In the Process of Poetry*¹⁰ uses Kenneth Koch's poem "Time Zone"¹¹ to "unpack" (but "not" "justify") the "New York School" title (1), before locating the thematic overlaps in their poetry that were "as much as they had in common."¹² Lytle Shaw's 2006 single-author based study: *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie*,¹³ suggests in its title that it will exclusively examine O'Hara's work, but it actually deals most explicitly and fully with the overlaps in The New York School poets' lives. Shaw's book examines the artistic intersections in The New York School of Poetry, calling their poetics one of "coterie," and considers the ways that coterie came to

automatically be considered important,' Ashbery commented without enthusiasm" (Lehman 20).

¹⁰ William Watkin, *In the Process of Poetry: The New York School and the Avant-Garde*. (London: Bucknell UP, 2001).

¹¹ Watkin uses the following lines from Kenneth Koch's "Time Zone" (*The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch* ((New York: Alfred Knopf, 2006) 459) to help define the New York School:

I came down to the Cedar on a bus hoping to see O'Hara and Ashbery
Astonishingly on the bus I don't know why it's the only occasion
I write a poem Where Am I Kenneth? It's on some torn-out notebook pages
The Cedar and the Five Spot each is a usable place
A celebrated comment Interviewer What do you think of space? De Kooning
Fuck space!
In any case Frank is there he says he likes Where Am I Kenneth?
I carry this news home pleasantly and the poem it mentions her to Janice
John's poem Europe is full of avant-garde ardor
I am thinking it's making an order out of a great disorder
I wonder at what stage in life this gets harder
The Cedar Bar one hardly thinks of it is what may be called a scene
However one closed to the public since no one goes there to be seen
It is a meeting place for the briefest romances.

¹² After "unpacking" the term, Watkin arrives at his own study's intention: "The section of 'A Time Zone' I have chosen illustrates the aesthetic practice of the New York School: processual, surface-based, making a virtue out of temporal, spatial and subjective uncertainties" (1).

¹³ Lytle Shaw, *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P: 2006).

inform poetic practice. Shaw points to the moment when O'Hara met Koch and John Ashbery in New York City, and cites it as the beginning of The New York School of Poetry.¹⁴ Shaw ambiguously deals with the problem of “The New York School” term throughout his book by referring to the “New York School” almost as frequently as to “New York Poets.” Terence Diggory’s 2009 *Encyclopedia of the New York School of Poets*¹⁵ spends an entire introduction debating the inclusivity and exclusivity of the term, noting how some of the best studies have attended primarily to one poet, so acknowledging that poetry’s individual merits over thematic ones (x). And Timothy Gray’s most recent study deals with the term metaphorically. In his 2010 book, *Urban Pastoral*,¹⁶ Gray explains: “The New York School’s confluence of poets and artists resembled a school of fish: creatures coming together to explore currents outside the mainstream” (1).

All of these studies affirm the flimsiness of the “New York School” title, while also agreeing on the major poets of the school. O'Hara, Ashbery, Koch, James Schuyler, and Barbara Guest are most often listed as “first-generation”¹⁷ New York

¹⁴ Shaw writes: “O'Hara ... met John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch, graduating [from Harvard] in 1950. After receiving his MA ... O'Hara moved to New York City, where early on, in addition to an expanding circle of poets, his closest friends tended to be painters ... Already by the late 1950s, O'Hara had an extremely wide range of friends, from the intimate circle of poets associated with the first generation New York School (John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, Kenneth Koch and James Schuyler) to painters...” (2).

¹⁵ Terence Diggory, *Encyclopedia of New York School of Poets* (New York: Facts on File, 2009).

¹⁶ Timothy Gray, *Urban Pastoral: Natural Currents in the New York School* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2010).

¹⁷ The Poetry Foundation’s glossary (“Glossary” *Poetry Foundation* (Web. 21 August 2011. <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/glossary-term/>>)) and Terence Diggory’s

School poets; Ted Berrigan, Ron Padgett, Anne Waldman and Alice Notley are most consistently mentioned as core “second-generation” New York School poets. Daniel Kane and Libbie Rifkin’s studies of Second-Generation New York School poets pay special attention to the thematic and intended overlaps between these generations.¹⁸

The poets themselves consistently reject the grouping-term. Ashbery speaks for his generation:

The term “New York School” applied to poetry isn’t helpful, in characterizing a number of widely dissimilar poets whose work moreover has little to do with New York, which is, or used to be, merely a convenient place to live and meet people, rather than a specific place whose local color influences the literature produced there.¹⁹

Notley parenthetically moves away from the term by permitting a note on her *Grave of Light*²⁰ dust-jacket: “Formerly associated with The New York School.” During an interview²¹, Padgett frequently undermines the term by prefacing it with the phrase: “the So-Called.” And Berrigan concisely states: “It should be understood that the New York School is a joke” (*Talking in Tranquility* 90).

introduction to *Encyclopedia of the New York School of Poets* (v-ix) both list these poets frequently as “core” members.

¹⁸ Daniel Kane, *All Poets Welcome* (Berkeley, California: U of C Press, 2003) and *Don’t Ever Get Famous* (Champaign, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 2006), are two in-depth studies of second generation New York School Poets. Libbie Rifkin’s *Career Moves* (Madison: U of Wisconsin, 2000) looks at the way Berrigan and others created a place for themselves within specific literary frameworks.

¹⁹ John Ashbery, “Introduction,” *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley, California: U of California P, 1971) x.

²⁰ Alice Notley, *Grave of Light: Collected Poems* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan UP, 2006).

²¹ See “Interview with Ron Padgett” in Chapter IV.

But commonalities in “So-Called New York School” poetry suggest it is possible to define the movement. For example, most New York School poems are resistant to criticism. This resistance is achieved through frequent utilization of humor, unusual shaping, conversational diction, subverted punctuation, and general attempts to, as O’Hara advised, “Put the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified”²² (these strategies will be fully explored throughout this study). Because these antics are difficult to formally discuss, critics have responded by more simply defining the group by the personal meeting of O’Hara, Ashbery and Koch (at Harvard), mentioning how these three poets wrote in a way that stands in contrast to the modes of their time (New Criticism), and finally isolating thematic consistencies throughout New York School writing. Shaw explicates O’Hara’s resistance to “Eliotic strictures” (5):

Certainly O’Hara was critical of [New Critical and Eliotic strictures], as both Marjorie Perloff and James Breslin have demonstrated. O’Hara’s response, though, was less to claim his own identity as particular... than ... to destabilize and displace the markers of literary universality that would allow poetry to operate in an established, understood public sphere—a sphere characterized by norms of tone, canons of reference, and what O’Hara, referring specifically to the New Critics, calls ‘certain rather stupid ideas about ... the comportment in diction that you adopt’ (SS 22). After mentioning that he had been ‘reading heaps of Eluard, Char and Lorca’ in a 1956 letter to Kenneth Koch, O’Hara writes, ‘they make me hum like a tuning-fork; who wants a ‘voice’ of his own? How did you like the measured pace of that poetry ‘spread’ in the *Times*? ‘Wilbur is major and undoubtedly Pound has been useful’—REALLY!!!’ (5)

While Ward’s, Perloff’s, Lehman’s, Watkin’s and Shaw’s studies of The New York School’s liberties, painterly tradition, avant-garde tendencies, and coterie are all valuable, they have all also inherently placed secondary emphasis on the forms or “spreads” of these poetries.

²² Frank O’Hara, “Personism,” *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1971) 499.

This study will take up The New York School's poetic form, primarily, to show how its seemingly "surface" and "process-based poetry" (Watkin 10-11) actually deeply and formally registers lived-in forms. How do New York School poets use the page as a place to respond to the urban and domestic forms they write within? Some critics have already looked at the role of the outdoor environment in New York School poetry. Explicitly, Gray's *Urban Pastoral*, and Hazel Smith's *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara*²³ attend to the ways New York City shaped New York School writing, and Diggory's *Encyclopedia of The New York School* implicitly considers the environment's shaping force, as it features an actual map of Manhattan²⁴ in its introduction. While it is useful to acknowledge the influence of Manhattan's external landscape, skyscrapers and grid, here the focus will be on the shaping propensity of indoor city dwellings. How does the space from which something is written in shape the writing? Specifically, are New York City apartments registered in New York School poems? As the forms of these poems exhibit registers of internal / perceived spaces, how does the shape of the internal spaces inhabited affect the form of these poems?

One writer for whom spaces were significant thematic structuring agents was T.S. Eliot. And while criticism has tended to posit New York School poetry as starkly opposed to "Eliotic strictures," it has overlooked the possibility of New York School poets writing in a way that is similar to Eliot's—partly because New York School poets

²³ Hazel Smith's *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2000) is, notably, the only full-length study of the city's physical impression on New York School poetry. Timothy Gray also considers the kind of landscape New York City provides throughout his *Urban Pastoral*, while acknowledging all of the essays and collections that have briefly alluded to the role of the city in New York School writing (Gray 10-11).

²⁴ Diggory xiv.

explicitly insist on an affinity to Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams. During a lecture on Williams' influence,²⁵ Notley suggests that her poetic grandparents were Whitman and Emily Dickinson, and elusively explains that New York School poets come from one of two fathers:

...Then Dickinson and Whitman mated—since they were half divine they could do anything they wanted—and they had 2 sons, William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound, and a third son, T.S. Eliot who went to a faraway country and never came back.

In the family-tree that Notley offers, Eliot is the son that could not possibly have had her, because of a metaphoric combination of distance and detachment from the American tradition she aspires to. And other New York School poets echo her sentiments,²⁶ quickly resisting an association with Eliot, in favor of more directly inheriting the Imagist tradition by allying themselves, instead, with Pound and Williams.²⁷ And while Eliot did, most simply, travel to a “faraway land,” his poetry

²⁵ “Doctor Williams' Heiresses: A Lecture Delivered at 80 Langton Street, 2006 San Francisco, Feb. 12, 1980” *Tuumba* 28 (July 1980): Entire Issue (unnumbered).

²⁶ Berrigan explains that in reading Eliot's poetry he “fell in love with this kind of brown music that I received in his works right away. And after that it was all analysis, and I found myself not overly interested in analysis, to put it mildly” (*Talking in Tranquility* 154).

²⁷ This alliance will be explored most in this study's chapter on Berrigan.

In his introduction to *The Selected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2008), Mark Ford explains: “In a talk given in 1952 at the Club—an artists' forum on East Eighth Street where painters, and occasionally poets, exchanged ideas and insults—O'Hara targeted especially those laboring under the ‘deadening and obscuring and precious effect’ of T. S. Eliot. ‘And after all, only Whitman and Crane and Williams, of the American poets,’ ‘Personism’ declares, ‘are better than the movies’” (xii).

explores many different kinds of spaces inhabited on that journey, and his changing use of form²⁸ reflects the changes in the kinds of spaces intimately inhabited.

As evident in Notley's story, New York School poets have tended to exclude Eliot from their narratives, and while Eliot scholars have attended to the many facets of his writing, they have elided the very note which harmonizes the New York School's writings with Eliot's: while Eliot's poetry harks to the landscape²⁹ and is often a City Poetry,³⁰ the musing activities of Eliot's *Prufrock and Other Observations*, *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*³¹ occur in rooms, as is the case for many of O'Hara's, Berrigan's, Notley's and Padgett's poems. The room-based setting of Eliot's poetry merits its own consideration, and a beginning is offered in an article written for a recent collection of essays on *The Waste Land*.³² While it would be interesting to retrospectively consider the way Eliot's poetry takes on new dimensions when viewed through the prism of New York School poetry, the scope of this study requests that more specific attention be given to the simple yet large question: How is New York School poetry formal?

²⁸ Consider the formal variances in *Prufrock and Other Observations*, *The Waste Land*, and *Four Quartets*, for examples.

²⁹ Nancy Hargrove's *Landscape as Symbol in the Poetry of T. S. Eliot* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1978) is the most extensive study of this.

³⁰ Among others, John Johnston's *The Poet and the City: A Study in Urban Perspectives* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1984) and Robert Crawford's *The Savage and the City* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1987) classify Eliot as a city poet.

³¹ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems* (Orlando, Florida: Harcourt Brace, 1934).

³² Yasmine Shamma, "'The Rooms Enclosed': Eliot's Settings," *The Waste Land at 90: A Retrospective*, ed. by Joe Moffett (NY, New York: Rodopi, 2011) 165-186.

Theoretical Anterooms

The stanza—specifically the twentieth century city stanza—grappling with questions of place, comes to take on its etymology, becoming a kind of linguistic room or inner space which poets may inflect with the dimensions of urban domestic life. Rooms are described throughout contemporary and modern American poetry within stanzas, so that the room often becomes inherently imitated and reflected in the shape of the stanza. This kind of reflection is notable in poems of The New York School which are set in apartments. In returning to the etymological roots of the word *stanza*, these contemporary poets not only engage in an age old conceit of western poetry, but also reinvent that conceit to accommodate the conditions of late twentieth century urban life. And as the stanza has become such a place to respond in, it gets, by the late 1980s in New York City, increasingly crowded, breathless and intense.

Accordingly, the page becomes a place riddled with the tensions of city life, as poets who have lived in cities, or in the idea of them, manipulate syntax, style and form—poetically rendering urban density. For example, in New York School poetry, long unbroken stanzas are consistently offered, with little punctuation, alongside the sense that characters are proliferating and time is unmarked and rapidly slipping, within undeniably difficult syntax—all hinting at an inescapable exhaustion. Yet the same is true of city rooms, just in a more physical or actual sense.³³ So when Koch writes “The

³³ Throughout his *Poetics of Space* (Beacon, Massachusetts: Beacon, 1994), Gaston Bachelard explores the relationship humans have with the spaces they inhabit. His first chapter points to changing notions of the home in the city: “In Paris there are no houses, and the inhabitants of the big city live in superimposed boxes... [The houses] have no roots and, what is quite unthinkable for a dreamer of houses, sky-scrapers have no cellars. From the street to the roof,

Boiling Water,” and when Allen Ginsberg writes “Howl” or “America,” and O’Hara writes “Meditations in an Emergency,” or Notley writes, “Place myself in New York [Need One More Time There],” all in chunks of rarely broken up stanzas and seemingly haphazard form, their poems become impressions of their external, or urban, situations.

Poems—particularly those of The New York School poets—bear imprints of the environments they describe, often absorbing the shape of the room into the shape³⁴ of the stanzas placed on the page. And though The New York School poets themselves reject a relation to high modernists such as Eliot (as in Notley’s above quoted lines), on the printed page they are engaged in a conversation those poets began in the first half of the twentieth century. The point is that these poetries are formally “answerable” (to borrow a term from Bakhtin—see below), or at least attempt to be answerable to the environment from which they speak. Mikhail Bakhtin writes of this phenomenon in “Art and Answerability.”³⁵ Bakhtin first disapproves of art that is

... Too self-confident, audaciously self-confident, and too high-flown, for it is in no way bound to answer for life. And, of course, life has no hope of ever catching up with art of this kind. ‘That’s too exalted for

the rooms pile up one on top of the other, while the tent of a horizonless sky encloses the entire city. But the height of city buildings is a purely *exterior* one. Elevators do away with the heroism of stair climbing so that there is no longer any virtue in living up near the sky. *Home* has become mere horizontality. The different rooms that compose living quarters jammed into one floor all lack one of the fundamental principles for distinguishing and classifying the values of intimacy” (26-7).

³⁴ By “shape,” I do not mean the obvious shapes of concrete poetry, but more subtle shapes, created by poetic devices within lines—senses of length, order and jaggedness given through line breaks, punctuation and stanza size.

³⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*, eds. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov (Austin: U of Texas P, 1990) 1.

us’—says life. ‘That’s art, after all! All we’ve got is the humble prose of living.’ (1)

Throughout twentieth century poetry, rooms, city-blocks, gardens and un-ideal cities offer generative vantage points for the “humble prose of living” to be written from (consider the many twentieth century poetry movements that are named after the places they started in). In this way, New York School poems are comprehensively “answerable.” What Bakhtin abstractly seeks as a “unity of answerability” (2), becomes actualized in the unity of poems written out of inhabited spaces.

Bakhtin’s short essay on answerability ends with a call to make art that matches life. When life is particularly urban, though, art seems to magnify it within the constructs of living spaces—particularly rooms.³⁶ Almost as if aware of the pity of unanswered inspiration, New York School poets offer emotional and physical reactions to urban life, rendering forms inwardly, often to critical effect. Though it is interesting that rooms appear throughout twentieth century poetry, it becomes more interesting to ask how poems become places to better accommodate or rebelliously eject the subjects of these rooms.

There is precedent for considering the way that rooms shape literature. Julia Brown’s *Bourgeois Interior*,³⁷ Diane Fuss’s *The Sense of an Interior*³⁸ and Victoria Rosner’s *Literature and the Architecture of Private Life*³⁹ affirm that late 19th century and early 20th

³⁶ It could be argued that in landscape poetry, the opposite is prone to happening: as large outdoor spaces request a different (potentially more open) kind of formal register.

³⁷ Julia Brown, *The Bourgeois Interior* (Virginia: U of Virginia P, 2008).

³⁸ Diane Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms That Shaped Them* (London: Routledge, 2004).

³⁹ Victoria Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (New York: Columbia U P, 2005) 2.

century literature springs from and is generated by the spaces constructed for private life. These studies examine the shaping effects of bedrooms, kitchens, corners, parlors and desks. And in the context of theory, philosophers, environmental psychologists and urban theorists have considered that people live in city-dwellings like Russian-dolls. Place philosopher Edward Casey reflects on Martin Heidegger's, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's and Gaston Bachelard's conceptions of space, eventually arguing that the parameters of experience had *in* a house are more informative than the actual physical parameters *of* the house.⁴⁰ So, the experience had in spaces (rather than the actual dimensions of the spaces) gets reflected in the shapes of poems. This will prove crucial when considering New York School poets (who write from small spaces—such as New York City studios), as the physical qualities of their lives shape the emotional dimensions of their poems. Casey claims that the home, however small, becomes a “place-world, a world of places” (290). The smallest unit of lived-in space, besides the body, is the room, and the room holds many objects that receive almost obsessive attention through the course of New York School poems. Casey continues describing how people live in “worlds” “of places,” arriving at a point relevant to this study of rooming poems:

What matters [in a house] is the degree of intimacy and intensity of our experience there; when these are acutely felt, the very distinction between universe and world ... becomes otiose. ... The exploration is not architectural, much less geometrical; it is a matter of rooms as dreamed, imagined, remembered—and *read*. (290)

While Casey reflects on the way that the “exploration” is neither architectural nor geometrical, within poetic constructions, the formulation of the exploration is forced into something between architecture, geometry and dreaming (Notley's poem, “101,” is

⁴⁰ Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997)

one of many from the first and second generation New York School poets that explore the relationship between dreaming and writing). And this formulation receives the distinction of “intimacy and intensity” in New York School poetry.

Wallace Stevens writes: “We have a sense of upheaval,” and goes on to describe how the contemporary poet must “establish themselves” on contemporaneous objects (he offers “herrings and apples”).⁴¹ New York Poets write repeatedly of this dynamic—in that their poems create the sorts of spaces they describe feeling situated within. Berrigan writes, for example: “I verbalized a place... /Always possessed of a disconnected head, I had a perfect heart”;⁴² Notley echoes: “I have a headache in a

⁴¹ In “The Irrational Element in Poetry” (*The Poet's Work: 29 Poets on the Origins and Practice of Their Art*, ed. Reginald Gibbons. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979) 49-59), Stevens writes: “We are preoccupied with events, even when we do not observe them closely. We have a sense of upheaval. We feel threatened. We look from an uncertain present toward a more uncertain future. One feels the desire to collect oneself against all this in poetry as well as in politics. . . . Resistance is the opposite of escape. The poet who wishes to contemplate the good in the midst of confusion is like the mystic who wishes to contemplate God in the midst of evil. There can be no thought of escape. Both the poet and the mystic may establish themselves on herrings and apples. The painter may establish himself on a guitar, a copy of Figaro and a dish of melons. These are fortifyings, although irrational ones. The only possible resistance to the pressure of the contemporaneous is a matter of herrings and apples or, to be less definite, the contemporaneous itself. In poetry, to that extent, the subject is not the contemporaneous, because that is only the nominal subject, but the poetry of the contemporaneous. Resistance to the pressure of ominous and destructive circumstance consists of its conversion, so far as possible, into a different, an explicable, an amenable circumstance” (49).

⁴² Ted Berrigan, *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan*, eds. Alice Notley, Anselm Berrigan and Edmund Berrigan (Berkeley: U of California P 2005) 521.

burning house for years.”⁴³ The above allegories of “upheaval” are offered within—and almost opposed to—the fixity of houses, perhaps because within contained places one may come to feel the limits of their own containment. In his *Spaces for the Sacred*, Philip Sheldrake explains: “Because people are ‘embodied’ they are also ‘somewhere.’”⁴⁴ Most interestingly, poets of The New York Schools choose the poem as the place within which this feeling may be deliberated. New York School poetry asks how bodies, and their extensions—houses (“and the body-self such a shadowy fragile house,” writes Notley)⁴⁵—, can be replicated in poetry. As bodied, constructed, roomed-life implies a responsibility of composure, the will to compose offers a generative tension in poems written from places of discomposure—whether they be economic, cultural or situational.

The New York School’s Place

This study will show how the hitherto understudied form of New York School poetics is concerned with outer-inner-spaces. O’Hara, agreed to be one of the leaders of The New York School of Poetry, explores the infinite imaginable external space one perceives in New York City, and the tension it holds with the finitude that real inhabited apartments present. And Berrigan, eager to pick up where O’Hara leaves

⁴³ Alice Notley, *Mysteries of Small Houses* (New York: Penguin, 1998) 81.

⁴⁴ Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001) 9.

⁴⁵ Notley, *Mysteries of Small Houses* 137.

off,⁴⁶ continues a tradition of reflecting lived-in and understood rooms of American poetry in his own spatially concerned New York School Poetry—explicitly in the writing of his *The Sonnets*, and implicitly in his later poetry’s subjects and formal manipulations.

O’Hara, Berrigan, Notley and Padgett, throughout their writings, make large claims about the poetics of space. These claims are visibly actualized in their poetic forms and quietly noticeable in the commentaries that float around their writings. But Notley (Berrigan’s widow) does this most explicitly, spending the entire span of a book explicitly asking and answering the question: What relationship do people have to houses, and houses to poems? Notley’s *Mysteries of Small Houses*, written in the decade following Berrigan’s death, retraces a personal history of inhabiting “small” constructed spaces, and asks: How are lived-in spaces remembered and recreated in the construction of a poem? While O’Hara asks, “Am I a door?” (*CP* 268) and Berrigan tells an interviewer, “My poems are like rooms” (*Talking in Tranquility* 21), Notley’s 1998 collection fully expands and thrives on these offhand sentiments. Her *Mysteries of Small Houses* serves as a work that posits and attempts to finally answer the question of how the word *stanza* may recall its etymology. Specifically, her “101” (explored in this study’s third and final chapters), engages with apartments as structuring tropes. And Padgett, Berrigan’s peer, frequent collaborator, and fellow organizer of the Poetry Project at St. Marks’ place, strives, in his 40 years of poetry, to explore the space of moments. His poetry, and specifically his most recent *How Long*, offers places where notions of the

⁴⁶ After a year of little writing, O’Hara died in 1966. Two years earlier, Berrigan’s *The Sonnets* put Berrigan on the New York School page. O’Hara called Berrigan’s work, “a fact of modern poetry” (See the introduction to Berrigan’s *The Sonnets* (New York: Penguin Poets, 2000) xiv).

space-time confluence may be finally attended to, and so a consideration of it serves to end this study in the contemporary moment.

It is also worth noting that while “The New York Schools” here referred to definitely consist of First and Second Generation New York School poets, there has also been abstract talk of Third and Fourth Generation New York School Poets. Jordan Davis, Koch’s biographer, outlines parameters of the First, Second, Third and Fourth generation New York Poets in Jordan Davis’s “Peeling Oranges on Top of the Skyscrapers,”⁴⁷ and Ron Silliman frequently refers to a Third Generation New York School in his blog writings.⁴⁸ These “energetic forefingers” (Bachelard’s term for relegated experience (213)) extend into the twenty-first century, partly due to the ongoing readings and publications of The Poetry Project at St. Mark’s Place, and the continuance of New York Schools of Painting.⁴⁹ While Davis’s work is the most extensive and explicit attempt to outline the history of a school that prefaces its own

⁴⁷ Jordan Davis, “Peeling Oranges on Top of the Skyscrapers: Towards a Name-Blind History of Poetry Since 1960,” *Vanitas* 1: 5-13.

⁴⁸ Silliman’s November 23 2005 review of Davis’s article (“November 23, 2005,” *Ron Silliman Blog*, 20 Apr. 2011, <<http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2005/11/>>); his “November 26, 2005” post (20 Apr. 2011, <<http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2005/11/>>); and his “September 21, 2009” post (20 Apr. 2011, <<http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2009/09/>>) on Michael Gizzi all refer to a “Third Generation New York School.”

⁴⁹ Robert Metzger’s introduction to Susan Sommer’s *The Rhythms of Color in Nature* (Introduction. *Susan Sommer*, 20 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.susansommer.com/>>) distinguishes Sommer as “separate” from “other third and fourth generation New York School” painters: “Town and country combined with a potent dose of the tropics give these paintings a jolt which separates Sommer from other third and fourth generation New York School Abstract Expressionists.”

title with “So-Called,” Davis aligns Second and Third Generation New York School poets with John Ashbery instead of—as this study chooses—Frank O’Hara. Silliman considers Davis’ choice and argues:

But the name that really is missing here, more than any other, is that of Frank O’Hara. His Irish moniker pops up as a visible absence in the very second bullet of Davis’ formal definition of the New York School’s first generation, in fact: “these writers were at least as influenced by the literature of continental Europe as they were by English poetry.” That is, to put it mildly, unproven in the case of O’Hara & immediately raises the question of Davis’ already slightly skewed timing bracket, focusing as it does from 1960 onward. I would argue that Davis is already involved in one of the most problematic elements of theorizing the New York School, because in the early 1960s John Ashbery was in France & physically removed to the day-to-day, face-to-face interactions so crucial to group formation in that literary period. So the theoretical question is this: just how central is John Ashbery to that first generation, or has his centrality been a thing that has grown later on in retrospect, in the minds, imaginations & influence of writers from succeeding generations, whether in Gens two, three, four & five, or elsewhere, say, among Ashbery’s quieter advocates who wouldn’t think of hanging out with the unwashed masses at the Church.⁵⁰

In Silliman’s questioning of Ashbery, there exists an implicit answer: O’Hara was more central to the school at the time,⁵¹ for his mere tendency to organize a party—at night, and on the page—as his energetic poetry exposes.⁵² Ashbery is still writing at the time

⁵⁰ “November 23, 2005,” *Ron Silliman Blog* (20 April 2011, <<http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/>>).

⁵¹ Russell Ferguson notes: “Ashbery himself lived in Paris for most of the period during which the ‘School’ might be said to have been most active.” (Russell Ferguson, “In Memory of My Feelings: Frank O’Hara and American Art,” *Jacket Magazine* 10, October 1999, August 2011, <<http://jacketmagazine.com/10/>>).

⁵² Lehman writes: “The poet at the vital center of the New York School was O’Hara. The group did not gel, Ashbery observed, until O’Hara arrived in New York in 1951 ‘to kind of cobble everything together and tell us what we and they were doing.’... O’Hara’s death... in 1966 removed the group’s dominant personality. But by then the New York School had

of this study, more conservatively, quietly and steadily, and no doubt has an energy of his own, but it is one of sustenance and not, as in O'Hara's case, moving force.⁵³

Silliman explains that the problem in attempting to outline the Second Generation New York School, is one tied to the problem of distinguishing influence:

I think the whole question of this most formidable of all group formations is very interesting to think about, to spatialize as a metaphor something akin to what happens to ripples in a pond after a large stone is tossed in. If that first stone was, as I would argue, Frank O'Hara, then by the time of the 3rd generation, the ripples have not only reached the shore, but begun to bounce back, so that we have outward ripples now intersecting those coming back in, making it impossible really to discern who really is, or is not, 4th generation, let alone 5th or 6th, which is about what we would be at right now.⁵⁴

established a sphere of influence beyond its initial milieu. That influence has ramified over the years, and today the impulse and strategies of the school have less to do with the specific geography of New York than with a state of mind in which the capacity for wonderment is matched by the conviction that poems are linguistic engines rather than repositories of felt experience" (7).

⁵³ In her *Poet among Painters*, Perloff writes of the difference between Ashbery and O'Hara: "O'Hara's 'voyage' is a perfectly ordinary lunchtime stroll, but the poet's 'phalanx of particulars' is carefully chosen to convey the peculiar animation that characterizes the city even on a hot day... Everything is moving, changing, shifting ground, for the poem deals with the passage of time and eventually with death. Ashbery's voyage 'into the secret, vaporous night ... the unknown that loves us'... is, by contrast, elusive, shadowy, archetypal. If his poetry lacks O'Hara's immediacy, it has, perhaps, a greater suggestiveness, a deeper resonance. If his voice is less genial and engaging, it compensates by its astonishing self-awareness, its fidelity to the mind's baffling encounters with the objects, whether real or imaginary, that it contemplates. But we need not prefer one mode or one poet to the other" (195).

⁵⁴ "November 23, 2005" *Ron Silliman Blog* (20 April 2011, <<http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com>>).

This study relies on a “spatializing” “metaphor” for cohesion. First and Second Generation New York School poetries pass forward, in and along with the energies of their poems, a practice of creating reflections of space. And though Davis’ article charts a different history of The New York Schools of Poetry (linked to Ashbery instead of O’Hara), it still relies heavily on the facts of where poets studied and migrated to and from. In this way, critics like Davis and Diggory (with their abstract and actual maps of Manhattan) not only participate in what Bachelard calls “relegating” “being to an exteriorized place” (213), but more substantially suggest that place was and is an informing factor in tracing the parameters of The New York Schools of Poetry. What follows is an extension and explicit affirmation of such inherent suggestions. The role of lived-in space (the most intimate of spaces) has inflected New York School Poetry’s (a poetry of notable intimacy) form. This is a study of those inflections.

Chapter One reconsiders O’Hara’s poetry, as a poetry of formal effects. O’Hara’s poetry offers a vantage point for the second half of the twentieth’s century’s “open” poetry (to borrow Lyn Hejinian’s notion).⁵⁵ In Chapter One, attention is given to the way that O’Hara responds—not only to New York City, but to his city apartments, by registering the shapes and views of those apartments in his poems. His poetry repeatedly alludes to domestic fixtures and the way that his “body” is like a room. In this way, his poems become harbors where these dynamics are explored. This chapter relies heavily on theoretical frameworks provided by Jane Jacobs’ *The Life and Death of*

⁵⁵ Lynn Hejinian discusses the politics of “open” and “closed” poetry throughout her “The Rejection of Closure” (*The Poetry Foundation*, 21 Aug. 2011, <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/essay/>>).

Great American Cities,⁵⁶ Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*⁵⁷ and Heidegger's *Poetry, Language, Thought*.⁵⁸ These studies of urban development and space offer theory through which these heavily populated, unpunctuated, unrhymed winding poems can be understood as answering to their urban-scapes.

Chapter Two, on Berrigan's poetry, suggests that the formalism of Second Generation New York School Poetry has been overlooked. Borrowing one of Berrigan's repeated lines for a title, "Bring Me Red Demented Rooms" is a chapter that examines the dementions and subsequent dimensions of Berrigan's poetry. Berrigan governed the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Place and edited "C" magazine, energetically reviving the New York School.⁵⁹ This chapter focuses on Berrigan's work to illustrate how, through poetry, practice and life, Berrigan encouraged poetry that sounded like talk, talked of daily drunken experience, and found its place, practically, among friends in his apartment and, poetically, in the sonnet form. In this way, Berrigan's sonnets challenge the public-private divide and traditional assumptions about form. Throughout his crowded sonnets he repeats spatially obsessed lines like: "Is there any room in that room that you room in?" and "Bring me red demented rooms."⁶⁰ And as his memoirs chronicle the many rooms he inhabited, Berrigan himself mentions the way these

⁵⁶ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1992).

⁵⁷ Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Beacon, Massachusetts: Beacon, 1994).

⁵⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Row, 1971).

⁵⁹ "Ted Berrigan was wont to say that he invented the New York School of poetry. And there is psychological, though not historical truth to this" (Ward 177).

⁶⁰ See *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan*, pages 28, 61, 170, 32 and 62, respectively.

crowded and demented rooms were important to his poetry, going so far as to state “A poem is like a room.” Throughout his writing, Berrigan makes poem-rooms that at once answer to and subvert John Donne’s call to “build in sonnets pretty rooms.”⁶¹

Chapter Three, on the “Living New York School’s Poetry of Inner Space,” looks at two remaining poets of the Second Generation New York Schools: Alice Notley and Ron Padgett. In an interview, Notley⁶² states, “This is not the poetry of place ... and it has nothing to do with aesthetic movements.” Her poetry, she affirms, is of experience. Investigating past experiences, Notley’s *Mysteries of Small Houses* poems revisit old apartments and rooms, written from outside of them (in Paris). Throughout the collection, she remembers floor-plans and, through this retracing, offers a direction to memory and poetic creation. Notley’s poems imply that place is, poetically rendered, a matter of experience, and Padgett’s further imply that New York places, and poetic forms are structures which sentiments like: “The best part about ‘Today / is ‘Today’” (“Strawberries in Mexico”)⁶³ may move through. This chapter closely examines Notley and Padgett’s recent poems and comments, to plot the place of place in nineties and noughties second generation New York School writing, and to ask, again and finally: How does place, and specifically lived-in space inform New York School Poetry?

⁶¹ This line comes from John Donne’s Renaissance poem, “The Canonization” (“The Canonization,” *Poetry Foundation*, 2 Feb. 2012, <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/173353/>>).

⁶² “Walking that Stretch for a Second: Alice Notley in Conversation with Yasmine Shamma” *Jacket* 40 (Late 2010, 31 January 2011, <<http://jacketmagazine.com/40/>>).

⁶³ Ron Padgett, “Strawberries in Mexico,” first published in Padgett and Shapiro’s *Anthology of New York Poets* (New York: Random House, 1970) 466.

Chapter Four consists of two interviews with the living poets in this study, and these interviews function by way of conclusion. Notley and Padgett were explicitly asked about the role of space in their writing, and their responses suggest that structural deliberations inform their poems written out of and about inhabited spaces.

Throughout this study, the central question is: How do urban poets respond to their situations by recreating them in poetry? Moreover, how does the line, opened up throughout the twentieth century by urban poets, become a place to register this affect? Mechanisms like the poetic “foot,” after all, revert to fundamentals in city poetry. While Eco-criticism has recently given attention to landscape in poetry, and earlier French theory to the subject of the city, the smallest unit of place—the room, or “stanza”—the “place one stands in,” has been curiously elided. What follows is a dwelling on this elision.

I. Frank O'Hara's Variousness

*My words are love
which willfully parades in
its room, refusing to move.*

-Frank O'Hara⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, ed. Donald Allen (California: U of California P, 1995)89; 216. Hereafter, all references to O'Hara's poems will be from this collection, unless otherwise noted, and will be abbreviated and cited in text.

O'Hara's speaker advises himself reflexively, through a ventriloquized confession. An inherent inclination is outlined ("you love Manhattan"), along with a push to do "love" differently: "always embrace things"—encouraged by the line break. Here O'Hara displays something more deliberate than the "I do this I do that" casualness for which he's come to be known. As the line breaks and forced space on the page suggest, here and throughout O'Hara's poetry, an "appropriate sense of space" is pursued formally, locally and thematically, alongside, and sometimes in tension with the pull to "always embrace things." What makes these imperatives even more difficult to fulfill is that O'Hara writes from and around Manhattan—a city full of all things, except space. O'Hara's page, viewed formally, is riddled with subsequent negotiations, as the city-based poet on vacation subtly shows himself to be caught between the contradictory urban pulls to "always embrace things" (a push to contain) "freely and with an appropriate sense of space" (a push to open and understand).

O'Hara's poems repeatedly attempt to juggle these two contradictory imperatives—"always" "embracing" "things," "with an appropriate sense of space"—making his poetry difficult to apprehend. The publication of his oeuvre in 1971⁶⁷ started a serious era in O'Hara scholarship. And as O'Hara's poems tease, toss and turn, he baffles his critics, who seem indecisive about how to hold O'Hara's opus. Charles Molesworth writes in his review⁶⁸ of *The Collected Poems*:

For all we can say about them, they yet remain chastely irreducible, as if they wanted nothing so much as to beggar commentary. But if we read them in bulk, we are left with the peculiar sensation we've been listening to a manic waif, someone for whom any audience becomes the most charitable therapy, for as soon as the poems stop talking, stop chatting, their speaker will fall dead. (61)

⁶⁷ *The Collected Poems*, cited above, was published in 1971.

⁶⁸ Charles Molesworth, "The Clear Architecture of the Nerves: The Poetry of Frank O'Hara" (*The Iowa Review* 6.3/4 (Summer-Fall 1975)) 61-74.

Helen Vendler equates *The Collected* to a drawer full of Polaroids: “Some overexposed, some under developed, some blurred, some unfocused, and yet any number of them succeeding in fixing the brilliance of some long-forgotten lunch, or the curve of a body in a single gesture, or a snowstorm, or a childhood movie” only asking for a Selected version of his poems to be published so to not “drown O’Hara in his own fluency.”⁶⁹ And Lytle Shaw writes: “One grasps [O’Hara] best through the special joy evoked by *The Collected Poems* as an entirety, where the daily mapping and enacting of social formations and the constant reshuffling of cultural monuments expand, page by page, into a fragmentary and quotidian epic of urban life.”⁷⁰ *The Collected Poems* may be so overwhelming because the poetry features or is at least set in, more often than not, that overwhelming American phenomenon: New York City. These reviews of O’Hara’s opus, after all, also serve as reviews of New York City—it is a place that is overwhelmingly “fluent,” “overexposed,” “underdeveloped,” “brilliant,” “irreducible,” manic, fragmentary, monumental, daily mapped, and chatty. After 24 hours in New York City, one is often “left with the peculiar sensation that we’ve been listening to a manic waif, someone for whom any audience becomes the most charitable therapy...” as in these typical O’Hara lines, and moods:

Now it is the 27th
of this month
which would have been my birthday
if I’d been born in it
but I wasn’t
would have made me a Scorpion
...
instead of Cancer
(CP 345)

I am so nervous about my life the little of it I can get a hold of
(CP 331)

⁶⁹ Vendler 4.

⁷⁰ Lytle Shaw, *Frank O’Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2006) 235.

So many echoes in my head
 ... I am frantic
 (CP 352)

I wish I were reeling around Paris
 instead of reeling around New York
 I wish I weren't reeling at all
 (CP 328)

Perhaps responding to Vendler's request for a floating device, Mark Ford didn't select these "manic chatty" lines for his recent: *The Selected Poems of Frank O'Hara*.⁷¹ Poems that are repeatedly published in selections and anthologies publicize a happier, more city enthused and enthusing O'Hara. For example, "Autobiographia Literaria" a short early poem is the first in both Ford's and Allen's *Selected Poems*. Composed of three stanzas, with lines varying from 3-5 words and with seemingly basic imagery, the poem appears relatively simple. And yet, being an early poem, it offers a strange vantage point, immediately complicating attempts to disentangle O'Hara from Manhattan's grid. The poem ends:

And here I am, the
 center of all beauty!
 writing these poems!
 Imagine!

This parade of exclamation points subtly sets up important questions worth asking while in the throes of O'Hara's poetry: Where is here? What is the center? Does being at the center govern writing, or does the "I"? Here the "I" is, at least syllabically, in the center of the first line and implicitly at the center of many other possibilities. The rhythmic stresses, barely detectable, fall outside of "I," "all" and "these"—lending the "center" subject more shadowy hiding places in the lines, as in the stressed landing

⁷¹ *The Selected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Mark Ford (New York: Knopf 2008). This is the second selection of O'Hara's poetry to be published since *The Collected Poems*.

spots of “here” and “am.” What kind of places do O’Hara’s poems create, and how are these creations in conversation with his lived in spaces?

The role of place in art is not only a New York School question, but a twentieth century question. Neal Bowers addresses it,⁷² through the ambiguous last stanza of “Autobiographia Literaria.” He writes:

Of special importance here is the phrasing of that final stanza, which ambiguously suggests that 1) Frank O’Hara, 2) Poetry, or 3) his location (the city) is the center of all beauty. Rather than a multiple choice of meanings, the poem actually presents a coherent vision of Frank O’Hara’s world. He, poetry and the city are one harmonious, albeit hectic and overwhelming, whole.

Bowers constructs a “Frank O’Hara World,” emphasizing that its focal point ranges freely from speaker, to poetry to city, to beauty. Through formal and imagistic antics, this range expands throughout O’Hara’s poems, and in “Autobiographia” its expansion does govern and provide a sense of harmony. But it also poses a large question: Does “beauty!” come from poetry, from the individual, or from the environment? A long glance at O’Hara’s poems, or even the (currently solidifying) canon of twentieth century poetry, suggests that it is “The City” which merits an exclamation point, as it is the place where all three forces—art, individual and environment—coalesce.

A closer look at “Autobiographia Literaria’s” title and dates proves this poem’s subject to be the poet himself. It’s a “faux-naïf” autobiography, after all, written in “1949 or 1950” (as *The Selected* notes), the years O’Hara first visited New York and helped found the Poets’ Theater, alongside those that would become his dear city friends. The title is reminiscent of other works that borrow titles from Latin, and claim, in their titles, to be autobiographical (such as “Apologia pro Vita Sua,” and *Biographia Literaria*). All this muddle hints towards “Autobiographia Literaria” having exclamation

⁷² Neal Bowers, “The City Limits,” *Frank O’Hara*, ed. Jim Elledge (U of Michigan P, 1990).

points in it because the speaker has found himself at “the center”—for what punctuation mark would being on the outside of “all beauty” merit? Throughout O’Hara’s poetry, it is this placement—being-in-the-middle-of-things, at a party (“A Party full of Friends”), on a block (“Steps”), on Fire Island (“A True Account of Talking to the Sun on Fire Island”), or in the center of remembering—in a memory (“In Memory of my Feelings”)—that warrants the enthusiasm which distinguishes O’Hara’s tone.

This enthusiasm becomes louder when within a radius of Times Square. Or, at very least, it has been registered as louder, with O’Hara writing, “Don’t let them take me away!” and fellow critics echoing.⁷³ An odd but subtle phenomenon makes this case: almost all tribute poems featuring any form of “To Frank O’Hara” tend to be more about Manhattan than O’Hara.⁷⁴ Maybe it is New York that drowns O’Hara in his fluency.⁷⁵

Instead of tiptoeing along the line that teasingly tends to separate poetry written from a city from the poetry of city life, O’Hara’s poetry suggests the line is blurred in space, as spatial theorists do, that dwelling is a matter of being within measure. Heidegger calls this “poetic dwelling,” and describes the way in which poetry and being

⁷³ Brad Gooch’s biography, titled *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O’Hara* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), makes the point in its title, that O’Hara’s poetry is a city poetry.

⁷⁴ Anne Waldman’s “A Phone Call from Frank O’Hara” and Greg Delanty’s “To Frank O’Hara,” are examples (both available at *The Poetry Foundation*. 31 Jan. 2012 <poetryfoundation.org>).

⁷⁵ In *The Process of Poetry*, earlier referenced, Watkins writes: “James Breslin is correct in noting that O’Hara’s New York is significant in that it finally moves beyond the city as purgatorial journey evident in such poets as Eliot and Ginsberg. New York in O’Hara is not an “unreal” city; rather it is the centre of the real...” (133).

is stationed within “the fourfold among things” (*Poetry Language Thought* 156).

Bachelard explains the limits of physical embodiment as incisive: “In being, everything is circuitous, roundabout, recurrent, so much talk; a chaplet of sojournings, a refrain with endless verses” (*Poetics of Space* 214). O’Hara’s “variousness,” which critics have isolated as a form of “joy” (as in Molesworth’s review, above) stressing the “grace” part of the line: “Grace to be born and live as variously as possible,” becomes, in this way, tinged with futility. Even if the stress were to fall on the word “possible,” the spatially alert reader and author would still be cornered, as Bachelard points out:

But what a spiral man’s being represents! And what a number of invertible dynamisms there are in this spiral! One no longer knows *right away* whether one is running toward the center or escaping... Thus the spiraled being who, from outside, appears to be a well invested center, will never reach his center. (214)

O’Hara’s speaker repeatedly refers to being “spiraled,” and highlights the circumstance as the best and worst possible thing in life (“Aren’t we all just muddy instants?” (*CP* 196)). Moreover, all of O’Hara’s descriptions of this “spiraled being” reflect sensitivity for the spatiality of it: he cites being “crowded,” “muddy,” “dirty,” “messy,” “big,” “clear,” “endless,” “long” etc. That is, O’Hara’s “vernacular,” which John Ashbery⁷⁶ suggests O’Hara found in New York City, is that of the urban.

Jane Jacobs, an urban theorist with particular interest in the space and time from which O’Hara himself wrote, outlines the ideal and real circumstances of New

⁷⁶ In Ashbery’s introduction to Donald Allen’s *Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, he writes:

“What was needed was a vernacular corresponding to the creatively messy New York Environment to ventilate the concentrated Surrealist imagery.... In the poems he was to write during the remainder of his life... this vernacular took over, shaping his already considerable gifts toward a remarkable new poetry—both modest and monumental, with something usable about it” (x).

York City's urban layout in her *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (originally published in 1961).⁷⁷ What O'Hara calls "endlessness" "more" and "so much"⁷⁸ are what Jacobs' terms the two circumstances of the city: intensity (the stimulation from each individual city step) and endlessness (the awareness of how many steps the city takes to fill) (Jacobs 379). O'Hara's poetry embraces these two circumstances, poetically rendering "endlessness" and "intensity" in his street poems ("Second Avenue," "Avenue A" etc), and throughout his many other poems that involve "dropping in" throughout New York (*CP* 261).

Jacobs explains that "streets provide the principal visual scenes in cities," and goes on to break the visual city into two:

In the foreground, they show us all kinds of detail and activity. They make a visual announcement . . . that this is an intense life and that into its composition go many different things. They make this announcement to us not only because we may see considerable activity itself, but because we see, in different types of buildings, signs, store fronts or other enterprises or institutions, and so on, the inanimate evidences of activity and diversity. However, if such a street goes on and on into the distance, with the intensity and intricacy of the foreground apparently dribbling into endless amorphous repetitions of itself and finally petering into the utter anonymity of distance, we are also getting a visual announcement that clearly says endlessness.

In terms of all human experience, these two announcements, one telling of great intensity, the other telling of endlessness, are hard to combine into a sensible whole.

One or two of these conflicting sets of impressions has to take precedence. (378-379)

New York School poetry reflects that it is "hard to combine" city impressions "into a sensible whole." As a result, O'Hara's poetry can sometimes seem insensible, while clearly pursuing a sense of wholeness. Jacobs explains that most city constructions

⁷⁷ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books Edition, 1992).

⁷⁸ Intensity and endlessness are best manifest in O'Hara's "Poem read at Joan Mitchell's", discussed below.

promote one view over the other—the long-view, for example, is that preferred by architects, and this might be the view preferred by high modernist poets, “with its connotations of repetition and infinity” (379). But Jacobs also praises the foreground-view as that of the city subject and, in her formulation, this is the New York School poet’s view, as “this is the viewpoint of a person whose purpose it is to use what exists on that street, rather than to look at it in detachment.” As Jacobs plays out both scenarios, she suggests that one must pick between seeing the intensity of the foreground *or* the endlessness of the Longview, to crop *out* the “Superfluous and offensive... deplorable mishmash, better dismissed from mind if possible” (379). If O’Hara’s city-based poems are reflections of a citted-mind, the question arises: What does O’Hara crop out? The answer seems to be: Nothing.

“Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s” is a poem that toys with the idea of cropping things out (*CP* 256). “Presumably written February 16, 1957” on the occasion of “Joan Mitchell’s party for Jane Freilecher and Joe Hazan on the eve of their marriage” (*CP* 539), and the poem is at once occasional and timeless; written to be read locally—at a downtown apartment party, “on the eve” of a marriage of friends, the poem celebrates a universal event. So the poem juggles a foreground-view (the apartment; the evening; the friends) and a long-view (marriage, in general) ultimately suggesting that, in terms of Jacobs’ formulation, a third solution exists: one may endeavor to take in both intensity and endlessness. The intense poem begins to end:

This poem goes on too long because our friendship has been long, long
 for this life and these times, long as art is long and un-
 interruptible,
 and I would make it as long as I hope our friendship lasts if I could
 make poems that long

I hope there will be more
 more drives to Bear Mountain and searches for hamburgers, more
 evenings
 avoiding the latest Japanese movie and watching Helen Vinson
 and Warner Baxter in *Vogues of 1938* instead, more discussions

in lobbies of the respective greatnesses of Diana Adams and
 Allegra Kent,
 more sunburns and more half-mile swims in which Joe beats me as Jane
 watches, lotion-covered and sleepy, more arguments over
 Faulkner's inferiority to Tolstoy while sand gets into my
 bathing trunks
 let's advance and change everything, but leave these little oases in
 case the heart gets thirsty en route
 and I should probably propose myself as a godfather if you have any
 children, since I will probably earn more money some day
 accidentally, and could teach him or her how to swim
 and now there is a Glazunov symphony on the radio and I think of our
 friends who are not here, of John and the nuptial quality
 of his verses (he is always marrying the whole world) and
 Janice and Kenneth, smiling and laughing, respectively (they
 are probably laughing at the Leaning Tower right now)
 but we are all here and have their proxy
 if Kenneth were writing this he would point out how art has changed
 women and women have changed art and men, but men haven't
 changed women much

Of particular interest here is the word “make,” at the start. O'Hara ushers in the lines of
 “more” through the small introduction: “I would make [this poem] as long...” In this
 reflexive stanza, O'Hara points to the Greek etymology of the word “poet”: the poet is
 a “maker” (as opposed to a “writer”). In “writing” there is an explicit attention to
 words, but in “making,” there is an attention to *shape* and the ability to order things to
 happen, alongside that attention to words. So O'Hara commands an attention to the
 shape of the stanza that he “makes” follow. Appropriately, what follows is one “long”
 stanza, in which O'Hara manipulates form organically—breaking the lines of the jam-
 packed stanza in the places that allow “more” begetting words to begin lines, such as
 “and,” “let's” and “but.” These kinds of words are usually just useful—minor and
 connective at most. But here these words come to mean more; given emphasis as line
 starters, and a place in a wider theme of pursuing plenty.

O'Hara wrote “Poem Read at Joan Mitchell's” within the same year that he met
 the Beatniks. So this “poem [that] goes on too long” can be read alongside Gregory

Corso's "Marriage."⁷⁹ "Marriage" was published in 1960, just three years after O'Hara's "Poem Read at Joan Mitchell's" was written. Both poems begin with deliberations of where subjects fit into societal molds (particularly, holy matrimony—as O'Hara's begins "At last you are tired of being single," and Corso's begins "Should I get married?"), and both request large somethings that are intangibly life giving (Corso's "Penguin dust,"⁸⁰ and O'Hara's "more"). In wanting "more," O'Hara summons more, filling out each of his speaker's requests with details ("*Vogues of 1938*," "lotion-covered," "half-mile swims,"), personal details ("sand gets into my bathing trunks"), and gossip ("John ... (he is always marrying the whole world)"), and going so far as to begin and create room for hypothetical situations ("if Kenneth were writing this..."). Where Corso's poem ends in mythical, almost lonely pangs, O'Hara's ends with yet another manifesto. O'Hara's final stanza exposes a poet that values love for its heroic qualities,⁸¹

⁷⁹ Gregory Corso, "Marriage," *The Happy Birthday of Death* (New York: New Directions, 1960) 29.

The first stanza of "Marriage" sets up a similar situation to O'Hara's poem's, but also a markedly different tone and response to the question of matrimony:

Should I get married? Should I be Good?
Astound the girl next door with my velvet suit and faustaus hood?
Don't take her to movies but to cemeteries
tell all about werewolf bathtubs and forked clarinets
then desire her and kiss her and all the preliminaries
and she going just so far and I understanding why
not getting angry saying You must feel! It's beautiful to feel!
Instead take her in my arms lean against an old crooked tombstone
and woo her the entire night the constellations in the sky--

⁸⁰ Corso's poem features the line: "And when the milkman comes leave him a note in the bottle / Penguin dust, bring me penguin dust, I want penguin dust—"

⁸¹ O'Hara explains in another poem of the same year ("John Button Birthday"): "And the lift of our experiences together, / which seems to me legendary. The long subways ..." (*CP*

and considers time as a vague thing through which the variousness of life passes.

After all, the particular absence of time in the above lines is notable: the only mention of time is by way of the general sensing of it— “evenings,” “some day” and, twice, “now”, bringing an attention to the “here” of the poem. What’s more, the poem is titled in tribute to where, and not when, it was read.

An overarching call for “more” emerges with an attention to the imprecision certain localities permit. This summoning of “more” embraces the two conditions Jacobs outlines: “endlessness” (“too long” “half-mile swims,” “Tolstoy” and “let’s advance”) and “intensity” (“more,” “sun-burns” “Faulkner” and “everything”) are simultaneously celebrated. And after we have followed the speaker to understand that his life has been, in the past, beautiful and full, and after we are led to land on a beach (again) alongside the physical props of seashores (“sand,” “bathing trunks,” and “lotion”), we arrive at O’Hara’s ultimate credo: “Let’s advance and change everything.” O’Hara jolts his reader, who at this point in the poem might have been lulled by the poem’s previous nostalgic musings. The moment, the many lines of thought and the full lines of poetry are declared one large movable, energy-filled, dynamic thing, capable of “advancing” and “changing” while being given, in the shape of the poem, something to hold onto—“these little oases” with satiating capacity “in case the heart gets thirsty en route.” Through these lines, O’Hara demonstrates a measure of control: the stanza, stepped away from, comes to look like a series of waves (in the longer lines asking for “mores”) that splash onto the “little oases” of heart-nourishing sentiments within them.

267). Again, in these lines, love is lifted and the experience of it is mapped—made transposable onto subways.

The poem ends as it started—with a loose reference to William Carlos Williams,⁸² it grabs its audience by the confused heart in the way of a fortune cookie, and resigns its “more”-wanting speaker to mortal limits:

but ideas are obscure and nothing should be obscure tonight
 you will live half the year in a house by the sea and half the year in
 a house in our arms
 we peer into the future and see you happy and hope it is a sign that we
 will be happy too, something to cling to, happiness
 the least and best of human attainments

The “house in our arms” is secure in its oasis between the longer lines. One feels safe reading O’Hara’s poetry. To borrow the distinctions he outlines in “Having a Coke with You,” this is “partly because” his images are soft, “partly because” he never says anything truly mean about anyone or anything, “partly because” his form has the look of being haphazard and wanting nothing more than to tell it like it truly is (“Dear Diary, he begins” writes Vendler in her above-mentioned review), and “partly because” he almost always arrives at a dismissive and humble declaration of how human, naked, in love, messy or unsure (“Who am I?” (*CP* 314)) of anything he is.

But O’Hara’s desires are many and clear. The poet who wants to be “at least as live as the vulgar,” jumps at the opportunity to be what Jacobs calls, “superfluous or offensive” (231), or, in O’Hara’s words “both all of the time” (*CP* 500), writing “we are one in the complicated foreground of space.” This unifying of two complicated views characterizes his work. So, at least as a city subject, O’Hara presents and occupies that third, un-mentioned possible reaction to foregrounds and long-views—giving neither precedence, but trying, as the Sun instructs—“always embrace things,” valuing all

⁸² “The effort to be new” mentioned in the beginning of “Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s,” and “ideas are obscure” in the end. In “A Sort of Song,” Williams writes: “Compose. (No ideas / but in things) Invent!” (*The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Vol II: 1939-1962* (New York: New Directions, 1988) 55).

“things” and “the distance” space connotes, not as “deplorable mishmash” (Jacobs 379), but as an impossibly multiple muse. O’Hara calls this muse “Variousness” and shows it to be the intangible city-based spirit that links the quotidian to the marvelous.

O’Hara’s Variousness

While intensity and endlessness are specifically celebrated in O’Hara’s longer poems, O’Hara frequently visits and valorizes variousness, or “deplorable mishmash” as Jacobs calls it. While O’Hara’s grave makes the point clear (“Grace to be born and live as variously as possible” is etched on his tombstone (*CP* xvi)), the idea of being variously (spatially) scattered surfaces throughout his poetry. O’Hara mentions departing often, sometimes wishfully:

And leaving in a great smoky fury
of his loved ones, he sailed
backwards to Europe

Sometimes as strategy: “you don’t want me to go where you go so I go where you don’t want me to” (*CP* 197); sometimes for metaphor: “meanwhile, back at the Paris branch of contemporary depression, I / am dropping through” (317); and most often as a way of conflating the universe:

so I call up Kenneth in Southampton and presto
he is leaning on the shelf in the kitchen three hours away
... wanting to be everything to everybody everywhere
(*CP* 331)

where will you find me, projective verse, since I will be gone?
for six seconds of your beautiful face I will sell the hotel and commit
an uninteresting suicide in Louisiana where it will take them a long time
to know who I am/why I came here/ what and why I am and made to
happen
(*CP* 351)

In his poems, leaving the setting of New York City invites not only physical travel, but time travel, as “sailing backwards” dwells on this time-space ambiguity. O’Hara explains: “I don’t have an American body / I have an anonymous body” (*CP* 168), and in this context his poetry becomes assertively slippery.

These lines also locate a center-point and focal-point. O’Hara’s poems refer to as many European cities as they do to American ones, as many studio apartments as seashores, and in reading O’Hara’s poems for New York, one gets pushed out. Ian Davidson writes of O’Hara’s many places:

Reading through *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, I am struck by the way the poems produce a variety of places (and the connections between them) from which the speaking subject can critique the normative assumptions of mainstream American culture. The places in his poems are rarely described in detail as if they existed beforehand and he simply inhabited them. His activities produce them as they also produce the speaking and writing subject of the poems and explore relationships between the body and the rural and urban landscape.⁸³

Davidson continues exploring the way O’Hara’s speaker moves between places, and the way this moving creates a sense of energy (as distinct from the energy of inhabiting places, as highlighted above). Davidson attends, mostly, to the multitude of these moves. But O’Hara’s living in many cities, in many apartments, and writing in many forms, also means he *left* many cities, many apartments and many forms. The body of his work moves from feeling very American to anonymous (as he goes so far to declare, “I have an anonymous body” (*CP* 168)). Unlocated and untimed—or too located and too timed—the times, places and languages written all over O’Hara’s poems trump attempts to pin O’Hara’s speaker down. His speaker confesses: “I am always tying up and then deciding to depart.” In “Commercial Variations,” “I’m turning in today for a little freedom to travel,” “Let’s advance and change everything” he pleads to his friends

⁸³ Ian Davidson, “Frank O’Hara’s Places,” *Jacket* 36, 2008, 9 Sept. 2011,

<<http://jacketmagazine.com/36/>>.

at “Joan Mitchell’s”, and in “Song,” “But for now I’m gone forever!” Scattering his speaker physically—through this “now you see me now you don’t” rhetoric—becomes a poetic device; lending the poems a visual energy, and clouding the reader’s attempts to trace a self, or a city.

O’Hara’s poetry has been canonized as being New York City poetry. But read chronologically, his poetry moves from feeling New York City-centric, to Euro-centric. For example, O’Hara wrote three poems explicitly about James Dean: “For James Dean,” “Thinking of James Dean,” and “Four Little Elegies” (*CP* 228; 230; 248). All of these poems were begun in October 1955, but the last of the three to be written is also the least locally American of the three. “Four Little Elegies” chronicles Dean’s life, centering on the things he did and didn’t do in New York, Hollywood, Salinas, Palm Springs and many other American popular cities. The saddest, “For James Dean,” was included in Donald Allen’s *Selected*. “For James Dean” features the most references to New York, including the usual type (for O’Hara) in which O’Hara’s speaker becomes part of the city—embodied in it—, to eventually turn into the spirit of a romanticizable jerky lover: “Alone / in the empty streets of New York / I am its dirty feet and head”; “Nostrils of pain down avenues / of luminous spit-globes”; “Peace! to be true to a city / of rats and to love the envy / of the dreary, smudged mouths.” But the last James Dean poem is different, not only in comparison to the other James Dean tributes, but in comparison to O’Hara’s oeuvre. And it is this James Dean poem that lands a spot in the new *Selected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, edited by Mark Ford.⁸⁴ “Thinking of James Dean” is made up of seven quatrains, not rhyming, but highly poetic in the old dependable way that they gain gusto through their alliterations, economy, and almost French like syntactical inversions:

⁸⁴ *The Selected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. Mark Ford (New York: Random House, 2008).

of drifting. The sea is dark and smells of fish beneath its silver surface. To reach the depths and rise, only in the sea; the abysses of life, incessantly plunging not to rise to a face of heat and joy again; habits of total immersion and the stance

victorious in death. And after hours of lying in nature, to nature, and simulated death in the crushing waves, their shells and heart pounding me naked on the shingle...

The ocean's rhythm finds poetic rhythm, and the poem's half-rhymes help the reader understand that in this lull, something's not right. While the next lines eerily predict O'Hara's own beachside death, they also mention Boston, *Julius Caesar*, Spain, *La Bohème* and Florida. The question arises: Where are we?

One need not get a sense of exact location when reading poems by the man whose gravestone features the line from, "For Grace after a Party" ("Grace to be born and live as variously as possible"). But it becomes possible to consider that O'Hara was as much a European as he was a New Yorker, or, more acutely and perhaps latently correctively, as much a poet as he was a New Yorker. His poems demonstrate that he happened to live in Europe, Florida, California, and even the country, and also, occasionally, New York. So the real source of the school's name surfaces: The New York School of Poetry was not named in tribute to New York City, but to a movement of painters propelling abstract expressionism.⁸⁵ When O'Hara wrote about painters of the original New York School, he used terminology that highlights his own poetry's traits:

Whether subjectively lyrical as in Gorky, publicly explosive as in de Kooning, or hieratical as in Newman, [there] exists the traumatic consciousness of emergency and crisis experienced as personal event,

⁸⁵ A term coined by Robert Coates exploited by Myers (as discussed in the previous chapter).

the artist assuming responsibility for being, however accidentally alive here and now. (8-9)⁸⁶

“Subjectively lyrical,” “publicly explosive,” and “hierarchical,” “there exists” in O’Hara’s poetry, “the traumatic consciousness of emergency and crisis experienced as personal event” which is highlighted most explicitly in the title, “Meditations in an Emergency,” and “the artist assuming responsibility for being, however accidentally alive here and now” which is highlighted implicitly in almost all of O’Hara’s poems.

The notion that O’Hara’s poetry speaks to and from many cities is made apprehensible by the recent *Selected Poems*’s selectivity: a series of previously under-attended poems, like the above James Dean poem; “It is 1:55 in Cambridge” (*SP* 98) (instead of the five “It is [a specific time] in New York” poems); and the earlier and previously uncollected “[And Leaving in a Great Smoky Fury]” (*SP* 108) are included in the recent publication. The last example of these poems set in Europe actually threatens not only to leave New York, but to never return. After describing a movement backwards in time and space (“And leaving in a great smoky fury / of his loved ones, he sailed / backwards to Europe discovering islands”), the short poem ends:

But the trees shall stand never
so high as in his native land!
they hoped, but he found ruins and
aqueducts and fountains, and loved them.

In this early justification of departure (which he romanticizes further in his later poetry), O’Hara controverts patriotism: not only can one leave home, but one can leave successfully and even happily—coming to “love” the infrastructure of their found life, wherever it is. The way we read O’Hara’s line from “Grand Central” and many others throughout the book, is prone to shifting while inviting shifting: “I don’t have an

⁸⁶ Frank O’Hara, “Introduction,” *Robert Motherwell Catalogue* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1962).

American body,” becomes defiant—meaning less in terms of citizenship and more in terms of shape.

So presence—scattered abstractly and concretely—becomes a structuring absence. Lines like “and I . . . roll from one to the next so fast” (*CP* 87), render this intention. This rolling-stone⁸⁷ attitude is often explained as artistic imitation: “Picasso made me tough and quick” (*CP* 17). He maintains the idea later, explaining: “Poetry being quicker and surer than prose, it is only just that poetry finish literature off” (*CP* 499). Just as the tone of “Personism” resists critical attention, so too does the scattering of himself, physically and otherwise, throughout his poems: “I’d have the immediacy of a bad movie” (*CP* 231). With quickness, the superfluous and the offensive, O’Hara’s poetry resists anything that comes between “the poet and the person” (*CP* 498).

But things do come between “the poet and the person,” namely, the form of the poem itself. Caleb Crain points out that while O’Hara claims that he could as well pick up the phone and call someone instead of writing a poem, O’Hara chooses to write:

The poem screens the poet’s love. It is both the fabric where the story of the love shows up and a barrier to direct contact. While writing the poem, O’Hara is buoyed by the gleeful thought that direct communication is possible, but although O’Hara realizes “that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem,” he does not use the telephone. He is relating more importantly to poetry than life. (287)⁸⁸

⁸⁷ “Run your fingers across my no-moss mind / That’s not a thought, that’s soot” (*CP* 327).

⁸⁸ Caleb Crain, “Frank O’Hara’s ‘Fired’ Self,” *American Literary History* 9.2 (1997): 287-308.

Crain suggests that O'Hara screens homosexual love, in his repeated "turning" to verses.⁸⁹ But more simply, Crain highlights the screening, which at its very least indicates anxiety.

"Anxieties" is one of O'Hara's most used words,⁹⁰ and it tends to be most frequently used when alluding to the claustrophobia or demands of domestic space. O'Hara's resistance to formal decisions ("I don't need to create elaborate structures") parallels his resistance to staying still within contained spaces. The poet moves often, "veering wildly in form" (as Vendler writes), filling in forms and spaces en route. Joe LeSeour, O'Hara's longtime roommate, describes the places they lived in "Four Apartments,"⁹¹ outlining not only the quality of life in the four apartments the two shared, but the quantity of things they shared. LeSeour remembers the first apartment he shared with O'Hara as one privileged with a view, but overflowing with internal problems:

Inside, the view wasn't so good... a sixth floor walk-up... The trouble was, it never had a really thorough cleaning, and just about anything you could think of was strewn through its four rooms. Then there was the cockroach problem... it was a good thing you could hardly notice the walls for the paintings. (xiv)

How is the mess of O'Hara's housed life rendered in his work? Without evident walls and spaces, O'Hara lived within clutter. It seems appropriate, then, that a man who almost never had, nor desired, a sense of privacy, and loved collages like

⁸⁹ "I love you, I love you. / But I am turning to my verses / And my heart is closing" (*CP* 201).

⁹⁰ Three variations of the word (anxious, anxiety and anxieties) surface 25 times throughout *The Collected Poems*. "Nerves," "nervousness" and "nervous" come up in 21 further instances.

⁹¹ Joe LeSeour, "Four Apartments," *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O'Hara* (New York: FSG Books, 2003) xiii-1.

Rauschenberg's, came to clutter his poems in a collage-like, open and unabashed way. O'Hara pushes out both the privacy-seeking guest and the clarity-seeking critic: "If some aficionado of my mess should say, 'That's not like Frank!' all to the good! / ... I want my face to be shaven, and my heart? You can't plan on the heart. But the better part of it, my poetry, is open" (*CP* 231). Mingling and tangling his heart with his poetry, O'Hara further subverts any attempts to separate things.

O'Hara's poems repeatedly hint that closure (of any kind) is the enemy.⁹² He begins a poem that rhymes awkwardly across quatrains: "'The mind is stifled.' Very little sky... ." With the poetic mechanics of "Homage to Pasternak's Cape Mootch" (*CP* 195), O'Hara formally stifles his reader, suggesting that entrapment in form relates to entrapment in a body or cityscape.⁹³ In "Homage to Pasternak's Cape Mootch," O'Hara creates a sense of entrapment by unusually repeating the word "is."⁹⁴ Unlike the non-

⁹² "To put it very gently, I have a feeling that the philosophical reduction of reality to a dealable-with system so distorts life that one's "reward" for this endeavor (a minor one, at that) is illness both from inside and outside" (*CP* 495).

⁹³ Unfortunately, the work which could tell most of O'Hara's views of domestic space is his play *The Houses at Falling Hanging* which is lost. In a footnote, LeSeour explains that John Bernard Myers was one of the few to have read it, and that it was "inspired by an unusual house and household in Sneden's Landing, New York.... The house, an architectural nightmare, spilled precariously over the side of a ravine, and the hostess was a bigger-than-life creature who'd had the doors removed from the johns. From what I gather, the play had absolutely no line of action" (xvii). Even in this remaining note, the issue reveals itself—an "architectural nightmare" features doorless johns and spilling over rooms, in which no action occurs, and all is on display.

⁹⁴ The word "is," occurs seven times in the five stanza poem, and is notably present from the poem's first stanza triple-use:

finite verbs O'Hara tends to utilize, "is" fixes the situation, almost stagnantly, in the present tense. It is appropriate, then, that the poem ends with a speaker almost heaving a wet cigarette and equating his position to a sense of hell:

... Drops of water,
 slightly chlorinated, fall from my nose
 onto the cigarette as I heavily breathe
 from swimming through the wood of this parquet
 which is deep brown, the tall trunk of hell.

In O'Hara's less publicized poems, the feeling of being stifled arises. This poetry is not O'Hara's best-known, but posits an O'Hara-ian vision that surfaces throughout *The Collected Poems*, in the consistently various spatial metaphors that are scattered in his early and later poems. It is this very sense of entrapment which seems to push his more popular poetry's energy, as the poems O'Hara is best known for tend to either be about moving (through love or through poetry) outwards, or about being outside anywhere.

The dynamic between inside and outside, which Bachelard devotes an entire chapter to in his *Poetics of Space*, is given space to oscillate in O'Hara's middle poems, such as in "Poem (I watched an armory combing its bronze bricks)" (CP 215). "Poem" formally resembles the bob and wheel of Middle English poetry, with a pattern of three long lines in a stanza, followed by four compressed lines (of four to five words). This refashioned form of the bob and wheel occurs six times (for a total of 12 stanzas), with each longer, three-lined stanza containing outdoor imagery, stifled by the subsequent four-lined stanzas of indoor imagery. For example, "Poem" begins:

I watched an armory combing its bronze bricks
 and in the sky there were glistening rails of milk.
 Where had the swan gone, the one with the lame back?

Now mounting the steps

"The mind is stifled." Very little sky
 is visible through the ailanthus,
 and through the ailanthus is the red brick
 and the grey brick, and the smell of cats.

I enter my new home full
of grey radiators and glass
ashtrays full of wool.

The poem's first longer-lined stanza is obscure, and this obscurity (in the longer stanzas) is a trend throughout the poem (especially present in the poem's seventh stanza).⁹⁵ Yet within the shorter, four-lined stanzas, a motif presents itself: a room's parameters are mapped, and the writer— mapping, finds a way to move that is not physical, but writing-based. The poem's last stanza makes the directions of the poem's stanzas clear:

I am really a woodcarver
and my words are love
which willfully parades in
its room, refusing to move.

Here and throughout the poem, the speaker claims an agency through mobility, before using that agency to stay still. Ultimately, this is marked as the poet's greatest feat.

“Poem,” is one of a series that ended O'Hara's great writing-run of 1954, ending, like many of those 1954 poems, by suggesting the power of words. Combining the last lines of O'Hara's last four 1954 poems allows for a mini-manifesto to surface: “Love” ends with “a parade of lamenting” which “draws near a wave of angels” within which a “he” “is drowning in the word” (*CP* 215); “Poem” ends with the above parade and a poet who “refuses” to leave the word-parade (instead of “drowning” within); “Poem (to James Schuyler)” ends with the extended metaphor of a horse rider galloping towards words “to hold the ribbons of life!”, eventually becoming a poet by mastering “the speed and strength which is the armor of the world” (*CP* 217); and “To the

⁹⁵ The seventh stanza (or fourth longer-lined stanza of the poem) makes no clear sense, yet leaves the reader with a sense of circumstances:

I watched the palisades shivering in the snow
of my face, which had grown preternaturally pure.
Once I destroyed a man's idea of himself to have him.

Harbormaster” compares the vehicle of poetry to an actual “ship,” ending with an affirmation of its agency (“I trust the sanity of my vessel; / and if it sinks, it may well be in answer to the reasoning of the eternal voices”(CP 217)). The notion that one has the power to move with and through words is emphasized over the pursuit of an actual destination. Within this series of last lines, there arises the sense of a speaker who gains an agency and mobility within (and almost especially powerful despite) the fixity of each poem’s construction.

In O’Hara’s more popular poems, he offers a speaker who reacts to feelings of a stifled mind by reforming their body, and their body’s vehicles (poems), endowing both with urban attributes—becoming larger, less stifled, more anonymous, and indistinguishable. Selfhood and neighborhood are tied in knots, as O’Hara’s poems cry out:

It’s me, though, not the city—
oh my god don’t let them take me away! wire The Times
...
You can’t tell me the city’s wicked: I’m wicked.
(CP 85)

Syntactically, the lines first offer the freedom to elide or linger on the unsure word “though” instead of the sure “city,” and the internal rhyme points “the city” back to “me.” Immediately, then, there is a sense of an expanded but indirect speaker. As the speaker moves on to defend New York City, the damaged hero’s wickedness feels even slightly heavier than the “city’s,” as the colon sets the stage for a declarative, disentangled confession. The colon allows the reader to expect a sense of clarity, and instead they are given an outwardly defensive and aggressive speaker; “wicked.” In the same way that the line, “I don’t have an American body, I have an anonymous body” implicitly declares a correction (as if to say, “don’t think that I have an American body”) followed by an expansion, (as if to say, “my body is bigger, less tangible, and less definable than you think it is”), the line “Don’t tell me the city’s wicked: I’m wicked”

corrects and contracts. O'Hara produces the poetic equivalent of negative relief, with the syntax of these corrections suggesting that negation ("don't") precludes a sense of calm, confident understanding. The implication in these syntactical arrangements is that O'Hara is not aggressively declaring or defending himself, but rather confessing himself, as the colon above sets the stage for a coming out from previous groupings.⁹⁶

O'Hara's speaker, already impossibly tangled up in himself, loses himself further in the city's identity and infrastructure. He writes in "Poem": "we'll stroll like poodles / and be washed down a / gigantic scenic gutter," and in "Une Journee de Juillet": "The sun hits a building and shines off onto my face" (*CP* 41; *SP* 84). Just as architect Louis Khan told his students that "The sun never knew how great it was until it hit the side of a building,"⁹⁷ O'Hara tells his reader that his greatness, the sun's, the city's and the building's are inseparable. The blurring of personhood and place adds another question to that of location: Does it matter where or what we are?

"I have an anonymous body," O'Hara seems to incessantly tease, continuing "Grand Central" (*CP* 168):

...though
you can get to love it, if you love the corpses of the Renaissance; I am
reconstructed from a model of poetry

The speaker who announces that he has an anonymous body does so in a poem pinned, by extended metaphor, to New York City. Harking explicitly to a New York

⁹⁶ As in the frequently mentioned, implicit declarations that O'Hara's poetry is the poetry of New York City (the titles of Perloff and Gooch's books on O'Hara, for example, make this point).

⁹⁷ Quoted in Wendy Richmond's "Housing the Muse," *Communication Arts*, 2010, 9 January 2012 <<http://www.commarts.com/columns/>>.

establishment, “Grand Central” describes not only the “ache” of becoming Grand Central, and of sexuality, but an “ache” from conversing with theories of poetry:

you see, and this might be a horseless
carriage, it might be but it is not,
it is riddled with bullets, am I.
And if they are not thundering into me
they are thundering across me, on
the way to some devastated island
where they will eat waffles with the
other Americans of American persuasion.
On rainy days I ache as if a train
were about to arrive, I switch my tracks.

The poem ends by riding off the energy of O’Hara’s best honed poetic trick: the development of a poetic image, and the entangling of the audience in all of that image’s imaginarieness, as “it might be but it is not, / it is riddled.” Eluding grasp further, the lines “thunder across” the page, and with them, the vague equation of a feeling to a physical thing. The speaker, image, and train are made one in their untouchability.

O’Hara’s Poetry of 1954

“Grand Central” marks a turning point in O’Hara’s writing, as it ushers in 1954, the year in which O’Hara produced a multitude of poetry, including his most varied poems like: “Homosexuality”; “To a Poet”; “Aus Einem April”; “For Grace after a Party”; “To the Harbormaster”; and the longer “Meditations in an Emergency”; “To the Mountains in New York”; “Mayakovsky”; “In the Movies”; and “Music” (*CP* 168-210). In his professional life, this was the year O’Hara spent away from the MOMA, before returning to a more senior position as a special curator in 1955. Ashbery points to the importance of the year, as that in which O’Hara’s “vernacular” came into fruition:

New style incorporating suggestions and temptations of
everyday as well as the dreams of the Surrealists... took over,

shaping his already considerable gifts toward a remarkable new poetry—both modest and monumental, with something basically usable about it—not only for poets in search of a voice of their own but for the reader who turns to poetry as a last resort in trying to juggle the contradictory components of modern life into something like a livable space.⁹⁸

O’Hara jokingly notes the “nuptial” tendency “of John... (he is always marrying the whole world).” But as Ashbery continues musing on how O’Hara came into his poetic own, he marries O’Hara into the “New York School,” in an important way:

That space, in Frank O’Hara’s case, was not only the space of New York School painting but of New York itself, that kaleidoscopic lumber-room where laws of time and space are altered ... The term “New York School” applied to poetry isn’t helpful ... But O’Hara is certainly a New York poet. The life of the city and of the millions of relationships that go to make it up hum through his poetry; a scent of garbage, patchouli and carbon monoxide drifts across it, marking it the lovely, corrupt, wholesome place New York is. (x)

As Ashbery describes, 1954 marks the point when O’Hara’s poetic style cemented, and—or *as*—he found his place in New York City.

One of the more controversial 1954 poems is “Homosexuality.” It takes off in this sense of being at ease in the city, finds its middle in a surrealist image on 14th street, and ends in a “kaleidoscopic lumber-room.” All of this is made possible through the personification of a scene, a tactic reminiscent of nature poetry. “However,” O’Hara brags in another 1954 poem (“Meditations in an Emergency” (CP 197)), a pride is taken in having never “clogged myself with the praises of pastoral life.” In the poem that follows this declaration (written a week later, as recorded by Timothy Gray),⁹⁹ O’Hara fully explores the process of leaving the traditional sense of the pastoral for an urban pastoral. “To the Mountains in New York” (CP 198-200) begins:

⁹⁸ “Introduction,” *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara* x.

⁹⁹ Timothy Gray, “Process and Plurality in New York’s Urban Pastoral,” *Contemporary Literature* 44.2 (Summer 2003): 362-378, 368.

Yes! yes! yes! I've decided,
 I'm letting my flock run around,
 I'm dropping my pastoral pretensions!
 and leaves don't fall into a little halo
 on my tanned and worried head.
 Let the houses fill up with dirt.
 My master died in my heart.
 On the molten streets of New York
 the master put up signs of my death.
 I love this hairy city.
 It's wrinkled like a detective story
 and noisy and getting fat and smudged
 lids hood the sharp hard black eyes.
 America's wandering away from me
 in a dream of pine trees and clouds
 of public dreams of the world at my feet.
 The moon comes out: languorous
 in spite of everything, towards all
 its expectancy rides a slow white horse.
 I walk watching, tripping, alleys
 open and fall around me like footsteps
 of a newly shod horse treading the marble staircases of the palace
 and the light screams of the nobility
 oblige invisible bayonets. All
 night I sit on the outspread knees
 of addicts; their kindness
 makes them talk like whores to
 the sun as it moves me hysterically
 forward. The subway shoots onto a ramp
 overlooking the East River, the towers!
 the minarets! The bridge. I'm lost.
 There's no way back to the houses
 filled with dirt. My master died
 in my heart on the molten streets.

Here, “the houses” are the places of the past—pastoral; “filled with dirt.” In obvious contrast, the subway moves the speaker “forward,” pushed away, presumably, by the old figures of sun and moon. “The Mountains” of New York State, are replaced by the mountainous physical and built monuments of the city—“the bridge” is valorized instead of the “east River”; “the minarets,” “the towers”—these are the emblems meriting the enthusiasm of: “Yes! yes! yes!” As “To the Mountains in New York”

continues, it promises a departure from the traditional pastoral.¹⁰⁰ The poem ends with a question that makes O'Hara's goal clear: "Shall I grow trees or flowers?"

O'Hara's flowers bloom in his subsequent 1954 poems, which promise, beyond trees, a wild mobility.

In praise of this mobility, "Homosexuality" (*CP* 181) explores things less tangible than trees:

So we are taking off our masks, are we, and keeping
Our mouths shut? as if we'd been pierced by a glance!

The song of an old cow is not more full of judgment
than the vapors which escape one's soul when one is
sick;

so I pull the shadows around me like a puff
and crinkle my eyes as if at the most exquisite moment

of a very long opera and then we are off!
Without reproach and without hope that our delicate feet

will touch the earth again, let alone "very soon."

Though a complicated image is subtly developed, this subtlety is undercut by the seemingly conversational and casual tone ("are we" "we are off!"). Four lines into the poem, "we" come to feel ourselves going "off" as O'Hara offers "vapors," and clouds his reader's view with imagery and alliteration: "the vapors which escape one's soul when one is sick." The reader is transported into imagining being sick, the soul,

¹⁰⁰ In his full and stimulating review of Diggory and Watkin's books, Timothy Gray points to the irony of these lines: "At the very least, O'Hara's posturing in "Meditations in an Emergency" contradicts the claim he makes in "To the Mountains in New York," since the poet presumably cannot "drop" his pastoral pretensions if he never had them in the first place. If neither poem is ironic (or if both are), one of them must be wrong" (367). Perhaps, though, both poems are right in pointing to a ghost that O'Hara intends to avoid—even if it never had showed up in O'Hara's poetry before.

captivity, freedom and smoke, and the imagining ear is simultaneously lubricated with “s” sounds.

Commenting on how his own poetry forms and feels, the second half of “Homosexuality” explains, “I start like ice, my finger to my ear, my ear / to my heart...” and then takes off again. These moments of almost over-the-top confession, so characteristic of O’Hara (who explains, unabashedly: “All I want is boundless love” (*CP* 197)) are counteracted by the poem’s more subtle motions. “Homosexuality” teasingly deploys a poetic image, which requires the linking eye to navigate through a city’s visual stimulus, and through, in turn, this city poetry. Offering the idea of runaway “vapors” allows the imagination to run wild—and it must. The poem equates sickness to leaving (“vapors which escape”), leaving to the climax of an opera (a potential metaphor for love and life), leaving to falling into love, and falling in love to being carried away by the poet’s imagination (“our delicate feet / will touch the earth again...”). All of this subtlety is counteracted by the poem’s explicit title, and outlandish declarations, like “It’s wonderful to admire oneself / with complete candor.” Of course good poems develop poetic images, but O’Hara’s images hide in—and thrive on—the tension between their beautifulness, and the places their beauty lives in: “the latrines” “the garbage can,” “14th Street... drunken and credulous,” and “53rd” (all in “Homosexuality”). Fifty-third street’s fault is that it “tries to tremble but is too at rest,” sounding faulty in the way that Adorno criticizes Jazz (“it ascribes to its subjective emotions without this being allowed to interrupt the fixedness of the basic sound pattern”).¹⁰¹ It is in this roundabout way that O’Hara’s ultimate enemy is revealed: immobility receives quick dismissal.

¹⁰¹ Theodor Adorno, *Essays on Music*, trans. Susan Gillespie (Berkeley: U of California P, 2002) 471.

Finding his ubiquitous doppelganger in the shapes of trains, skyscrapers and the oft-mentioned UN building, O'Hara becomes the mirrored building: at once mirror to the city, kaleidoscope to reader, and the thing reflected. The city's infrastructure and the poem's infrastructure are united in their dependence on the *flâneur* and reader to navigate imaginative walks.

Embracing “all things” with an “appropriate sense of space” is, in this married way, as much a formal problem as a visual one in a city of limited space. When writing of relationships and personal disasters, O'Hara's speaker repeatedly cries out for the mobility afforded by space. For all his poetry's pronounced departures, his speaker oddly returns to and through domestic fixtures. “To Jane, Some Air,” begins, “Now what we desire is space. To turn up the thermometer and sigh” and climaxes with “Oh space! / You never conquer desire, do you?” (CP 192). Similarly, “Nocturne” describes a relationship as intolerable, because “it's space” (CP 224). In this spatially sensitive way, when O'Hara's speaker feels off, he turns himself out:

I was crowded with / windows
(CP 54)

I'm laughing like an old bedspring
(CP 194)

In anxiety / when a run in the ceiling spreads
(CP 171)

Look at my room.
(CP 18)

Am I a door?
(CP 196)

These resurfacings are particularly disconcerting because they lean on structures.

“Entrapped in being” writes Bachelard, “we shall always have to come out of it” (213).

So the vulnerable feeling subject is at one with both the modernly vulnerable poem, and the modern city's infrastructure: subject, poem and city have their insides out on

display. As O'Hara equates "measure and other technical apparatus" to "a pair of pants you want ... to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you" (*CP* 248), he repeatedly implies relationships between constructions. The perfectly arranged person, poem, moment and room share, in O'Hara's poems, share an interface, with O'Hara allowing it to be possible to "take your hands off my hips / and put them on a statue's hips." The dissipation of structural lines suggests a dissipation or blurring of what Henri Lefebvre distinguishes as "representational space" (that in the hips) to "representations of space" (the statue).¹⁰²

Tying "statues" "buildings" "windows" and other physical constructs to our own construction, the Romantic retreat to solace in nature becomes the New York School retreat to solace in architecture. Sometimes this results in the human body feeling rid of blood, with an air conditioning unit in the heart's place. "Nocturne" begins:

There's nothing worse
than feeling bad and not
being able to tell you.
Not because you'd kill me
or it would kill you, or
we don't love each other.
It's space.

This poem, like "Anxiety," probes internal and overwhelmingly vacuous feelings, distances and silences, stressing the need for fillers that are real and somehow then stronger. As it moves out from confessing the dynamics of a relationship's downfall, it outlines the sort of space which solicits "nothing worse." Zooming out to the sky "grey / and clear, with pink and / blue shadows" broken up unnaturally (for a sky) by line breaks, the poem zooms in:

¹⁰² Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974) 41-43.

My eyes, like millions of
 glassy squares, merely reflect.
 Everything sees through me,
 in the daytime I'm too hot
 and at night I freeze; I'm
 built the wrong way for the
 river and mild gale would
 break every fiber in me.
 Why don't I go east and west
 instead of north and south?
 It's the architect's fault.

“Built the wrong way,” the building, or O’Hara’s speaker, or the poem, suffers the way a glass building suffers from an incompatibility with nature: they are too transparent for the too strong sun, and too thin for the too cold nights. Here, O’Hara places blame: “It’s the architect’s fault,” and emulates this through line breaks (“I’m / built,” “the / river,” “would / break”), making the poem feel wobbly. As his speaker explicitly states that he goes “north and south” in a poem oddly tall and narrow for O’Hara, the poem becomes the building. “Nocturne” exposes the feeling of being “built” of eyes like mirrored windows and “nerves” like electrical wiring, which in turn permits and almost welcomes equations to inhabited space, soliciting poetic zoning.¹⁰³

In returning to the “Grand Central” line “I don’t have an American body / I have an anonymous body,” the “body” comes to seem made of concrete, glass and words instead of human tissue. But O’Hara’s poetry is full of love above all, as real-estate-obsessed lines like, “All I want is a room up there,” get followed by provocatively sweet conditions: “and you in it” (*CP* 370). How can love thrive in such city-scaped

¹⁰³ “O’Hara’s poems vary in the degree to which they dislocate the city and many of the poems retain a coherent cityplace. Poems such as ‘The Day Lady Died’, marked by road grids, architectural landmarks and time checks, could be said to be the ultimate in mapping it, and to register the kind of legibility of the city which city planner Kevin Lynch aimed to produce...” (Hazel Smith, *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O’Hara* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2000) 58.

conditions? O'Hara suggests that the parameters of relationships are manifest in the parameters of city rooms. "Aus Einem April," another richly developed 1954 poem (*CP* 186) considers both sets of parameters:

We dust the walls.
 And of course we are weeping larks
 falling all over the heavens with our shoulders clasped
 in someone's armpits, so tightly! And our throats are full.
 Haven't you ever fallen down at Christmas
 and didn't it move everyone who saw you?
 isn't that what the tree means? the pure
 pleasure
 of making weep those whom you cannot move by your flights!
 It's enough to drive one to suicide.
 And the rooftops are falling apart like applause

of rough, long-nailed, intimate, roughened-by-kisses, hands.
 Fingers more breathless than a tongue laid upon the lips
 in the hour of sunlight, early morning, before the mist rolls
 in from the sea; and out there everything is turbulent and green.

A homophonic translation of Rainer Marie Rilke's "Aus Einem April," the poem departs, after the image of larks, into a purely O'Hara-ian scene—that of love being a personal disaster, public epiphany and spatial construct, realizable in the form of the poem, or at least the forming of a poetic image. The poem's form, concretely, resembles a house, with the first stanza's jaggedness looking like a physical emblem of "rooftops ... falling apart like applause." But the poem's subject is less tangible, as its opening marks it domestic: "We dust the walls." While the opening line, in all its solemn music, suggests that the poem will continue to mark the parameters of domesticity (or internal construction), it gets trippier and less linear with each line, "falling all over," reaching outwards to grab onto "you," and, in so doing, coming out of the "we" to remind the fumbling reader (the poem makes the reader fumble) of their own experiences with tripping. Once all, on and around the page, are vulnerable from the incited remembrance and look of "falling apart," the poem moves to the more ordered second stanza, which, at this point in the image-following, jars, especially from

within its container. Applause is crude, begun by “rough, long nailed” hands—hands one wouldn’t want to fall into. The reader yearns for in-love-with-life O’Hara—and there O’Hara is, with the repeated mention of “rough” but this time hyphenated to the better: “roughened-by-kisses.” Where are we? Again, we are surreally somewhere else where it is possible for a hand clap to turn into a kiss, because the act of fingers anxiously meeting is like that lips when they lock. Throughout all of these denser, later poems, set in rooms, O’Hara forces the reader to take part in this kind of image-by-image breakdown. This poem’s end offers the image of a mouth as a portal, with the idea of kissing (“a tongue laid upon the lips”) begetting a seaside scene, and elicited through the alliteration of “s” sounds. Imagistically, the move is, again, through interiority, outwards, with the logical parameters of life traced as ill fitting, and leading poet and loyal reader gladly “out there” where “everything is turbulent and green.”

Susan Rosenbaum writes¹⁰⁴ of the way O’Hara makes “out there” his own form of *in-here*, claiming that O’Hara’s “home” is “potentially any place in the city that enters his poetry—he carries his home with him, a habit of vision rather than a collection of objects” (76). But Rosenbaum’s criticism eclipses the fact that O’Hara had real homes, which are often alluded to in his poems: “You will live half the year in a house by the sea” he hopes, in “Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s,” while offering directions to his apartment and his state of mind in many other poems—“I live above a dyke bar and I am happy” (*CP* 266; 286). Instead, Rosenbaum’s criticism dwells on O’Hara’s “habit of vision” which Perloff, Shaw, and others have attended to. The idea that O’Hara “habited,” instead of *in-habited* New York, is useful in itself—and useful in that it

¹⁰⁴ Susan B. Rosenbaum, *Professing Sincerity: Modern Lyric Poetry, Commercial Culture, and the Crisis in Reading* (Virginia: U of Virginia P, 2007).

suggests that this present-perfect notion (habiting) found space in poetry.¹⁰⁵ As Rosenbaum's challenging chapter on O'Hara ends, she writes: "O'Hara takes the materials of the street and carves from them a 'room' or a place of interiority, ... as: '...my words are love / which willfully parades in its room, refusing to move' " (91). Eventually, Rosenbaum's chapter on O'Hara's consumer tendencies borders on reducing O'Hara's to one who alters space to "alter social practices in a city that pressured him to conform to its moral and social codes" (64). As Josh Schneiderman's recent introduction to *The Correspondence of Kenneth Koch and Frank O'Hara, 1955-1956*¹⁰⁶ shows, O'Hara was more concerned with changing poetry than he was with changing his city.

Perhaps O'Hara offering a speaker with an "anonymous body," points to the notion that metaphysical malleability can trump citizenship. While the body of O'Hara's work has the tendency to be misshapen, it also tends to celebrate misshapeness: "I am what people make of me—if they / can and when they will" O'Hara coyly agrees, "My difficulty is / readily played—like a rhapsody, or a fresh /

¹⁰⁵ Davidson explores the relationship of found space to landscape: "The poems also become marginalized literary spaces in which O'Hara can explore ways that the speaking and writing subject might know things about themselves. The poem, through the use of the pastoral, is a place of reflection, of trying to work out what things might mean by locating them in an imagined space. The structure of the poem offers the possibility of embodied presence, and in Pastoral 12: 'By direction we return to our fulfilling world, we are back in the poem.' The poem provides a space that is 'fulfilling' and where potential can be realised, and where the incoherence of the real world and its shifting planes of experience can be experienced as well as reflected on" ("Frank O'Hara's Spaces").

¹⁰⁶ *The Correspondence of Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch*, ed. Josh Schneiderman (New York: The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, 2009).

house” (*CP* 190). The oscillation encouraged in the word “or” is riffed on throughout his poetry. “Happy here and happy there,” “everything to everybody everywhere” the “anonymous body” is repeatedly offered as a thing susceptible to feeling frustrated by structure. So O’Hara crossed out the “Avenue A” line: “everything is too incomprehensible,” and replaced it with “everything is too comprehensible” (*CP* 546),¹⁰⁷ as if comprehensibility were more threatening. This “always embrac[ing] things” brings with it, then, a rejection of limits (which might make things containable / comprehensible). O’Hara writes in his “Notes on *Second Avenue*” (which itself is an incredibly long and difficult poem): “To put it very gently, I have a feeling that the philosophical reduction of reality to a dealable-with system so distorts life that one’s ‘reward’ for this endeavor (a minor one, at that) is illness both from inside and outside” (*CP* 495).¹⁰⁸ So instead, O’Hara’s speaker embraces the “incomprehensible,” the drifting, and the playful, and O’Hara’s “appropriate sense” of space comes to depend on smudging the lines between constructs; celebrating that buildings—poetic, bodily and urban—are only as good as they’re usable, and even better for the sounds they make when they come apart.

“Coming Apart”

¹⁰⁷ Editorial decisions are chronicled by Donald Allen in his notes to *The Collected Poems*.

¹⁰⁸ Bachelard notes the sickness such delineation prompts: “In this horrible inside-outside... within itself, being is slowly digesting its nothingness” (217). O’Hara gives the sense that seeking clarity leads to distortion, because it means that one may be forced to apprehend a vertigo, realizing that they live between inside and outside.

Twelve years after O'Hara's death, Robert Hass wrote: "All the new thinking is about loss. / In this it resembles all the old thinking" ("Meditations at Lagunitas").¹⁰⁹ Although part of an entirely different aesthetic movement, it becomes possible to transpose this notion onto O'Hara's oeuvre. His poetry does ask the reader to think about loss—not only in terms of crumbling buildings, but also in terms of crumbling forms. O'Hara's living in many cities, and many apartments within New York City, alongside writing in many forms, is also a gesture of leaving many cities, many apartments, and many forms. Vendler parenthetically points to O'Hara's "lack of comfortable form": "(he veered wildly from long to short, with no particular reason in many cases for either choice)" (3). While she notes "no particular reason" for "either choice," she does not address potential reasons for the "wild" "veering." An obvious "reason" for "veering" in O'Hara's case is that his poetry strives to "embrace all things," but another potential "reason" for "veering" is that it enacts a version of leaving. How much of O'Hara's "veering," then, is in the spirit of embracing disparate things, and how much is in the spirit of loss?

When O'Hara "veers" towards "long" poetry, his poems tend to take on density, exhausting and confusing his reader at once. "Biotherm (for Bill Berkson)" (*CP* 436-448), for example, is fifteen pages long and defiantly yells at the logic of form: "measure shmeasure know shknew" (*CP* 439). This rum-soaked revolution happens paradoxically in a quatrain, in a poem filled with many other stanzas in various forms, within which many poets, artists, writers,¹¹⁰ times and places¹¹¹ are cited. The poem even

¹⁰⁹ Robert Hass, "Meditations at Lagunitas," *The Poetry Foundation*, 10 January 2012, <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/>>.

¹¹⁰ For example:

... kiss me,
Busby Berkeley, kiss me

offers subverted forms within its seeming aformal scheme, such as a mini-“sonnet”
in its middle:

you were there I was here you were here I was there where are you I
miss you
(that was an example of the “sonnet” “form”) (this is another)
when you went and I stayed and then I went and we were both lost and
then I died

(CP 442)

As in the above lines, the poem also takes on love and romance. In fact, there’s little the long poem leaves out in its fifteen pages. As this kind of long poem becomes a list of life, it also becomes a place for life to rest. And death is one of the poem’s clear preoccupations, as it outlines its intentions in its opaque beginning: “The best thing in the world but I better be quick about it / better be gone tomorrow” (CP 436). And while the poem is “quick” in terms of its quickly shifting attentions, it is also “long” and full of “so much” in the “Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s” way. When O’Hara repeatedly asks for “more” or “so much” or “all things” he is also locating “less” “so little” and “things missing.”

Shaw writes of O’Hara’s “quotidian yet paradoxically deathlike work”:

As O’Hara’s act of creation stretches temporally into literary history, it is “like death” (perhaps) in that the possibility of an immediate world of quotidian sense-experience evoked so forcefully by O’Hara’s rhetoric becomes an oddly displaced, and possibly opposite, effect. As details and names accumulate, O’Hara’s New York becomes, for later readers, an increasingly impossible imaginative act, one held in a fictive unity only by its absent experiential center. (24)

you have ended the war by simply singing in your Irene Dunne foreskin
“Practically Yours”
with June Vincent, Lionello Venturi and Casper Citron
a Universal-International release produced by G. Mennen Williams
directed by Florine Stettheimer
continuity by the Third Reich
(CP 437)

¹¹¹ In a lecture, Daniel Kane calls this listing of places, people and activities “elegiac” (“Lecture on Patti Smith,” Linacre College, Oxford, 23 February 2010).

“Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s” and “Biotherm (for Bill Berkson)” both showcase O’Hara’s tendency to list names and moments—erupting with weepy celebratory tone. And in his shorter poems, like “My Heart” (*CP* 231), he defines and defends the wanting to “advance and change everything”: “And if / some aficionado of my mess says ‘That’s /not like Frank!’, all to the good!” Being clean-shaven and bare-footed are the aspirations outlined in “My Heart,” competing with the “Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s” dream of “sand getting into my bathing trunks,” and “Song (Is it Dirty?)” (*CP* 327), which taunts a tourist unaccustomed to New York City’s grime. So O’Hara’s descriptions of happiness are as excessive, various and riddled as his forms.

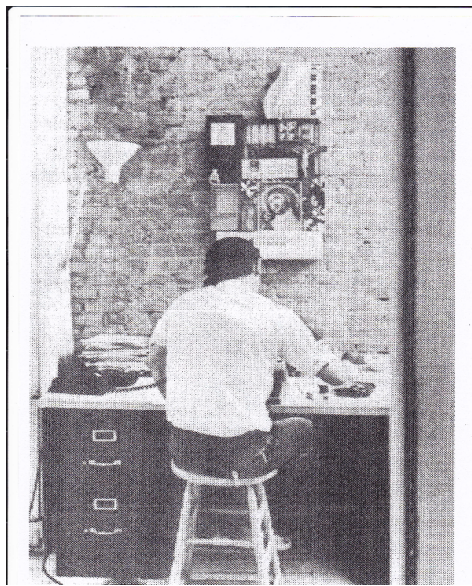
As with T.S. Eliot, “dirty” is one of O’Hara’s frequently recurring words. But O’Hara equally mentions “love,” “heart,” “messy,” “too much” “a lot” and other loose references to excess. Through all of the implications that “all” of us are “just muddy instants” (“My Heart”), stress falls on the “all” of everything. In this way, it is easy to gloss lines that offer senses of neurosis, as the audacity of O’Hara’s speaker welcomes more attention than his anxiety (consider the anxiety producing effects of the word “just” in “aren’t we all just muddy instants”).

Shaw locates the subtle but ever-present anxiety, and relates it to an issue of audience. In his *Poetics of Coterie*, Shaw offers two photographs—one of O’Hara smiling (shown in Shaw’s *Poetics of Coterie* (24)) engaged in conversation and facing his audience, and the other of O’Hara at his desk, facing a brick wall (shown below), writing:

Should we read O’Hara as the immediate, intimate friend, the animated interlocutor laughing between sentences and facing us [Here, in Shaw’s text, is offered a photograph of O’Hara reclining in a chair and laughing in the direction of the camera]? Or is it more accurate to understand him, despite the appearance of informality, despite the “colloquial, conversational” surface of his work, as Feldman suggests, as a more “distant” writer (as opposed to speaker) who has subtly shifted himself away from us precisely through his seemingly immediate writing, who is always “turning to my verses,” aware that “we create only as dead men”—perhaps the poet who, as in Richard Moore’s photograph, presents his back to us while addressing someone else in a phone

conversation, working at his desk, maybe typing, and possibly contemplating the solidity and permanence of the brick wall in front of which he writes? (24).

For Shaw's work, noting this directionality presents a way to consider the dynamic between inner and outer reader spaces—dictated by O'Hara's positioning, and the subsequent presence of his audience. For this study of space, Shaw's photograph-based question leads to another question. Here is the photograph Shaw considers (25):



Shaw asks whether or not O'Hara has, in a sense, his back to us—"turning to [his verses]." I wonder what O'Hara is looking towards. I am less interested in the idea that he is turning away from *us* and more interested in the fact that he is turning towards a *wall*. What are the effects of the wall? What are the ramifications of O'Hara's positions, not socially, but within space? How does the wall of the apartment come into his writing? Is this position "within the fourfold among things" (Heidegger 156), a submission? O'Hara starts to answer in "A Pleasant Thought from Whitehead," but turns the reader's attention to the reader themselves:

Here I am at my desk ...
 ... Ah!
 reader! you open the page
 my poems stare at you you
 stare back, do you not? my
 poems speak on the silver

of your eyes your eyes repeat
 them to your lover's this
 very night. Over your naked
 shoulder the improving stars
 read my poems and flash
 them onward to a friend.

(CP 23)

Just as O'Hara shifts attention away from himself at his desk to, eventually his reader's naked shoulder, I want to shift it back. Shifting from questions of readership to questions of writership, is shifting towards more answerable question of architecture and—poetically, architectonics. While O'Hara makes statements like “Now what we desire is space” (CP 192) he poetically enacts it, or architects it, by making space on the page—leaving white gaps in his poems, as in “To Jane Some Air” (CP 192). Heidegger reminds the reader of the etymology of space: “A space is something that has been made room for, something that is cleared and free, namely within a boundry, Greek *peras*” (154). The boundary, in this poem's case, is the poem. The poem, then, fitted into Heidegger's equation, becomes bigger: “A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its presencing*” (154). The speaker who gets “space” then, gets reminded of the limitedness of space, and also of its specific relief in potentiality. This relief, spatially and emotionally, is embodied in the smiling open bodied O'Hara.¹¹²

There is also the issue of embodiment, which spatial philosophers like Bachelard consider in detail. Bachelard muses on the dependency, in the French

¹¹² O'Hara is pictured, reclining in a chair, smiling and open to the room on the same page of Shaw's *Poetics of Coterie* (25).

expression of “being”—“l’être”—on the “là”—or “there”ness of being.¹¹³ Heidegger calls this “the fourfold”: “by the name “man” I already name the stay within the fourfold among things” (156). Bachelard explains, “Entrapped in being, we shall always have to come out of it. And when we are hardly outside of being, we always have to go back into it. Thus, in being, everything is circuitous, roundabout, recurrent, so much talk; a chaplet of sojournings, a refrain with endless verses” (213-214). So O’Hara’s statement “I am always turning to my verses,” which Shaw marks as a Death-of-the-Author surrender, makes new sense in Bachelard’s spatial assessment of being; with O’Hara here, and elsewhere, aware that he is in a “refrain with endless verses.” “One no longer knows *right away* whether one is running toward the center of escaping” Bachelard reminds us (214).

When O’Hara describes cinematic experience as an opportunity to “reflect a moment on the flesh in which you’re mired” (*CP* 208), he is also stressing the way that “là” is heavy. Heidegger links the limitations of “poetic dwelling” to the limitations of language, expounding first on the “dwelling”: “We confront a double demand: for one thing, we are to think of what is called man’s existence by way of the nature of dwelling; for another, we are to think of the nature of poetry as a letting-dwell, as a—perhaps even *the*—distinctive kind of building” (215). This link between poetic space and living space is maybe only ever explicitly realized in O’Hara’s “Nocturne,” but peripherally, O’Hara writes again and again of a sequestering that arises from “letting-dwell”: “We dust the walls” (*CP* 186), he writes, and later, “my eyes like millions of glasses merely reflect” (*CP* 224). So O’Hara’s poetry suggests that between the presence of desire *for*

¹¹³ “In the tonal quality of the French language, the *là* (there) is so forceful [in être-là], that to designate being (l’être) by être-là is to point an energetic forefinger that might easily relegate intimate being to an exteriorized place” (*Poetics of Space* 213).

space and the limitedness *of* space (in New York City and in intimacy), bodies are reconstructed—sealed off sometimes (eyes that do not take in, but “merely reflect,”) and alienated or remolded often.

Returning, again and finally to the now over-quoted line: “I don’t have an American body, I have an anonymous body” (*CP* 168), is a claim O’Hara makes within a poem that ends with his body achieving a completely sexualized state and becoming “Grand Central.” This line has been so frequently quoted because it gives much to consider: in terms of spatial issues, it is helpful to focus on the insistence—or, to borrow Heidegger’s term, the “building”—of “an anonymous body”; aesthetically, the desire to assert an “anonymous body” offers a push-pull between modern affirmations of the universe’s intrinsic order, and post-modern arguments with those affirmations; formally, these affirmations result in manipulations (critically and explicitly traceable in language poetry, and discussions of organic form). Reading “I have an anonymous body” with questions of order and patterning in mind, hints towards anonymity as strategy.

In his college journal, O’Hara outlines his views on order:

I feel steadily but there is no pattern, there can be no pattern, there is only being; you cannot sell yourself, you cannot stand that far apart from your self to decipher, if there is any integrity in you. There is only the giving of self and the having, the always being; you must be able to always love and always create, the artist is and always loves and always creates and cannot help but love and create... There is no need for a pattern if one lives, for in the realization of being one can cope with life as it comes with suffering but no bitterness.¹¹⁴

In his “Statement for *New American Poetry*,” O’Hara rehashes these ideas:

It may be that poetry makes life’s nebulous events tangible to me and restores their detail; or conversely, that poetry brings forth the intangible

¹¹⁴ *Early Writing*, ed. Donald Allen (Bollinas, Calif: Grey Fox; Berkeley: Bookpeople, 1977)

quality of incidences which are all too concrete and circumstantial.
Or each on specific occasions, or both all the time. (*CP* 500)

So O'Hara's later public terms "nebulous" and "restoration" are earlier personally termed "the giving of the self" and "the having," or more artistically, "loving" and "creating." Patterning is here suggested to pale in the face of the artist who "always loves and always creates." Perhaps, then, in this early credo lies a response to what Vendler would later call O'Hara's "lack of comfortable form" (6): "there is no need for a pattern if one lives." Here too are the seeds of the sun's later ventriloquized advice: "always embrace things... freely." But also present is the pathos that Shaw notes in O'Hara's later elegiac tendencies.

Shaw's remarks on elegy are particularly important, because while many articles and books have been written on O'Hara's celebratory and happy tendencies, the sadness of O'Hara's poetry has received little attention.¹¹⁵ For example, in "Why I am Not a Painter" (*CP* 262), O'Hara writes:

There should be
so much more, not of orange, of
words, of how terrible orange is
and life. Days go by

Scholarship glosses this recurrent mention of life being terrible, choosing to focus, instead, on O'Hara's conversational tactics and painterly obsessions.¹¹⁶ But this

¹¹⁵ The notable exception is in Caleb Cain's Essay "Frank O'Hara's 'Fired' Self" which dwells on lines of sadness and violence in O'Hara's poetry, but situates these undertones within a framework of homosexual identity searching ("Frank O'Hara's 'Fired' Self" (*American Literary History* 9.2 (1997): 287-308)).

¹¹⁶ See Perloff's discussions of the poem in *Poet Among Painters* (39; 111-2). Both mentions of the poem focus on aesthetic issues, and essentially ignore O'Hara's remark on life's terribleness.

happens, in part, because O'Hara encourages a glossing. Note how in "Ode to Michael Goldberg's birth and others," O'Hara's speaker confesses a sadness and then skips away:

A couple of specifically anguished days
 Make me now distrust sorrow, simple sorrow
 Especially, like sorrow over death

It makes you wonder who you are to be sorrowful
 over death, death belonging to another
 and suddenly inhabited by you without permission

...
 disbelieving your own feelings is the worst
 and you suspect that you are jealous of this death

YIPPEE! I'm glad I'm alive
 "I'm glad you're alive
 too, baby, because I want to fuck you"
 (CP 294)

The suddenly capitalized and exclamation marked "YIPPEE!" is at once relieving, and awkward. It jolts the reader out of the momentary pathos and momentary stanzas, and throws the conversational voice (captured in haphazard lines) against the lyric (captured in formal stanzas), marking not only disjunct, but inviting flexible distrust. The reader is encouraged to ask: Which voice is franker? "How terrible life is" is something O'Hara returns to throughout his poetry, in the same breath as mentions of how wonderful life is—and the tuned-in reader hears the chord come together, sometimes cacophonously (as above) and sometimes harmoniously, as in that sentiment which resonates throughout O'Hara's writing: "Grace to be born and live *as variously as possible*" (CP 256).

The idea that there "should be / so much more" gets repeatedly treated. What becomes a later poetic and (I am arguing) formal issue in O'Hara's poetry of how to "always embrace things" starts in O'Hara's earlier poetry, as a barely audible despondency. Towards the middle of his poetic career, the year after he wrote "A True Account of Talking to the Sun on Fire Island," O'Hara makes an immediate point of demoting form, beginning "Personism" with a rejection: "Now, come on. I don't

believe in god, so I don't have to make elaborately sounded structures" (CP 498).

Relieved of the responsibility to consider form, O'Hara uses the space of the rest of the essay to wax and wane, instead, on issues of abstraction, or "the decision involved in the choice between 'the nostalgia *of* the infinite' and 'the nostalgia *for* the infinite'" (CP 498-499). So the issue of how to deal with "the infinite" (another way of asserting that "there should be so much more") takes precedence. And form gets squandered, because, assumedly, O'Hara's disbelief in God is equivalent to a disbelief in order.

But in looking for what O'Hara does believe in, the reader finds lack. On the sole occasion of O'Hara affirming belief, he also throws it away: "I believe that the sky is a bag / of leaves thrown down / thrown away like a squirrel's brains" (CP 165). Less troublesome than the sky being a bag of leaves, is the repetition of the word "thrown," which emphasizes not only the deadness of the fauna up high but, also, the downward and dismissive nature of nature.

Bachelard's explanations of man's "spiral being" (considered above) eventually seem to epitomize O'Hara's poetic strategies: "Being is alternately condensation that disperses with a burst, and dispersion that flows back to a center." Not having an "American body," or "believing" things about "the sky" become, in O'Hara's work, ways of permitting condensation and dispersion. O'Hara's lines burst—as in the phrase (emphasized by line-break): "is a bag"—and disperse—as in the image of "leaves" or an "Anonymous body." These big things are thrown down to "flow back to a center," or to revert to participants in life's cycles (embodied, in the above poem, in the death of a squirrel). Not having an "American body," but an "anonymous" one, is a way of condensing and dispersing, as is the suggestion of belief alongside an imagistic dismissal.

Taking place in New York City, the urban constructed facet of O'Hara's life becomes a poetically constructed facet. He writes in a letter: "Joe and I have moved to

the free, glamorous Village. Would that you were here for midnight beers and liberated discussions of art, sex, friends, and above all, *techne*, which alone is said to free the poet from his limitations” (qtd in Shaw 59). The Village is glamorous because it is “free” and “liberated” and *techne*, or art, is “glamorous” because it is “said to free the poet from his limitations.” The poet’s limitations allow Heidegger, though, to tie poetry to dwelling: “The taking of measure is what is poetic in dwelling. Poetry is measuring... In poetry there takes place what all measuring is in the ground of its being” (221). Yet here O’Hara puts stress on the “taking” and the “being” available in his Village life. Shared living space with Joe in the Village induces a celebration of space, arrived at through “*techne*.” Poetry allows for the measuring to be replaced by energies (as in that of “being”).

O’Hara’s poems ride off the energy of “coming apart”—embracing the pull of condensation by celebrating localities, things, rooms and people, while calling for the push of evaporation—into space. So odes (as each of O’Hara’s poems is an “ode” of a sort, and many include the word “ode” in their titles) become places to act out in. The effect is not only a reversal of abstractions, but also a reversal of invitations. As O’Hara explores abstraction, size and scope of speaker, and irregularity in form in his poetry, he manipulates tactics that simultaneously expel the critical eye, and entice the reader’s. “You don’t want me to go where you go so I go where you don’t want me to,” he teases (*CP* 197). With his youthful rebellious energy, at once “quicker” and “more sure” (to borrow terms from his “Personism” (*CP* 498)) O’Hara’s poems urge the scholarly audience to abandon logic, because “Pain always produces logic, which is very bad for you” (*CP* 249) (and, as quoted above, “you cannot stand that far apart from your self to decipher”), while also urging the reader to relinquish themselves to the “so much more” (*CP* 262)—in the city, and in the twists and turns of poetic imagery, which O’Hara offers as inextricably linked. After “Song” teases the clean city-walker (with the above

mentioned, “Is it dirty?”), it invites reader and walker to peruse, be seduced, naively grossed out, and corrected: “Run your fingers across my no-moss mind / that’s not a thought that’s soot” (*CP* 327). So with the poem’s pushes and pulls comes the sense of a resilient writer—covered in “soot,” untouchable though seemingly “bare,”¹¹⁷ “everything to everybody everywhere” (*CP* 331), with an “anonymous body.”

The body of O’Hara’s work, when viewed through the spaces it inhabits and creates, “comes apart,” in every sense of the oxymoronic expression. It invites an inwardness and an outwardness. It rides off puns (“frankly” (*CP* 306)) and almost-meanings, while giving the sense of a universal and untouchable speaker. O’Hara’s speaker is shapeless, or slickly misshapen, or “both all of the time.” O’Hara himself, then, might balk at the way his work has been characterized, as critics have located his presence in The New York School, and among painters, and have tended to delineate him to particular, limited, islands of space (Manhattan). It may be more useful to consider that O’Hara’s work may be part of a greater, wider, and international tradition of writing spatially-inflected, imagistic poetry, as it so often valorizes being “everything to everybody everywhere.” Just as O’Hara offers a speaker with an “anonymous body,” he also offers one that claims to be “so so so so happy!”—because this vague variousness allows his speaker to find himself “at the center of all beauty,” and sometimes all over and besides it: “happy here and happy there” (*CP* 343). “God it’s good... to love you so much” (*CP* 371), O’Hara’s poetry exclaims. His poems accordingly make space for that “so much,” asking his reader to read as intensely *and* as

¹¹⁷ In “My Heart,” O’Hara confesses a tangled intent:

I want my feet to be bare,
I want my face to be shaven, and my heart--
you can't plan on the heart, but
the better part of it, my poetry, is open.
(*CP* 231)

“variously as possible,” as his poetry rides off the energy of “variousness,” “falling apart”—embracing the pull of condensation by celebrating localities, things, rooms and people, while calling for a dispersal—into incomprehensible unorganized, various spaces. Embracing the incomprehensible, the drifting, and the playful, O’Hara’s “appropriate sense of space” depends on smudging the lines between constructs, and celebrating the fact that buildings—poetic, bodily and urban—are only as good as they’re usable, and even better for the sounds they make when they come apart.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ As in “Aus Einem April”’s “rooftops, falling apart like applause” (*CP* 186).

II. “Bring me Red Demented Rooms:”

Ted Berrigan’s Poetic Programs

“If we must compare the poem to the make-up of some physical object it ought not to be to a wall but to something organic like a plant.”

– Cleanth Brooks¹¹⁹

“I always thought of each one of my poems, like the sonnets, as being a room. And before that, I used to think of each stanza as being a room. And that each stanza should be a different room. And they should go like that...”

– Ted Berrigan¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students* (New York: Henry Holt, 1950) xlil.

¹²⁰ *Talking In Tranquility: Interviews with Ted Berrigan*. eds. Stephen Ratcliffe and Leslie Scalapino (Bolinas, CA: Avenue B; O Books, 1991) 21.

Although it is not one of Ted Berrigan's more challenging poems, "10 Things I Do Every Day"¹²¹ is one of his most quoted. It reads:

wake up
smoke pot
see the cat
love my wife
think of Frank

eat lunch
make noises
sing songs
go out
dig the streets

go home for dinner
read the Post
make pee-pee
two kids
grin

read books
see my friends
get pissed-off
have a Pepsi
disappear

How to take this poet seriously? The poem almost asks its reader not to, as the speaker presents himself as flippant ("see the cat"), high ("smoke pot," "get pissed off"), immature ("make noises," "make pee-pee") and—if that weren't enough—disappearing. The poem also highlights the ways Berrigan's poetry can be read: it aims to pay tribute to Frank O'Hara, it is entrenched in the quotidian (cause and effect of that tribute), it was written from the constraints of urban space, it is at once personal and evasive, and it often seems haphazardly casual—easily taken, like O'Hara's, as heart-to-heart art ("My heart Your heart" Berrigan starts "London Air" (*CP* 454)). But

¹²¹ *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan*, eds. Alice Notley, Anselm Berrigan and Edmund Berrigan (Berkeley: U of California P: 2005) 164. All further references to Berrigan's poetry will be from this collection (abbreviated to *CP*) unless otherwise stated.

there are poetic programs in Berrigan's work that have been difficult to discern because of the sheer number of pages Berrigan wrote.

At 663 pages, Berrigan's *Collected Poems* presents a resistance. Large and sprawling, it contains many "Things To Do" poems, which serve as self-imposed screens against criticism. Part of this is strategy, as Daniel Kane writes: "Second-generation New York School poets not only created an environment that froze out academic discourse, they also consciously kept their work apart from the gentleman's commercialism inherent in academic life" (*All Poets Welcome* 98).¹²² And in its tone, list-form, imagery and seeming directionless-ness, Berrigan's "Things I Do Everyday" does resist inclusion in academic textbooks. At once reflecting that "Everyone has the right to be judged by their best" (Berrigan, *CP* 561) and accounting for Berrigan's inconsistencies, his sons Anselm and Edmund introduce *The Selected Poems of Ted Berrigan*: "Ted was in a continual process of pushing out and exploring ... He began to actively court sentimentality ... intertwining sentimental and experimental gestures in his works" (4).¹²³ Charting this courtship, the 2011 *Selected Poems* offers poetry from Berrigan's multiple publications, presenting a poet pursuing the elusive shape of sentimentality—writing in multiple forms, recycling friends' statements and lines, incorporating translations of French poetry, and responding to interview questions with multiple-paged answers. While these "actions" are evident in *The Selected Poems*, they are overwhelmingly manifest in *The Collected Poems*. Just as O'Hara's 586 paged *Collected Poems* risked, according to Helen Vendler, "drowning O'Hara in his own fluency,"

¹²² Daniel Kane, *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2003).

¹²³ *The Selected Poems of Ted Berrigan*, eds. Alice Notley, Anselm Berrigan and Edmund Berrigan (Berkeley: U of California P, 2011).

reading Berrigan's work as a whole, through *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan*, makes Berrigan's "sentimentality" hard to distinguish from poetic schizophrenia, drowning speaker and audience. The reader can find it difficult to find anything to hold onto.

Attuned to the dynamic between "sentimentality" and form, one gets the sense that Berrigan was wholeheartedly aware of O'Hara's "To Hell With It" warning: "Sentimentality is always intruding on form" (*CP of Frank O'Hara* 275). This may be why many of Berrigan's poems get so easily tangled up in each other. He courts sentimentality along with the shapeliness of life. He changes forms often, understanding that the poem is a space that he, as a poet, has the power to shape and be shaped by. "I want to make the poems have shape, be shapely" he explains in an interview.¹²⁴ Poems such as "10 Things I Do Every Day" make deliberation over "shape" and shaping difficult to see. Berrigan's list-poems, ruminating and repetitive sonnets, and whimsical works have tended to steal attention away from more delicate and weighty works, and Berrigan's general poetic programs. In *The Selected Poems of Ted Berrigan*, the editors seek to "tell the story of Ted's work, to new and familiar readers alike" At once a personal and public project, *The Selected Poems* asks "Who was he, and, by extension, who were we?" (*SP* 5). The "we" consists of Berrigan's sons, but also extends to an entire generation of poets still writing today. And while Berrigan may "make pee-pee" in the above list-poem, he writes with an ear tuned in to the "tightening right beneath your heart"¹²⁵ in many others.

To treat his resistantly large body of work critically, a lens helps for focusing. This chapter will look at the relationship of outside, architected forms to inner, poet-

¹²⁴ *Nice to See You: Homage to Ted Berrigan*, ed. Anne Waldman (Minneapolis: Coffee House, 1988) 13.

¹²⁵ *CP* 561.

made forms to better locate Berrigan within a twentieth century American tradition of writing out of city rooms. Commonly, Berrigan has been isolated as leader of the Second Generation New York School of Poetry, long-winded talker, writer and mainly, community organizer.¹²⁶ But works like “Last Poem” (CP 521), “A Certain Slant of Sunlight,” “Whitman in Black” (CP), *The Sonnets* and *Train Ride* (CP 521; 566; 419; 26-85; 240-285) will here be carefully and formally examined, so that Berrigan’s poetry may come to surface as heavily deliberate and reliant on form. Libbie Rifkin writes of “taking the bait”: “At least among avant-gardes, Berrigan registers as formal innovator, a process poet.”¹²⁷ Berrigan’s innovations process poetic, personal and economic situations—all within stanzas. How does the stanza serve Berrigan as the right place for these processings?

“I Strain to Gather My Absurdities”:¹²⁸ Berrigan’s Enigmatic Influences

Allen gave me this big wet kiss and said, “there are thousands of people all around, would you like to meet Anybody?”

I thought it was really interesting because I thought the Presidents of Poetry were all back in New York, but I actually knew that Allen was the President anyway. You can understand the position I was in... There was some bitchy in-fighting going on there; it was over establishing lineage.

(Waldman 106; 108)

¹²⁶ Daniel Kane’s *All Poets Welcome* and Geoff Ward’s *Statues of Liberty* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993) categorize Berrigan as leader of The Second Generation New York School. Both works are quoted throughout this chapter.

¹²⁷ Libbie Rifkin, *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-Garde* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2000) 115.

¹²⁸ CP 29; 52.

Attempts to pin Berrigan's influences down get immediately flustered by Berrigan's own many references to American poets: he cites Ezra Pound, Walt Whitman, O'Hara, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William Carlos Williams and even Wallace Stevens throughout his many interviews, essays, letters and talks. Most consistently, he is anthologized as the poet O'Hara passed the New York School baton to. This view is perpetuated by Berrigan's own frequent references to "Frank" throughout his poems. Accordingly, Geoff Ward concludes his *Statues of Liberty*—a close study of The First Generation New York School of Poetry—with a post-script on Berrigan: "Ted Berrigan was wont to say that he invented the New York School of Poetry. And there is psychological, though not historic truth to this. His poems do not simply issue from such an idea, but also take it on as their subject matter; saying it to make it happen" (177). Ward's note is succinct, and the rest of his chapter moves away from Berrigan to a look at Berrigan's contemporaries. Many others poets and critics—like Ron Padgett, Mark Ford, Anne Waldman and Tom Clark¹²⁹—make a longer point of handing Berrigan the Second Generation New York School crown in anthologies and elegies. When asked about The New York School, Berrigan himself points out that the term is slippery, though it is loaded with influential implications:

You have to understand that nobody *does* quite understand this fully. But it should be understood that "The New York School" is a joke... To go on about the New York School, there were these four people, and when I first came to New York... I was very interested in these four people... There weren't many people that were interested in those four people. In fact, those people weren't publishing enough to suit me,

¹²⁹ Ron Padgett's *Ted: A Personal Memoir of Ted Berrigan* (Great Barrington: Figures, 1993), Mark Ford and Trevor Winkfield's *New York Poets II: An Anthology* (Glasgow: Carcanet, 2006), Anne Waldman's *Nice to See You: Homage to Ted Berrigan* (Minneapolis: Coffee House, 1988), and Tom Clark's *Late Returns: A Memoir of Ted Berrigan* (Bolinas: Tombouctou Books, 1985) all chronicle Berrigan as a community organizer and leader of second generation NY School poets.

and I wasn't getting to see enough of their works... And then I realized that there was such a thing as New York School, because there was a second generation. So in essence, *we* were the New York School because these guys, although they were the real New York School, weren't doing anything about it, and we were. And that struck me as very funny. (*Talking in Tranquility* 90)

Just as Ashbery claims O'Hara became a poet as he found his place in New York City (see previous chapter), here Berrigan implies that his relationship with The New York School of Poetry cemented in a tri-part way: He moved to New York, found four marginalized poets (Koch, O'Hara, Ashbery, and Schuyler), found that they were marginal, and decided to align himself with them by publishing more extensively. Evidence of this prolific publishing is available through the remaining copies of *C Magazine*¹³⁰ and *The Collected Poems*' introduction, where the editors explain their decisions to double-publish certain poems that were mass published. The result of this double publishing is that the contemporary reader is re-confronted with poems the same way the New York poetry audience would have seen them published and republished throughout the 1960s, 70s and 80s. In his "Last Poem" (discussed below), Berrigan's speaker points to an agenda: "I verbalized myself a place / In Society. 101 St. Mark's Place, apt. 12A, NYC 10009" (*CP* 521). Place making through poetry making, Berrigan's repeated publications suggest a poet clearing a plot on the New York scene page. By "verbalizing" himself over and over, Berrigan's publications suggest a poet concerned with economics (frequently publishing for lack of money) and being heard.

But Berrigan himself makes it difficult to discern a clear poetic purpose, voicing and implicitly un-voicing mini-manifestos frequently. In an interview with Barry Alpert, he claims that he "didn't go to New York to find any writers and hang around with them" but rather, "I went to New York to learn, to have the privacy which I thought I

¹³⁰ Berrigan's 13 issue poetry magazine project, *C Magazine*, was first published in 1963.

could only have in a society of millions of people” (*Talking in Tranquility* 47). Five years later, in a conversation with Rosanne Erlich, he goes on:

You asked me if I was a member and what about the New York School. Was I in it? Did it really exist. And I said, “Absolutely.” “Certainly.” “Of Course.” I used to tell people they could join for five dollars, and they would write a certain kind of poem. Then I had an idea that the New York School consisted of whomever I thought. And I could have that idea, see, because there was no New York School. I didn’t have to consult John Ashbery to see if it was alright to think Philip Whalen from the West Coast, was in it, too. (*Talking in Tranquility* 90-91)

Berrigan’s flippantly solidifies Ashbery’s statement: “The term ‘New York School’ applied to poetry isn’t helpful.” However, Ashbery goes on to explain that it is unhelpful because the term claims to characterize “A number of widely dissimilar poets whose work moreover has little to do with New York” (*CP Frank O’Hara* x). According to Ashbery, New York “is, or used to be, merely a convenient place to live and meet people, rather than a specific place whose local color influences the literature produced there” (*CP Frank O’Hara* x). Ashbery concludes this introduction to O’Hara’s work by showing how O’Hara’s work *is* visually influenced by New York.¹³¹ And though the lineage is conspicuously deliberate, Berrigan too, creates a poetry of New York—big, stimulated, frantically courting and space-making. Berrigan subverts Pound’s advice, privileging movement over static imagining: “Ezra Pound said, ‘Read Everything.’ So we read everything. Then he said, ‘Study everything.’ And we said, ‘We don’t want to study everything’” (Waldman 112). As Berrigan continues, he saves this statement from sounding too punk for a moment, before falling back:

You don’t have to study everything, you just see it. So then we looked at everything up and down Madison Avenue, going into every gallery and looking at millions of paintings. We overloaded the circuits with an unbelievable load of information—and drugs. We took millions of all kinds of drugs. Change your consciousness. I see flat; I take a little acid and I see depth. (Waldman 112)

¹³¹ For a fuller discussion of Ashbery’s comments, see previous chapter.

Because Berrigan wrote so much, spoke so much, and admitted so much in writing and on tape, his work becomes crowded with contradictory and incriminating statements, like these. In this way, he prematurely blocked himself from critical view. But his consistent appraisal of the everyday surfaces: his attention here is to sight and to the street, as he situates himself within an earlier generation's painterly poet tradition.¹³²

Though the school was named after a painting movement, the title might have held through to second and even to today's fourth generation¹³³ New York School writers because no other title has paid tribute to the stimulating city. In the introduction to his posthumously published *Collected Poems*, Notley verifies that Berrigan's poems take on New York:

It is important to say once again that *The Sonnets* was written in New York... *The Sonnets*, in fact, could reflect no other setting than that city. In these poems New York bricks and human density have become the interior walls of someone always reading and thinking. Outside-in. (*CP* 4)

And as Berrigan's own poetry progressed, his relationships to poetry and place intertwined: "I verbalized myself a place," he explains in "Last Poem." "Outside-in" as Notley puts it, gets clustered with inside-out. Urban theories echo that everyday external experiences provoke tensions between inside and outside, which are internally

¹³² Berrigan lived with the painter Joe Brainard, and cites Brainard's importance to him as a painter friend frequently. For example, in his interview with Tom Savage, he explains: "Joe made me suddenly know that [painting] existed. I mean the instant I saw the works he was doing then, I knew that." (*Talking in Tranquility* 169).

¹³³ Jordan Davis attempts to chronicle the generations in his "Peeling Oranges on Top of the Skyscrapers: Towards a Name-Blind History of Poetry Since 1960" (*Vanitas* 1: 5-13). Ron Silliman reviews Davis's chronicle in his "Saturday, November 26, 2005" blogpost (*Ron Silliman Blog*, 26 Nov. 2005, 20 Apr. 2011, <<http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2005/11/>>).

registered. Recall Bachelard's consideration of designated being: "In the tonal quality of the French language, the *la* (there) is so forceful [in *etre-la*], that to designate being (*l'etre*) by *etre-la* is to point an energetic forefinger that might easily relegate intimate being to an exteriorized place" (*Poetics of Space* 213).¹³⁴ Berrigan's moving to the *la* of New York City, then, becomes a moving to an exteriorized life. Berrigan riffs on this idea throughout his "Whitman in Black" (discussed at this chapter's end), and other explicitly New York based poems—particularly those that imitate O'Hara by stating time and place: "It is 5:15 in New York." These time-place plots are not only ways of echoing O'Hara, but ways of pinning poems down, within "that city's" density and despite it.¹³⁵

Through his poetry's imitations, appropriations, citations and dedications,¹³⁶ Berrigan outlines moving to New York as part of a poetic program. Despite his early comments about seeking anonymity, Berrigan's presence on the Lower East Side scene show a poet who moved to New York City to create and be a part of a community of artists there¹³⁷—which he began to gather in Tulsa— and to become a "wonderful

¹³⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space* 1958, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).

¹³⁵ Timothy Henry's *Jacket Magazine* article "Time and Again: The Strategy of Simultaneity in Ted Berrigan's *The Sonnets*" discusses the ways in Berrigan uses time. (*Jacket* 40 (2010), 5 January 2011, <<http://jacketmagazine.com/40/>>).

¹³⁶ "Dedication has been a signature convention of the New York School for several years before O'Hara's 'Personism'.... For Berrigan, it was one of many ways of 'writing a name for a day,' freighting a poem with human as well as verbal material in an effort, it seems, to rescue temporarily poem, recipient, and by association, poet, from oblivion" (Rifkin 121).

¹³⁷ Daniel Kane writes about this extensively. See "Angel Hair Magazine, the Second-Generation New York School, and the Poetics of Sociability" (*Contemporary Literature* 45.2, Summer 2004: 331-367).

poet” (Waldman 20). Rifkin addresses this intent fully in her *Career Moves*. In her chapter on Berrigan, titled “Worrying about Making It,”¹³⁸ she offers a close reading of “Sonnet 74” and traces Berrigan’s poetic and personal “moves” across the American poetry scene. Rifkin quotes Berrigan to probe him:

‘I came to New York to become this wonderful poet, and I was to be very serious. Not to become but to be. That took about a year and a half, then I wrote this major work and there I was’ (Waldman *Nice* 20). In the scores of interviews and talks he gave between the 1967 publication of his debut book, *The Sonnets*, and his death in 1983, Ted Berrigan recounts the beginnings of his poetic career in this way; he compresses the bildungsroman’s developmental narrative until it yields the immediacy of the “star-is born” story. (109-10)

Rifkin’s chapter consolidates the many things Berrigan has said about his influences (in the above mentioned “scores of interviews”), and examines the self-determined influences of poets like Williams, O’Hara and Ashbery. Ward, too, notes that listing poets in poems was not only strategy, but a route:

Ted Berrigan saw that, since poetry in the sixties was, with the exception of one or two harassed celebrities, such as Ginsberg and Lowell, a coterie affair, one had to either ignore that evidence, or, push it for all it was worth. His long term gamble lay in taking the second route. (178)

And while critics have isolated Berrigan’s reliance on O’Hara, Ashbery, Ginsberg and other New York City centric contemporary names, Berrigan also mentions other, less contemporary, less New York, less obvious poets, as influential. Berrigan explains registering Emily Dickinson and T.S. Eliot’s inner (rhythm based) and outer (shape based) forms:

I discovered first of all that a number of the poems of Emily Dickinson were already familiar to me... I’d read them, and they’d stuck, to a certain extent. These odd poems with their off rhymes and their half-rhymes and their kind of not quite seeming to make anything clear the way that, say, a photograph would. But yet, there being something there.

¹³⁸ Rifkin, *Career Moves: Olsen, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-Garde* 108-

Some enigma which was all clarity. I mean, for me it was all feeling, not analogies. (*The Reminiscences of Ted Berrigan* 39)¹³⁹

Appropriately, Berrigan chose a line from Dickinson for the title of one of his later books, and its title poem. “A Certain Slant of Sunlight” pays tribute to this view of Dickinson by giving a picture while “not quite seeming to make anything clear”:

In Africa the wine is cheap, and it is
 on St. Mark’s Place too, beneath a white moon.
 I’ll go there tomorrow, dark bulk hooded
 against what is hurled down at me in my no hat
 which is weather: the tall pretty girl in the print dress
 under the fur collar of her cloth coat
 will be standing
 by the wire fence where the wild flowers grown not too
 tall
 her eyes will be deep brown and her hair styled 1941
 American
 will be too; but
 I’ll be shattered by then
 But now I’m not and can also picture white clouds
 impossibly high in blue sky over small boy heartbroken
 to be dressed in black knickers, black, coat, white shirt,
 buster-brown collar, flowing black bow-tie
 her hand lightly fallen on his shoulder, faded sunlight
 falling
 across the picture, mother & son, 33 & 7, First
 Communion Day, 1941—
 I’ll go out for a drink with one of my demons tonight
 they are dry in Colorado 1980 spring snow.

¹³⁹ *The Reminiscences of Ted Berrigan* is an interview with Tom Savage conducted as part of Columbia University’s Oral History Project. A manuscript exists at Emory University’s Manuscript and Rare Book Library (Ted Berrigan Papers, Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University). The interview was originally produced by the Oral History Research Office of Columbia University. A portion of the interview was republished as “Interview with Tom Savage” in *Talking in Tranquility*, ten years later. All further references to this interview will be to the original copy (housed at Emory’s MARBL), and will be cited as “*The Reminiscences of Ted Berrigan*.” If references are made to the second, revised version, they will be attributed to Ratcliff and Scalpino’s *Talking in Tranquility*.

The poem's setting is difficult to pin down. It roams from ideas of Africa, to New York City (St. Mark's) to a memory, to a vision, to Colorado. And amid its almost non-existent rhyme ("high," "sky," "bow-tie," and "dry," and "son," and "1941" are remarkably the only rhyming words in the poem), the poem's focal point becomes, instead of the form it's written in, the form it gazes at: A photograph. The poem uses the *idea* of a photograph for clarity, while offering *details from* a photograph for "some enigma," becoming a photograph of a photograph, in this hazy "all clarity" way. Using the photograph as a focal point allows for an implicit "all clarity" to be counteracted by a formulated "some enigma." By oscillating between patched together recollections of a past, and drunken pursuits of a future ("I'll be shattered by then"; "I'll go out for a drink with one of my demons tonight"), the poem enacts what Berrigan admired of Dickinson's—giving "internal difference / where the meanings are" (Dickinson "A Certain Slant of Light").¹⁴⁰

Half showing and half hiding, Berrigan performs a trick that at best feels like a slight of hand and, at worst, feels like self-reflexive poetry.¹⁴¹ Berrigan's "poetics of sociability" as Daniel Kane terms it (92-93),¹⁴² makes his poetry heavily referential, at

¹⁴⁰ Emily Dickinson, "There's a Certain Slant of Light" (*Bartleby*, 13 Sept. 2011, <<http://www.bartleby.com/113/>>).

¹⁴¹ "What poetry *mustn't* do is talk to itself," explains Bernard O'Donoghue. ("Poetry's Concern," *Strong Words*, eds. WN Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2000. 222-225) 223).

¹⁴² "I will argue we can infer what I call a 'poetics of sociability' in second-generation work, and indeed, that failing to recognize the initial communal impulses behind these texts is to miss much of what is important about the writing." (92); "... Writers within Previous 'schools' did not perform such sociability *in their poetry* as relentlessly as second-generation poets did in their literary work" (Kane, *Don't Ever Get Famous* 93).

once implicitly open and exclusive. Berrigan's poetry repeatedly oscillates between many forms of "all clarity" and "some enigma," and the poet, as a figurehead, embodies this public-private oscillation. While he (publicly) versifies his private life (as in his "10 Things I Do Everyday," or the repeated mention of "fucking til 7"), his speaker also assumes a "pose" in some of his more subtle, more lightly balanced poems. This pose is at once open-stanced and formed, like his hero's, O'Hara. In a poem that begins "I'm so glad Larry Rivers made a statue of me," O'Hara's openness solidifies as a slippery, abstract, coy, craftiness:

I am what people make of me—if they
can and when they will. My difficulty is
readily played—like a rhapsody, or a fresh
house.

(CP 190)

Claiming to be open to a public formulation, while hiding behind deliberately jagged form and playfully obscure imagery, O'Hara's persona repeatedly enacts a slip-slide. As Berrigan explains, "We used to refer to Frank as a master of the clear enigma, where what he said was a total enigma but it was absolutely clear ... He's being self-deprecating in a way that is totally arrogant. Frank was good at that" (*Talking in Tranquility* 116). Tom Clark writes of Berrigan emulating O'Hara, as Berrigan worked to formulate his own poetic persona:

I later came to believe this was a persona Ted borrowed from Frank O'Hara, who'd developed it as a description of the New York abstract expressionist painters, those bigger-than-life figures who remained great heroes to Ted, as they'd been to Frank, his favorite poet. The lineage was evident. "But My poetry is *open*..." That openness, and the commitment and willingness to *pose*, without embarrassment, in the persona created by the poem, was Berrigan's inheritance from O'Hara.
(21)

In "10 Things I Do Everyday," this stance seems obvious. However through some of his most lightly balanced poems, Berrigan's speaker assumes a "pose" which is at once open-stanced, and formed. This open-closure is delicately evoked in Berrigan's "Last

Poem,” which is often quoted as a self-written elegy (though not his actual last poem), and merits more formal consideration.

“Dear Berrigan, He Died”: Berrigan’s “Last” Poems

While many of Harold Bloom’s claims about poetic influence might be of threat to Berrigan’s poetry (Berrigan being a poet who loved to appropriate and re-appropriate, beginning poems with lines from “greater” poets so as to work up to them),¹⁴³ Berrigan’s poetry trumps Bloom’s assertions in at least one respect. Bloom writes: “Every poet begins ... by rebelling more strongly against the consciousness of death than all other men and women do.”¹⁴⁴ Berrigan, though, wrote very much with the consciousness of death.¹⁴⁵ “Dear Berrigan, he died,” Berrigan explains in his second sonnet, and at the age of 48, Berrigan did die. He knew he was dying for a long time,¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Berrigan describes this process throughout his interviews, collected most extensively in Ratcliffe and Scalpino’s *Talking in Tranquility*.

¹⁴⁴ Harold Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1973) 10.

¹⁴⁵ In her footnote to the “Last Poems” of *The Collected Poems*, Notley writes: “Ted had been a sporadic dater of poems, but each of these [last poems] has a date affixed... One cannot help but have the feeling he is counting down to his final moments” (637).

¹⁴⁶ “How did he know he was going to die? When he wrote the poem (“Telegram”) to Jack Kerouac, who had just died, that said ‘Bye-Bye Jack. / See you soon,’ he was making a literary allusion to Duchamp’s message to Picabia on the latter’s death (‘Francis, a bientot’), but he was also simply telling the truth. Kerouac died at forty-seven, Ted at forty-eight. And that year before Ted died, he put his papers in order. According to Alice, he more or less left instructions on how his next book, *A Certain Slant of Sunlight*, was to be edited. He went through his old

and record of this dying exists today in the form of recollections and poems from old friends (made available in Anne Waldman's *Nice to See You: Homage to Ted Berrigan*). Berrigan, too, wrote himself homages that seem, in hindsight, completely conscious of his impending death.¹⁴⁷ Though written in 1979 and not his actual "last," "Last Poem" often gets quoted as self-written elegy. It was read at his July 1983 funeral:¹⁴⁸

Before I began life this time
I took a crash course in Counter-Intelligence
Once here I signed in, see name below, and added
Some words remembered from an earlier time,
"The intention of the organism is to survive."
My earliest, & happiest, memories pre-date WW II
They involve a glass slipper & a helpless blue rose
In a slender blue single-rose vase: Mine

correspondence (the part he never sold, that is) and returned the letters I had sent him. He meant it as a friendly gesture, a gift. He even made marginal notes and funny comments on them. I thought he was just being considerate, recalling old times, being friendly. I had discounted his thoughts of death as those of an Irishman who needs sentiment the way others need coffee. Yes, back in 1971 I had predicted he would die young, in my poem 'June 17, 1942': 'Ted, sorry for you / already flying out into what / really is the end of everything.' But then he never did die. Gradually I forgot that he could die, because it seemed that no matter how much he punished his body with speed, cigarettes, alcohol, and a bad diet, he seemed to be impervious" (Padgett, *Ted* 61-62).

¹⁴⁷ In this way, he might become Bloom's sixth (and final) kind of poet—he who enacts "Apophrades."

¹⁴⁸ Notley offers useful notes to the poem in her footnotes to *The Collected Poems*: "Ted conceived of the 'last poem' as a form: a poem that any poet might want to write. ... The poem was written more than four years before his death, but people have a tendency to treat it as virtually Ted's last poem and testament. It is far from his last poem... 'Last Poem' was originally published in the magazine *Inc.* #3, edited by John Daley, in which it is dated '13 Jan 79/ nyc.'" (703-704).

Was a story without a plot. The days of my years
 Folded into one another, an easy fit, in which
 I made money & spent it, learned to dance & forgot, gave
 Blood, regained my poise, & verbalized myself a place
 In Society. 101 St. Mark's Place, apt. 12A, NYC 10009
 New York. Friends appeared & disappeared, or wiggled out,
 Or stayed; inspiring strangers sadly died; everyone
 I ever knew aged tremendously, except me. I remained
 Somewhere between 2 and 9 years old. But frequent
 Reification of my own experiences delivered to me
 Several new vocabularies, I loved that almost most of all.
 I once had the honor of meeting Beckett & I dug him.
 The pills kept me going, until now. Love, & work,
 Were my great happinesses, that other people die the source
 Of my great, terrible, & inarticulate one grief. In my time
 I grew tall & huge of frame, obviously possessed
 Of a disconnected head, I had a perfect heart. The end
 Came quickly & completely without pain, one quiet night as I
 Was sitting, writing, next to you in bed, words chosen randomly
 From a tired brain, it like them, suitable, & fitting.
 Let none regret my end who called me friend.

Though not a sonnet, the poem's last line bends in half, calling form into question right at its sentiment's softest moment.¹⁴⁹ By the time the reader has arrived at this moment, they have been filled with facts, confessions and a sense of resonance, perpetuated formally by internal rhyme. The rhymes begin where the speaker (Berrigan himself)¹⁵⁰ explains "Mine / Was a story without a plot," inviting plotless-ness to take on weight and truth, rhyming with the word "forgot" two lines later. "Pain," "brain," "head," "bed," "end," and "friend," all rhyme in spread-out ways, setting the body and the

¹⁴⁹ "Andre Breton wrote a brief essay about a deceased friend, Jacques Vacho. Ted was particularly moved by the final sentence in that piece: 'Cet homme fut mon ami.' This man was my friend" (Padgett, *Ted* 82).

¹⁵⁰ "I don't do what Eliot does in 'Prufrock.' The 'I' is not Prufrock; it is Ted Berrigan" (*Talking in Tranquility* 95).

poem resounding, as internal rhymes¹⁵¹ increase in concentration in the last five lines, enforcing a poetic coda.¹⁵² The point here is not to show that there *is* a rhyme scheme, but to suggest a subtle and deliberate craft. “Last Poem” produces an intricate fold, wholly realizable in its internal rhyme structure—that delicate one-in-the-middle of every-other-line pattern. The (every two-line) rhyme scattering in “Last Poem” gives each rhyme time to open and close, while offering a sense of causality and implicit cohesion.

In this way, the poem is almost truly organic—seeming to sprawl with consciousness, sometimes not making logical sense while being sweetly sense-able (memories “involve a glass slipper & a helpless blue rose / in a slender blue single-rose vase”—the vase creates a space for the glass, blue and rose to be united), all the while answering to itself: “But frequent / Reification of my own experiences delivered to me / Several new vocabularies, I loved that almost most of all.” “Reification” (a term borrowed from Robert Creeley)¹⁵³ is performed in the poem’s internal, ingrained rhyme

¹⁵¹ “Tall & huge frame” gets re-felt by rhyming with “pain” (paused by a comma), and also “brain,” two lines thereafter, making the body reverberate.

¹⁵² In *Poetic Closure* (Barbara Hernstein-Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1968)), Hernstein-Smith explains: “In music, the coda is a terminal section of a piece or movement, added for the specific purpose of securing closure and clearly distinguished from the preceding portion by its structure. A counterpart is found in poetry wherever the conclusion of a poem forms a more or less discrete section, involving new formal or thematic principles, or (as in the envoy) both. As a closural force... the terminal modification of formal principles arrests the reader’s expectations of further development and thus prepared him for cessation” (188).

¹⁵³ In Notley’s notes to *The Collected*, she writes: “Besides the words essentially from Creeley, from ‘Frequent / Reification’ through ‘and I dug him,’ one hears language echoing trashy spy

scheme, its many repeated words (“time” (li.1; 4), “rose” (li. 7; 8), “years” (li. 9; 17), “place” (li. 12; 13), “9” (li. 13; 17), “me” (li.16; 17) and “end” (li. 25; 29)), and mangled tenses. Beginning with a rebeginning (“Before I began”), the poem starts, stops,¹⁵⁴ and implies the death of its author in a sentence that feels like a clause: “The end / Came quickly & completely without pain, one quiet night...” Open, closed and opened, the poem is expertly musical: mentioning “the end,” it ushers in its own coda, where rhyme becomes more obvious. By the time the reader has reached the last reverberating lines of “Last Poem,” they cannot but be in love with a poet’s self-proclaimed “perfect heart” and anachronistically youthful spirit. So “the end” hits the reader—or “friend”—hard, if not harder than it does the poet-speaker, as the speaker’s exit from the stage promises to be felt.

Barbara Hernstein-Smith writes extensively on endings in her *Poetic Closure*.¹⁵⁵ She explains that in codas, the reader is led to an end alongside the poet. Her reflections on a poem by Lord Thomas Vaux may be applicable to Berrigan’s own ending lines:

novels, a poem from *Easter Monday*, the poem ‘Cranston near the City Line,’ and the initial voice-over for the soap opera *The Days of our Lives*.” (703-704). Robert Duncan actually expounds on “reification” in his essay “Equilibrations” (in *Post Modern American Poetry* ed. Paul Hoover (USA: Norton 1994): “The poem is not a stream of consciousness, but an area of composition in which I work with whatever comes into it. Only words come into it. Sounds and ideas. ... In which meanings and ideas, themes and things seen, arise. So that there is not only a melody of sounds but of images. Rimes, the reiteration of formation in the design, even puns, lead into the complexities of the field. But now the poet works with a sense of parts fitting in relation to a design that is larger than the poem” (628).

¹⁵⁴ Memories are given that “pre-date” (instead of more simply and progressively dating), while the poem mentions a “going” along with a stopping (“until now”).

¹⁵⁵ See Footnote 150.

The structure is not logical, however, but associative and iterative. The poet is confronted by his own mortality, which he almost dispassionately acknowledges as it reveals itself in the signs, symptoms, and visions of his own decay and death... Indeed, at this point in the poem threatens to become intolerably monotonous or obsessive, for the reader has been assailed by a relentless successions of 'last things,' and the question 'Where do we go from here?' is beginning to press itself. The repetitive and associative structure of the poem has not yielded any principle that could determine a concluding point, and since almost every quatrain has rung with the finality of death, the closural force of any such allusion has been exhausted well before the last lines. In the conclusion of the poem, however, the poet unexpectedly turns from the incantatory evocation of his own death to a chilling envoy that sweeps the reader into the dismal fellowship of mortality. Though blunted by iteration, in this coda death's sting is sharpened once again, for here the poet has made it our own. (191)

Hernstein-Smith's commentary on codas are about a poem from the Renaissance, and come from an entire chapter on poetic codas. The fact that these comments could easily be applied to Berrigan's "Last Poem" is testimony to the nostalgic and progressive aspects of the poem. What's more, pinning this commentary to Berrigan's poem allows "Last Poem" to be situated within a series of Berrigan's own "last" or "final" poems, and a wider literary canon of Elegies to the Poet, by the Poet.

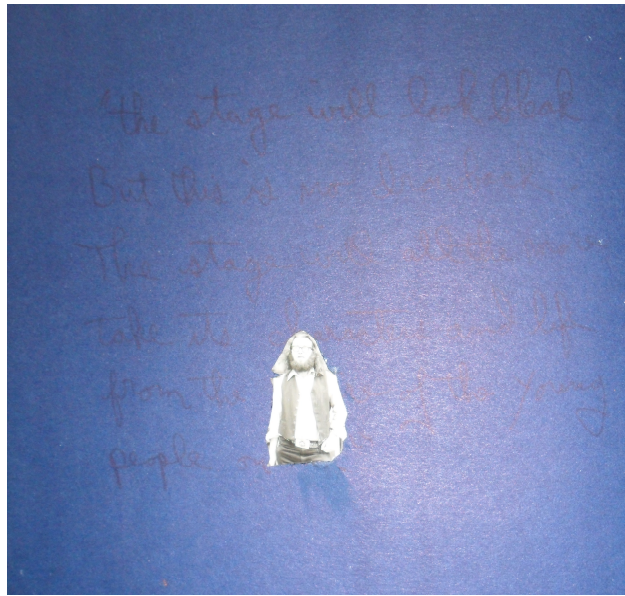
An unpublished pamphlet surviving in Emory University's Manuscript and Rare Book Library suggests that making an exit be felt was Berrigan's poetic goal. The pamphlet, titled "~A Gladness as Remote from Ecstasy as it is From Fear~ (for Annabel)," consists of quotes from other poets, drawings and note-like lines. It ends with writing in dark blue ink on dark blue construction paper, looking, under today's light, like a hidden message. Visible with the aid of red light,¹⁵⁶ the text reads:

the stage will look bleak

¹⁵⁶ Until my visit to Emory's MARBL, the Library had not been aware of the text on this page, and so it is undocumented, except by its existence in the library ("~A Gladness as Remote from Ecstasy as it is From Fear~ (for Annabel)," Ted Berrigan Papers, Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University).

But this is no drawback.
 The stage will all the more
 take the characters and life
 from the fire of the young
 people on me.

Though the source of the lines is unclear, and the reason for the visible burying of them unclear too, there is a small photograph of Berrigan himself over the word “fire”:



So Berrigan’s image survives as that very “fire” which the lines, in circumstance and sentiment, request.

Rifkin comments at great length on the elegiac quality of Berrigan’s poetry, isolating it as part of a poetic program: “*The Sonnets* is notable, however, for the fact that the poet’s death, conceived specifically in terms of a literary posterity, is already a concern...” (122). Rifkin, writing specifically about “A Final Sonnet” (CP 75-76), is reflecting on Berrigan’s own comments about leaving the sonnet form. Berrigan explains the process of ending *The Sonnets* as one of sensing it was time to stop writing in a particular way, citing the effort he spent in finding a good way to conclude. In late June of 1963, while seeking a poetic departure from sonnet form, Berrigan read Prospero’s final speech in *The Tempest*, and inserted five of Shakespeare’s lines into his

sonnets. These repetitions allow the sonnets to bounce off each other and envelop the reader in a prolonged déjà –vu.

Harking back to *The Tempest* also allows the “A Final Sonnet” to stretch across centuries. And as the poem ends, the issue of lifting lines from other works presents itself: How much of this poem is actually new? And how much should be attributed to Berrigan? In his interview with Tom Savage, Berrigan explains that this was an instance of taking five lines from Shakespeare (as opposed to interjecting one line from a poet) (*Talking in Tranquility* 91). Line-borrowing is something Berrigan did a lot of, and Peter Robinson attempts to umbrella the collage-like effect of the practice:

...There is nevertheless an ‘arte povera’ effect, as if the more possibilities of thieving from everyone and anyone including yourself ... produce as its presumably unintended side-effect a desperate shortage feeling, a snatching at whatever is at hand.¹⁵⁸

The idea that Berrigan’s borrowing inflects his poetry with a sense of poverty may hold, but it also makes his poetry feel overwhelmingly referential, full, repetitive, insistent, imitative, and amphetamined. At its best, the tendency to borrow and recycle lines gives Berrigan’s *Sonnets* a rhythm: “Working in this way enabled him to develop *The Sonnets*’ characteristic rhythm: repetition of words and lines within individual poems and across the book as a whole produces a kind of ‘reverb’—a synthetic echo that interrupts the lyric voice whenever it threatens to extend into song” (127). Rifkin so importantly suggests that this borrowing makes *The Sonnets*’ at once richer and protects the lyric voice against a liquidation.

And it is the genius of Berrigan repetition practice, that by “A Final Sonnet” repetition results in something at once reminiscent and fresh—altogether appropriate as a final poem. “My dream” for example, is mentioned twelve times throughout *The*

¹⁵⁸ Peter Robinson, “No Apologies and No Prizes: The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan,” *Jacket* 34 (October 2007), 19 May 2010, <<http://jacketmagazine.com/34/>>.

Sonnets, but always followed by a different “dream.” In “A Final Sonnet,” the “dream” produces the promise to let go of “this rough magic,” so that the “dream” falls away, finally, very softly, into Shakespeare’s. A fitting end to *The Sonnets*, as Berrigan frequently explains that Shakespeare’s sonnets influenced his own:

I instantly saw that this iambic pentameter and rhyme—that’s what Williams had been talking about. And it’s true. Americans... talked more quickly. Our diction was different. The rhymes would have to fall in different places. I’d have to do all that differently, but that I could do this. And years went by... somewhere between the time I thought that and, say, two and a half years later, I pursued intensively a course of study of the sonnet, and I wrote a lot of them, and I made a certain kind of breakthrough.... And then I wrote a sonnet sequence, and it was published as my first book. And I did it purposefully. That is, I thought something like, “Now what do you do if you are a poet, you are just starting out and you intend to be big?” And I mean, who was bigger than Shakespeare? ... And I decided you wrote a sonnet sequence. So I wrote a sonnet sequence.” (*Talking in Tranquility* 160)

The “intensive course of study,” began with a study of Shakespeare’s “Sonnet XCIV,” and that sonnet’s compassion¹⁵⁹ and pace make their ways into this “A Final Sonnet” and many others. For example, because “A Final Sonnet” generally lacks punctuation, the sonnet’s pace is punctuated by its repetitions: “Someone” begins each breath when

¹⁵⁹ Shakespeare’s “Sonnet XCIV” (*Bartleby*, 2 Feb. 2012, <<http://www.bartleby.com/70/>>)

reads:

They that have power to hurt and will do none,
That do not do the thing they most do show,
Who, moving others, are themselves as stone,
Unmoved, cold, and to temptation slow,
They rightly do inherit heaven's graces
And husband nature's riches from expense;
They are the lords and owners of their faces,
Others but stewards of their excellence.
The summer's flower is to the summer sweet,
Though to itself it only live and die,
But if that flower with base infection meet,
The basest weed outbraves his dignity:
 For sweetest things turn sourest by their deeds;
 Lilies that fester smell far worse than weeds.

read, so that the reader is forced to inject purpose, consideration, and a sense of pace into the multiple imagined people's circumstances. Berrigan comments in an interview:

The major technical resource that I have to deal with as a poet is pace. My pace is fast. I think fast and my metabolism's fast. I speak reasonably fast, therefore it seems to me that I should write fast. If I'm doing a rewriting it would have to keep up the pace. And that's a problem. But speed is something I like... There are things you can do when you're fast that you can't do when you're going slow, and vice versa. (*Talking in Tranquility* 104)

Berrigan goes on to comment on his preferences for fast poems and poets (“Auden was a fast poet. Frank O’Hara was a very fast poet” (*Talking in Tranquility* 104)), he also reflects on Emily Dickinson, Delmore Schwartz and Robert Creeley’s use of “pace”—poetry which is “certainly ... fast, but [has] a certain slowness in the way they read” (*Talking in Tranquility* 104). With pace so carefully inscribed into “A Final Sonnet,” the reader becomes at once slowed down and a little exhausted as the different types of people (“someones”) and occasions (“having a birthday,” “getting married”) permeate the scope of possibilities the poem invites us to consider. This sensitive musing sets the stage for Berrigan to hint at his own poetic departure: “How strange to be gone in a minute.” But Berrigan plants this line before leaving—again creating the sense of pervading possibilities, without tangible finishes. To further the feeling of a circle almost-being-completed, the poem’s last line “Dear Chris, hello” suggests not only the departure of the poet at last, but his full entrance into a conversation he has been starting all along.¹⁶⁰

But Rifkin makes an interesting leap: “*The Sonnets* thus anticipates a personal as well as a poetic end... saying goodbye not only to the form that enabled him to embark on his first major project, but also to the crowded, chaotic world of the living” (122).

¹⁶⁰ “Dear Chris,” begins and moves down (in position) in the four preceding sonnets (*CP* 69; 70; 71; 72). It only occurs as a last line in “A Final Sonnet”.

She so suggests that “the doubleness of *The Sonnets*: full of dailiness, it is zeitgesit poetry that nevertheless attempts to evade the contemporary by pressing time until only the essential elements of the poetic career remain” is commentary and prophecy at once (122). As Rifkin’s insightful chapter continues outlining the way Berrigan shaped his poetic career, it links Berrigan’s many time-calls and deaths in poems to an agenda: shaping an oeuvre. “Anticipating and even performing his own demise” Rifkin acknowledges, “is one of the ways in which the ambitious poet attempts to assert control over his career” (134). In this respect, “Last Poem” becomes part of a catalogue of poems that recall Berrigan’s own self-declared poetic career and simultaneously push it forward, from the sepulcher¹⁶¹ of traditional form.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹“And the sonnet is not dead” (*CP* 36); Berrigan explains in an interview with Tom Savage: “William Carlos Williams... said “The sonnet is dead.” I mean, it was a very famous pronouncement of his. When I began writing it was very well known. “The sonnet is dead.” He was saying very clearly, “One cannot project out into the air or down onto the page in shapely form contemporary feelings, and have it come out as a sonnet.” That is, the orthodox sonnet limited expression of feeling by virtue of its restrictions, so that the post-electricity, post-motor car, post-what have you, airplane, could no longer truly express one’s feelings in such prescribed form.” (*Talking in Tranquility* 158).

¹⁶² In *The Straight Line: Writing on Poetry and Poets* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000), Padgett sums up the variances in Berrigan’s sonnets: “Not a single poem in *The Sonnets* conforms to the classical definition of the sonnet, either Shakespearean or Italian, and yet the sense of the sonnet, the feel of the well-crafted ‘little song,’ hovers behind them all... The changes [Berrigan] rung on the traditional sonnet form, with a good dose of the hypnotic repetition of lines in the pantoun form, are particularly interesting. The line enjambments, the twisting of syntax, the ‘push-pull’ of meaning, the abrupt changes of tone, the dislocation of punctuation, the fading in and out of prosody, the intentional misuse of parts of speech, the

Alongside a potential thematically-governed agenda, comes Berrigan's creation of a new poetic form. "Last Poem" is "beautiful," in part because of its simple honesty,¹⁶³ in part because of its span, and mostly because, in the old *fashioned* way, it does what it says:¹⁶⁴ "The days of my years/ Folded into one another, an easy fit..." Art and life merge, as the poem goes on to fold into itself, and the speaker dissolves in the pattern, leaving the reader with a sense of neatness, and the sound of a pacing pulse.

Berrigan spoke with Tom Clark about this way of subtly rhyming:

... A rhyme is like a connection, with the one up here and the two down here, and they flow more... And also you can do so many things with rhymes. I mean, you can do the beautiful off-rhymes, and you can rhyme a word like "there," which is one of my favorite words to rhyme. "There." I like the way it sounds, like in "And I was there and I was there." Then you can rhyme it with the middle syllable of another word in the next line and stuff. And that's what I really like to do. I mean, I'm into Natural Numbers, like Rexroth talks about... I think I really write in units of speech and half units. (*Talking in Tranquility* 14-15).

With "beautiful off-rhymes" and rhymes with "the middle syllable of another word in the next line and stuff," Berrigan's "Last Poem," reads off the page better than on¹⁶⁵—depending on the intricacies of breath and intonation (heavily guided by form), to resonate. "Last Poem" produces an intricate fold, wholly realizable in the internal

aesthetic decisions as to when to accept the results of a chance operation or discard them—these should not be overlooked in favor of colorful subject matter" (92).

¹⁶³ According to Tom Savage's "A Personal Memoir," Berrigan "took pleasure in having been told by a doctor that he had a 'perfect heart'" (Waldman 158).

¹⁶⁴ Praising art that imitates life, Berrigan echoed Ginsberg's sentiment "Mind is shapely; Art is shapely"(previously quoted (Ginsberg 415)) with "I want to make my poems have shape, be shapely" (*Talking in Tranquility* 15).

¹⁶⁵ "I always loved rhyme. Edgar Allen Poe was a great favorite of mine, and Conrad Aiken in a certain way, and Eliot. I guess I was always influenced by the way Eliot uses rhyme, when I read it as an American." (*Talking in Tranquility* 22).

rhyme structure—that one-in-the-middle of every-other-line pattern described above. A reader interested in these formal issues, might go on to draw the way Berrigan’s poem progresses as a sort of zig-zag, or a starting and stopping and restarting in the middle-of-things, over and over. Berrigan does this with rhyme in the above poem, and with phrases and whole lines throughout his *Sonnets*. Lines like “I rage in a blue shirt at a brown desk / In a bright room” get repeated and repositioned throughout his poems, always moving downwards.¹⁶⁶ This particularly domestic vision of creative intensity, for example, is the fourth line in Sonnet LV (*CP* 58), the fifth in Sonnet LXXX (*CP* 70), and finds its final resting place as the ninth line of Sonnet LXXIV (*CP* 73).¹⁶⁷ This re-positioning happens frequently throughout Berrigan’s sonnets (as with the abovementioned “my dream”), along with re-appropriating lines from other poets and people, re-imagining moments, and translating, all contributing to a sense of an ever-evolving revision vision. And *The Selected Poems*’ appendix helps to point out that Berrigan’s poems were written in rapid succession, progressing as a sort of zig-zag, ever-entrenched in revision, starting and stopping and restarting in the middle-of-things, plotting times, and saying “hello” over and over. Yes, this is a poetry that “actively courts” something it deems sacred.

Berrigan called this start-stop-restart, “hello again” mode, a way of emphasizing the “reification of experience,” and explains that his writing meant to make it manifest (*Homage to Ted Berrigan* 109). Berrigan describes a way of writing in “Blocks”: “I didn’t want people to come into my poems, but if I could make things come out... They’re all

¹⁶⁶ From Clark’s *Late Returns*, we know that that desk was in living room (27).

¹⁶⁷ The 2011 *Selected Poems of Ted Berrigan* includes, in its appendix, a list of when poems were written. The list is useful in pointing out that the sonnets were numbered chronologically, as they were written.

based on this push/pull idea. Blocks. Blocks is the key word in *The Sonnets*” (Waldman 109). Padgett (Berrigan’s friend from Tulsa, fellow poet, frequent collaborator and memoir writer) explicates the block-theory further:

...I said [Berrigan’s sonnets were] “built” rather than “written” because, as Ted himself has said several hundred times, he was using words as though they were bricks he placed side by side,, one course after another, tapping them into place with his old typewriter that required a firm wham of the fingers. Scissors and Elmer’s glue were also essential tools.¹⁶⁸

Berrigan explains that his sense of construction mirrored outer constructions, repeatedly. In an interview with George Oppen, he explains: “And I started noticing that he is really interested in something that I’m interested in, which is how you get around the corner of a line; and when I hooked onto that, I started getting caught up in this certain way” (Waldman 62-63). In contrast, Berrigan reflects on writing *In the Early Morning Rain* in Chicago: “I wasn’t using line end cuts, I was being smooth going around the corner of lines, but I really jammed it up almost the way Chicago is jammed up as a city as opposed to the way New York is; they were written in Chicago” (*Talking in Tranquility* 87). Berrigan so treats the ends of lines in “Last Poem,” like the ends of blocks in the East Village, so that “frequent / reification” can come to feel like crossing Avenue A to get to First.¹⁶⁹ And again, this way of writing in blocks and with a sense of corners is a way of creating a space, out of a space.

Although Berrigan claims to be “fast” in talk, writing and walking, Padgett compares his own poetry to Berrigan’s: “My poems tended to be fast and light; Ted’s moved from word to word in dense clusters... Ted and I talked about how we each needed something of the other’s style, I to keep my lines from flying right off the page,

¹⁶⁸ Ron Padgett, *The Straight Line: Writing on Poetry and Poets* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000) 92.

¹⁶⁹ This is an intersection near the apartment Berrigan lived in.

Ted to keep his from getting mired” (*Ted* 68). Padgett’s reflections offer an alternative: Berrigan’s “reification” produces dense clusters, always harking back and recreating in an inextricable process. Oscillating between intensity and surface (another word Berrigan loved, as is documented in his interview with Tom Savage), was potentially a coping strategy poetically, and personally, as both art and New York City are easy to get mired in. Writing and reading his poetry become ways of writing and reading city life: walking¹⁷⁰ through the mired mind and place.

In actuality, Berrigan comments on his own poetry almost as much as his peers do,¹⁷¹ all offering space metaphors for understanding: “When I’m having fun, then I like to think enormous thoughts, structures, palaces and architecture. I thought plenty about *The Sonnets*, I thought great architecture and rooms and buildings but I only thought that when I wasn’t writing....” (Waldman 113). “Structures, palaces and architecture”—these are the kinds of “rooms and buildings” Berrigan highlights as inspirations for poetry. And yet they did not exist in the East Village from which Berrigan wrote. In this way, Berrigan’s poetry unexpectedly leans towards spaces, real and imagined,

¹⁷⁰ Berrigan relates walking to talking and writing: “Well, ninety percent of my poems come out of walking, taking walks.... They come to me, and no matter where they come to me they usually get sort of worked out while I’m walking. And by worked out I mean, the poems come to me by getting a phrase or so... When I’m walking I allow myself to let a few phrases start coming together” (*Talking in Tranquility* 18).

¹⁷¹ “Pressed by admirers and students to theorize his debut work, Berrigan adduced a wide variety of metaphors for form—from ‘block’ to ‘room’ to ‘still life’ to ‘field’ to ‘voice’ to ‘story’. These figures stand in for a host of poetic agendas, a representative history of conceptions of form more reflective of the professionalized context of interpretation than compositional process itself” (Rifkin 115).

unavailable in the cultural, socio-economic, and poetic climate from which Berrigan wrote.

“Is there Any Room in that Room that You Room In?” Berrigan’s Rooms

Berrigan moved to the crowded city of New York with intent: “I came to New York to become this wonderful poet... Not to become but to be. To find out how to work at it ... then I wrote this major work and there I was. Just as I thought I would be in my inane stupidity” (Waldman 20). Accordingly, Berrigan’s rented spaces took on the pulls of his artistic programs:

The walls of his apartment were always covered with art of his friends: drawings, paintings, collages and constructions by Joe and George, collaborations between him and them, works by Donna Dennis, and Andy Warhol posters; and on the floor, serving as a coffee table, an original Warhol Brillo Box, which Andy had given him... Ted’s was festooned with coffee rings, cigarette burns, scratches and scuff marks. As we used to say in those days, he “personalized it.” (Padgett, *Ted* 84)

Much like O’Hara, Berrigan immersed himself physically, socially and personally in art.

Berrigan’s poetry is often complemented by drawings by Joe Brainard, Kenward

Elmslie, Alice Notley, or himself—a simple look at his *C Magazine* illustrates this. His

rooms, also, were lined with these drawings: “The walls of the living room were lined

with works by Joe Brainard, many of them ‘collaborations’ Ted had a hand in...”

(Padgett, *Ted* 27). In the same way that his manuscripts show the page as a place to

sprawl in, his apartment life was cluttered with evidence of artistic energy, mobility and

poverty—“festooned” with “personality.” How did the page become a place to register

this life? And why did Berrigan choose the strictures of sonnet form to write in, from

this New York City intensity? Berrigan responds to John Donne’s promise: “We’ll build

in sonnets pretty rooms,” throwing the answer in question form back: “Is there room in

that room that you room in.”¹⁷² Berrigan obstructs the potential for a view of domesticity, and fills the stanza with complications. What’s more, he repeats this line throughout his stuffed and rearranged sonnets (three times (*CP* 28; 61; 170), changing it eventually to the coy parenthetical: “(is there room in the tune to atune in?” (*CP* 174)). And the repeated line occurs alongside other repeated room-obsessed lines like: “All /this ... makes me love you even more than the dirt / in the crevices in my window / and the rust on the bolt in my door” (*CP* 62; 64); “I rage in a blue shirt at a brown desk in a / Bright room” (*CP* 58; 74); “Bring me red demented rooms (*CP* 32; 62); “I am closing my window” (*CP* 64; 65) and 80 other references to rooms. Throughout all these room-obsessed lines, Berrigan’s writing implies that another, more accommodating “room” may be created in poetry. And among the many metaphors he describes his poetry with, is the room:

I always thought of each one of my poems, like the sonnets, as being a room. And before that, I used to think of each stanza as being a room. And that each stanza should be a different room. And they should go like that, so that the space in between was that. So that when you got out of the room, you went sort of like that. You went just like that into the next room. But then the sonnets, I made them to be a whole room. But then each line or each two lines or each three lines would be part of the room, sort of. And then in the open poems, although it’s also usually a room, instead of there being sections of the room, I was interested in the air. And I try to have the poems go like that, around the room and move around. (*Talking in Tranquility* 21)

Throughout this study of rooms and stanzas, this is, curiously, the clearest and most explicit association of the stanza to its etymology. While it is helpful that Berrigan likened his stanzas to rooms, how much does his explanation hold? Do separate rooms and so, stanzas, delineate separate thoughts? Or is the room a useful image because of

¹⁷² Rifkin points out: “‘Is there any room in the room that you room in’ reads like an example from a handbook of English usage, showing the different meanings of the word room; it’s an anxious demonstration of virtuosity, and an earnest request for inclusion” (119).

the intimacy it promises to secure? As much as Berrigan claims to not be responding to modernism,¹⁷³ Cleanth Brook's well known statement: "If we must compare a poem to the make-up of some physical object it ought not to be to a wall but to something organic like a plant"¹⁷⁴ receives, through Berrigan's poem's and statements, the response: "Bring me red demented rooms"; or more explicitly: "Each stanza should be a room" (*Talking in Tranquility* 21). He elaborates: "I often think of my words as sort of bricks. But the bricks then are underneath the words, sort of. I use the words a lot of time to disguise the fact that it's a brick underneath, or to make the brick float That's the best thing I've said in five years about my works actually" (*Talking in Tranquility* 19). In this way, Berrigan's poetry presents itself as part of a wave for a new New Criticism: The organic response to the *inorganic* facts of post modern daily life. If, for Eliot and his contemporaries, nature—or more specifically, as in *Ash Wednesday*—the river, presented itself as a "brown god," what forms of divinity present themselves to the writer at a messy desk¹⁷⁵ in an East Village apartment? Berrigan offers a new set of figures to work towards:

My poems are about domestic—my poems are domestic in a certain way. They're more involved with the household gods than gods of magic or gods of war. So therefore in the more intimate human way they're involved with love and friendship, the rituals of daily life—the ceremonial occasions of everyday life in an everyday way but you have to live it as a creature twisted and turned and warped and moved by the external events in the world." (*Talking in Tranquility* 84)

¹⁷³ Berrigan claims, in an interview: "I had never heard of the word 'modernism'" (Waldman 22).

¹⁷⁴ Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry: An Anthology for College Students* (New York: Henry Holt, 1950) xlix-l.

¹⁷⁵ Tom Clark records Berrigan's apartment at 286 East 2nd Street as having a desk in the south facing living room covered with typewriters and poems and a radio, always on (21).

reader trip further, and makes the room at once a mythical place, and a heavy request. Berrigan's speaker obviously has a room, for the second line's activity, which is referred to throughout the sonnets as well. Does the reference to the speaker's sex life "increase the difficulty of perception"? Not necessarily, but the following line trips up the time frame for its memory—making it another *déjà vu*—that short term memory accidentally grouped in with a long term one—and so a moment temporarily difficult. The middle lines of the sonnet come from Berrigan's translation of Rimbaud's "Le Bateau Ivre" (CP 64) and are coyly also tripped up by the confession "Why can't I read French?" As the poem continues, it gets increasingly more "difficult" rehashing visions of the "old woman" from "Poem in Modern Manner" (CP 32), and offering "oatmeal," injecting "thought" with "taste" that has dimensions of touch and temperature but not actual taste ("warm delicate"). Is this "fragmentary work"¹⁷⁷ as Adorno would have it? "The closed work of art belongs to the bourgeois... and the fragmentary work, in its state of complete negativity, belongs to utopia" (Adorno 126). It is appropriately difficult to say. But as the fragments—with an almost complete negativity—hark to their dystopia, they become resolved in the mention of drugs, alliterated for extra hallucinatory effect: "Something there is is benzadrine in bed." The double "is" suggests not only an expanded consciousness, but a loss: the reader is invited to wander around the offered fragmentary details of the room in search of the "something", and pause in-between "is"s. This pause slows the spinning of the sonnet-room down, and the reader is led to linger on the last thought: "Bring me red demented rooms," as if this room weren't red or demented enough. It is the mark of the poetry that makes this line feel lulling—does the speaker desire a room that feels like the one in his head, a

¹⁷⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Susan Gillespie (Berkeley: U of California P, 2002) 126, note 5.

room “as... perceived, and not as ... known” (Shklovsky 12)? Or has the reader here been ushered into fitting the conception of the room-stanza into their own head—sensually denting and retarding it, accordingly? The line is at once imperative and self-satisfying, as “red demented rooms” offer alliterative consonance—giving “r”, “d”s and “m”s that mirror themselves, allowing the “dementions” and “dimensions” of the room and poem the possibility of—again—being folded into.

In a 1978 interview with Anne Waldman, Berrigan refers back to the idea of the room and suggests that his analogy is invoked for nesting: “My poems are like a room, but not this room, there’s not enough in this room. This room was made by somebody else. I may live here for three months, I’ll make this room look like rooms look” (Waldman 113). Promising to “personalize” the room, Berrigan’s statement suggests that the poem is an architected and worn in place which responds to its architected lived in environment. In the same way that O’Hara’s “Aus Einem April” almost comes to look like a concrete poem, Berrigan’s repeated question (“Is there any room in that room that you room in?”) concretely responds to the strictures of his concrete location: cramped New York City domestic spaces are called out to from the middle of cramped New York City sonnets—the “dense clusters” that mire. And Berrigan carves out his place, simultaneously in both.

Berrigan lingers on the idea of room-poems often, reiterating Robert Frost’s idea of poems having doors to them: “The beginnings of poems are literally like opening a door to a room. The endings are like closing a door, or like going out the door and saying good bye” (*Talking in Tranquility* 94). Waldman responds to Berrigan’s room-ruminations with a request for clarity and a joke: “Rooms you live in? Put everything up on the walls!” and Berrigan clarifies in turn:

Yeah, but its not even that. It’s what’s not in the room then, given you have enough time to do it. Plus, the way the towel’s on there and not there. What’s on this desk. If too much gets on here, I take it away

because I may want to write something. If too much is on the floor, I may kick it under this couch because I may want to write something. That's how *I* am. One of my principal desires is to make my poems be like my life, and my life is the way I think I am, because I don't know how I am. I can't see myself the way that you can see me, but I can see everything else around me. If I can make everything around me be the way that it is [in these poems], presumably I can create the shape of the self inside the poem, because there is a person inside almost all of the poems. Sometimes not on stage, but just talking. Sometimes it's the inside of a person talking, but I couldn't have it be inside that person talking unless I created an outside first. Inside doesn't exist without the outside. I want to make the poems have shape, be shapely. I also want to make them have some tactile quality. (Waldman 113)

When reading Berrigan's poetry, it is not immediately obvious that this much deliberation over "shape" and shaping took place. But here his reflections echo Allen Ginsberg's: "Mind is shapely; Art is shapely,"¹⁷⁸ and Berrigan so infuses requests like "Bring me red demented rooms" (*CP* 33; 63) with a charge: the rooms must be red, demented and available, as poems are filled with color and shape, or as a persona wishes to exist within a more accommodating, created kind of "outside"—"Because" as Berrigan reminds us, "there is a person inside almost all of the poems" (Waldman 113). "The shape of the self," is implicitly shaped by the outside described, and so relies heavily on the forms of artistic constructions. The "inside" is shaped, then, by the "outside" form of the poem, truly taking on the "tactile" qualities of life.

"Love Came Into My Room / I Mean My Life":¹⁷⁹ Berrigan's Sequiturs

In the same breath that Berrigan requests art with a tactile quality reflective of space, he continues to discuss his sonnets:

¹⁷⁸ Ginsberg 415.

¹⁷⁹ *CP* 149.

My technical achievement in *The Sonnets* was to conceive of the sonnet as fourteen units of one line each. I don't think it had been done that way much before. I don't think it had been broken down much more than into couplets, so I had a lot more variables to work with and a lot more possibilities of structures. (*Talking in Tranquility* 113)

Berrigan discusses his reasons for writing sonnets at great length, musing on the mathematics and history of the form. Lost in these discussions of ideas is the look of the sonnets as they were originally published: with one sonnet per page, allowing them to look like the concrete blocks—artifacts of mid 1960's lived in space—that Berrigan related them to. In *The Reminiscences of Ted Berrigan*, Berrigan traces his attention to form more widely as stemming from his first experiences reading poetry. Recalling Poe and Tennyson as the first poets he ever read, he explains their resonance:

But then there was Annabelle Lee. That poem. That was wonderful. I thought that was really very wonderful. And I can remember to this day, many of the stanzas of it, and have used it, in fact, many times in teaching. And I felt, I think, an intense love of this poem, and of this music. Of this thing—this made object. Made of sounds, of words, and not as music or as story, but as a poem. And I wouldn't have phrased it that way then, but that's the way it was. I mean I truly did feel it. (14)

Berrigan's attention to the materiality of the poem is often implied: "And since then I've been bathing in the poem" (*CP* 3; 30)—but also often subverted by his poetry's other topics: "Smoke dope", "I'm high!" (*CP* 115). This sort of oscillation between a personal and artistic confession, and publicly defiant exclamation happens often in Berrigan's poetry—sometimes within the span of a few lines, as in his "That Poem George Found" from *The Morning Line* (*CP* 534):

In the year of 1327, at the opening of the first hour,
on the 6th of April, I entered the labyrinth
My wandering since has been without purpose.
Here, look at it. Wanna see this? No.
I want to find out what's happening with the Indians.
What Indians? the ones that were torturing Jane Bowles
to death? No, the Algonquins & Iroquois. Eileen
& I already finished that other book. Well,
Fuck yourself then.

Opening with lines from Petrarch,¹⁸⁰ the poem approaches a suggestion that poetry is life (“I entered the labyrinth/ My wandering since has been without purpose”) and begins to consider delving into the material and metaphysical implications of such abstract / concrete confluences. But within one line “I want to find out what’s happening...” it shifts back to the non-sequiturs that a Berrigan reader becomes familiar with quickly. The patchwork of thoughts serve to clutter a poem, receiving mind and moment with conversational antics (mirroring amphetaminated highs), and make flippant departures permissible, if not altogether welcome (“Fuck yourself then”). Formally, this way of zooming in and the panning out affirms the elastic space of the poem. Thematically it allows Berrigan’s speaker to do what other city subjects do: receive and give stimulating distraction to protect the heart of the matter. In relation to the scattering which O’Hara displays in his poems of departure (addressed in the previous chapter), this way of getting close and getting away in Berrigan’s poetry is at once in line with the tradition of New York Poetry which he was eager to inherit, and part of Berrigan’s own self-established tone: part humor, part severe sincerity, part conversational, and part “difficulty, readily played.”¹⁸¹

Berrigan writes of this slippery tone often, in a way that is appropriately simultaneously self aware and self-distancing. He addresses this in his interview with Savage, explaining that rather than being self-conscious as an adolescent, he had a double consciousness:

When I was doing things, I was aware of myself doing them. And that person was thinking, too. And I was, I think, equally aware that those

¹⁸⁰ Notley notes in *The Collected Poems*: “The opening lines refer to a sonnet by Petrarch and will now recur in Ted’s poems; see, for example, “The Einstein Intersection” (705).

¹⁸¹ Frank O’Hara teases: “my difficulty is / readily played—like a rhapsody, or a fresh/ house” (*Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara* 190).

two people had to be united, and that that's when you got to be a grown-up, and that that's when you were doing whatever it was you were going to be doing. And I didn't know how long that was going to take. And often I was caught in a mild trance, I think, standing on a street corner, between the two, waiting, listening to see if they'd come any closer together, you know? (*The Reminiscences of Ted Berrigan* 20)

While this kind of hyper awareness is common, if not altogether indicative of coming of age, Berrigan's is particularly interesting in that it depends on a street-scape for metaphor. His conception of his consciousness is rooted in a sense of space; a simpler rendition of Heidegger's: "When I go toward the door of the lecture hall, I am already there, and I could not go to it at all if I were not such that I am there. I am never here only, as this encapsulated body; rather, I am there, that is, I already pervade the room, and only thus can I go through it" (*Talking in Tranquility* 157). Throughout his poetry, he imagines being in the middle of the street, in the middle of rooms, and in the middle of moments to situate his speaker in the middle of everything. This idea is loosely treated and complicated, for example, in his poem "Hall of Mirrors" (*CP* 234). In the poem, Berrigan creates a poetic space mirroring a mental and physical space. The poem begins:

We miss something now
as we think about it
Let's see: eat, sleep & dream, read
A good book, by Robert Stone
Be alone

Knew of it first in New York City. Couldn't find it
in Ann Arbor, though
I like it here
Had to go back to New York
Found it on the Upper West Side
there

I can't live with you
But you live here in my heart
You keep me alive and alert
aware of something missing
going on

The poem's stanza-breaks, lack of punctuation, ambiguous subject (who "knew" and "found"), and ongoing actions in stanza endings, invoke a calm tone, despite the implication of looking into places and being deflected by them. After the speaker scatters himself around Manhattan, he turns into an unavailable lover—in tune but increasingly non committal, physically first, then spiritually:

Now it's back
 & a good thing for us
 It's letting us be wise, that's why
 it's being left up in the air
 You can see it, there
 as you look, in your eyes

Now it's yours and now it's yours & mine.
 We'll have another look, another time.

The rhyme here makes the poem border on trite, but viewed against its title, allows for the theme of "mirroring" to resonate through until the end.

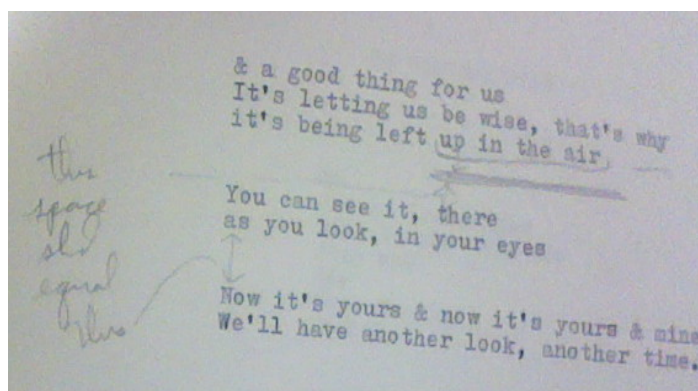
On December 3, 1969,¹⁸² Berrigan sent the poem to Larry Fagin for publication.

He paid special editorial attention to these concluding lines:

[&] Now it's back
 & a good thing for us
 It's letting us be wise, that's why
 it's being left up in the air

Berrigan wrote "up in the air" should "drop this down a line" and following the drop down, insists that the stanza break should be big and symmetrical "This space should equal this space" ("this" being a double line break):

¹⁸² Chronicled in the Ted Berrigan Papers at Emory University's Manuscript And Rare Book Library.



It is unclear why these editorial comments were disregarded when the poem was finally published, but the attention to form is worth here noting, as it implies that the poem was meant to look like the mental and physical spaces being described.

Berrigan's attention to space in his early pre- heavily stimulated life phase (pre New York City, pre St. Mark's Place, and pre amphetamine use) is noteworthy. Padgett remembers the way Berrigan kept space before moving to New York. Padgett recalls Berrigan's bed always being made and a framed picture of James Dean above the Tulsa bed, alongside an "immaculate" kitchen (Padgett, *Ted 2*). All his apartments were, according to his life long friend and colleague, "old, cheap, respectable, ultra-tidy" (Padgett, *Ted 3*), until moving to New York. Padgett explains that Berrigan "... later dispelled the mystique (of his tidiness) by explaining that his neatness was just a habit he had picked up in the army. When he moved to NY, his tidiness, under the incursions of slum gruminess, slowly gave way" (Padgett, *Ted 3*). Traces of this tidiness may be in the above drafts of poems, where Berrigan insists on formal parameters to reflect felt thought-space.

In his later, and longer poems, these spaces are clustered with demands (his very last poem, for example, was written from his bed and recalls the sounds of TV and

conversation from Notley in the room next door,¹⁸³ responding to life as “perceived.” These perceptions were at once domestically situated, and situated in artistic intentions:

When I came to New York in 1959/60 it changed my life in a way. I came to New York and I lived with a painter, Joe Brainard, and he literally opened my eyes for me and I saw on these flat surfaces, visually, what I have been only feeling before and then trying to get down on the page. I saw visually what I wanted to have happen in the poems.... Duchamp is the person who introduced to me the concept of finding material, and then I found that all artists had done this as far as I could see. Dos Passos, take anyone you want, a painter painting a picture of someone is using found material. (*Talking in Tranquility* 27).

Berrigan was never rich, as he recalls his early suburban upbringing:

... We were still what should be called poor. But because of installment buying and so on, we didn't live like poor people. We had a television when they came in and a refrigerator and a stove. We were comfortable enough. We always lived in a rented place. We never had a car. Never owned a house or anything. (*Talking in Tranquility* 22)

The remnants of Berrigan's “poor” life—the found materials from suburbia to urban life, become the materials of Berrigan's poetry, as he writes of being “before gray walls”(CP 35), in the “cold sleepless” or “trackless room” (CP 100), fuelled by fifteen separately cited “pepsis” (CP 52) and, most clearly, amid *The Collected Poems*' forty references to “money”: “We were there / AND THERE WAS NO / MONEY” (62). Robinson's suggestion of an “art povera effect... snatching whatever is at hand” seems apt here, as Berrigan's found materials—from things friends say, to things poets write, to Pepsis—all help to create a socio-economic external space for his poetry to sit within.

This feeling of poverty led Berrigan to join the army:

¹⁸³ “Dated '15 May 83,' Ted's real ‘last poem’ was written over the course of a couple hours, late on a Saturday night. I was in one room watching the Fred Astaire movie, and ted was in the other room listening to my voice and his own, and to the voices of the actors” (CP 719).

My life was taken out of my hands. And it had been in my hands for almost two years by then. You know, I mean, I'd gotten out of high school and I'd had to literally carry my life around in my hands and wonder where I was going to put it. And there was no place to put it. Absolutely no place. (*The Reminiscences of Ted Berrigan* 27)

When Berrigan returned from this search for a place to put his life, he describes gaining a sense of mobility and agency:

So I came back to America, and I went on leave home to Providence, and I noticed I was different, you know. I was different. I was more together. I mean, the Army had taught me that I could get on a boat, go across an ocean. That I could go to New York City and walk around. That I could walk around in Atlanta, Georgia. That I could wear this uniform which meant something or other, and walk around and act as if I was that, and still not have that mean anything too much, too heavy. That I could be assigned to various jobs, have that pulled out from under me and move to another place with one day's notice. That I could do all these kinds of things. That I was flexible. That I was a flexible person, and that I had a reasonably agile mind, you know. I wasn't susceptible to the shock of displacement from wherever I was calling home at the moment. . . . I came to Oklahoma as that person. Like, ready to make a home anyplace I might be sent or find myself accidentally or whatever. (*The Reminiscences of Ted Berrigan* 32)

In joining the Army, Berrigan joined a group of poets as well—for O'Hara and Eliot also returned from service to begin writing poetry. The Berrigan that chooses to title one of his books with a line from Ashbery's poetry ("So going around cities") seems to have taken great freedom with this mobility after his move to New York City, and after living with and in the sonnet form. Berrigan was not the only poet of his group to move to New York City and seem to relish city life for its liberties: Notley, O'Hara, Koch, Ashbery, Padgett—none of these poets were originally New Yorkers.¹⁸⁴ These founding members of New York Schools of poetry all came from outside, smaller towns in middle America; towns very different in cultural climate and physical layout, and different in the kind of life they provide. Few, for example, came from towns that

¹⁸⁴ Notley is from Needles, California; O'Hara from Grafton, Massachusetts; Koch from Cincinnati, Ohio (the biggest of these cities); Padgett from Tulsa, Oklahoma.

one could walk around in. Berrigan himself recalls how he would spend his time after school in his later teenage years:

There were many days that I would skip school and walk around in neighborhoods I didn't live in and walk out through the park and not think. That's what I would do. I would not think thoughts, but I would feel neighborhoods and feel the lawns and the houses and the way that things looked, rather than see them. I would feel what it was like to be out there in the middle of the afternoon—one o'clock, two o'clock, with no other young person in the world seemingly there. (*The Reminiscences of Ted Berrigan* 21)

This is the voice of a city poet in hindsight. The boy who skipped school to “feel what it was like to be out there” went on to write “Whitman in Black” (*CP* 419):

For my sins I live in the city of New York
Whitman's city lived in in Melville's senses, urban inferno
Where love can stay for only a minute
Then has to go, to get some work done
...
Big town will wear you down
But it's only here you can turn around 360 degrees
And everything is clear from here at the center
To every point along the circle of horizon
Here you can see for miles & miles & miles
Be born again daily, die nightly for a change of style
Here clearly here; see with affection...

Formally, this often anthologized poem's punctuation, line breaks and internal rhymes (“Big town will wear you down”, “everything is clear from here” etc.), offer the reader pausing points to “turn around 360 degrees” from inside the poem's sentiments. And as one approaches the poem's center, “everything” does become “clear from here at the center,” as the city's endlessness inspires the poet's sense of immortality. Poetry, the city, and the speaker's own selfhood conflate—much like in O'Hara's “Autobiographia Literaria” (“Here I am! At the center of all beauty!” (*CP* 11)). Heidegger explains: “Man's relation to locations, and through locations to spaces inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, strictly thought

and spoken.”¹⁸⁵ Berrigan being “here at the center” of his poem, is Berrigan inhering his location—thought, spoken, written, remembered, and situated—onto the space of the page.

Both Berrigan and O’Hara place value on vision. Here in Berrigan’s poem, the seeming possibility of infinity which city life offers (visually and personally) is relished (as in: “At heart we are infinite” (*CP* 66)). Recall Jacobs’s reflections on city blocks: “We are also getting [from the city] a visual announcement that clearly says endlessness. In terms of all human experience, these two announcements, one telling of great intensity, the other telling of endlessness, are hard to combine into a sensible whole.”¹⁸⁶ Berrigan’s poetry is in line with O’Hara’s, in that it takes joy in combining these experiences into a whole—its sensibility being beside the point. And the same person who wandered his neighborhoods block seeking feeling, goes on to write poems which are at once places for that seeking, and reflective of the feeling found. As abovementioned, Berrigan explained to Waldman: “Inside doesn’t exist without the outside. I want to make the poems have shape, be shapely” (Waldman 113). So sensitive to visual stimulation (as reflected by their admiration of, and proximity to, painters), Berrigan’s poetry becomes open when placed in cities. As Richard Sennett writes: “To care about what one sees in the world leads to mobilizing one’s creative powers. In the modern city, these creative powers ought to take on a particular and humane form, turning people outward.”¹⁸⁷ The joy of being a city subject is the opportunity to turn

¹⁸⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Row, 1971) 157.

¹⁸⁶ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, 1961 (Vintage Books Edition: New York, 1992) 379.

¹⁸⁷ Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye* (New York: Knopf, 1991) xiv.

outwards. This joy overrides what Jacobs calls “the difficulty” in Berrigan’s poetry, as in “Whitman in Black,” the ability to “see for miles & miles & miles” makes the city a place in which humans take on higher powers (*CP* 419). Michel de Certeau explains: “His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes.”¹⁸⁸

Berrigan’s reflections on living in a small town and relishing his time on sidewalks of suburbia, alongside these comments from urban theorists, suggest a poet with a particular city sensibility. But because Berrigan wrote about many cities (like O’Hara and Eliot), and many spaces within those cities (from rooms to trains), it becomes possible to view Berrigan’s poetry as generally spatially sensitive. This sensitivity is implied in Berrigan’s interviews on his poetry (as above noted, he explicitly claims: “My poems are like rooms”) and in recollections of his past. He describes the feeling of moving to Tulsa, Oklahoma, as one of discovery that was sharply countered by knowing Padgett—someone who had grown up in Tulsa:

I was there [in Tulsa] three or four months, five months. I was scheduled to be there, I think, thirteen months and then be let out of the Army. But I was there three or four or five months, and I made my own kind of map of the city of Tulsa, Oklahoma, and what it was like. I had my own sense of Tulsa. It was very interesting, you know. (*The Reminiscences of Ted Berrigan* 34)

Berrigan continues the interview to offer Padgett’s more ingrained knowledge of Tulsa for contrast. Sensitive not only to apprehensions of place, but to the experiencing of absorption of place, Berrigan’s poems, in turn, often use physical locators—whether pieces of furniture or names of city streets—to root his works in a sense of “what it was like.” “Now I rage in a blue shirt at a brown desk / In a bright room” (*CP* 74), he

¹⁸⁸ Michel de Certeau, “Walking in the City,” *The Cultural Studies Reader* ed. Simon During (London: Routledge, 1993, 126-133) 127.

seems to always be saying. “Part of my History” (CP 527) demonstrates this attention to multiple types of space, as it reflects on a moment of crisis:¹⁸⁹

... I took
 Another puff of my Chesterfield King, and,
 As she walked around in my room, saw orange
 & blue raise themselves ere she walked.
 They were my mind. And then, I saw
 Cupcakes, pink & flushed pink, floating
 About in the air, aglow in their own poise.
 Cold air stabbed into my heart, as, suddenly,
 In serious drag, I felt my body getting
 Colder & colder, and felt, rather than saw, my
 Fez hovering above my head, like a typical set
 of Berrigan thoughts, imprisoned in lacquer, European
 Style, tailor-made. I could see I was sitting
 At a table in Hoboken Truck-Stop. When the smoke
 Cleared, I saw a red telephone on the table by my
 Left hand. A heart-stimulant shot into my heart
 Out of the immediate darkness to my right. I picked up
 The telephone, & that was all that kept me alive.

Written in March of 1981, the poem reflects on a moment of grief. Blue and orange, Chesterfields, heart, smoke, stimulants, darkness and life: this poem lines up Berrigan’s frequent poetry subjects and also stills them all. As readers, we know that the moment is being stilled, because the drag of the cigarette is allotted fourteen lines. In the span of the inhale, Berrigan describes the way that vision possesses: “They were my mind.” As Berrigan describes feeling stale (“like a typical set / of Berrigan thoughts”) and consequently disembodied (“imprisoned in lacquer”), his poem moves out of the apartment room and into New Jersey’s stagnant air. The poem does a complete job of flooding the reader’s senses, as after the visual stimulation of color is offered, the smell of cigarettes is met with diesel, before the setting is returned to New York City and the moment of clarity (picking up the phone). Notley describes the poem: “The poet

¹⁸⁹ “Ted lived for years without a telephone, until 1980 when his mother fell ill with cancer and the “red telephone” was installed. This is an “autobiographical” poem in which there are few facts and nothing’s transparent. ... The poem might be termed “anti-autobiographical.” The dedicatee, Lewis Warsh, is the author of a book called *Part of My History*” (CP 704).

gradually finds himself stuck in a self and poem he knows too well—‘a typical set / of Berrigan thoughts,’ until finally he thinks to make a phone call” (*CP* 704). Because this poem is concerned with fixity and death, change, relief and space become intertwined motifs. The poet’s mind is “lacquered,” the body is fitted in a tailor-made suit—a physical stiffness is outlined, while an emotional limbo is cast, as speaker and audience are neither here nor there, but instead at a Hoboken truck stop.

Notley comments on the “anti-autobiographical” elements of the poem.

Autobiography is an issue many of Berrigan’s interviewers take up, and his responses reject confessional poetry while affirming that the parameters of his personal life map onto a space that is important to his poetry. For the purpose of this study, though, I would like to consider the poet’s stance within the constructs he describes:

I’ve always wanted to speak directly from my life when I was speaking ... But it took me, I think, fifteen years or so to strip away, to have fall away, the words, the way of talking, the phrasing, the language—and I love language that is in the world around me—to be able to strip that away and talk naked without being sensational. I mean, for me, if there’s been any progression in my writing over the years, it has been that I’ve moved steadily... And... I moved on from there and I went around in various circles and I touched down. I think, right from the very beginning, here and there and spoke what you would call autobiographical ...

I never have told anything in my poems that I wouldn’t simply say. I mean, there’s been no blurting ... It’s always been open in that way. But it wasn’t until I was in my late thirties and early forties, I think, that I was able to see back far enough into my life. The kind of life I talked about at the beginning. ... To see some kind of a line. Really a—what is the name of the line in architecture that’s talked about all the time? It’s the curve line. The curved figure. The arabesque. To see the arabesque that led—that began when I popped onto the earth and at this point is here. And who knows? It may, by the time I pop up into heaven.... turn out to be a straight line, not an arabesque. (*The Reminiscences of Ted Berrigan* 66-67)

Berrigan here shows an artistic agenda that values honesty as much as point of view.

Point of view, though, is here literal: he describes wanting to “see the arabesque” from a place where everything else has “fallen away,” “stripped down”—that is, for the creation of art, he seeks to be positioned at a virtual center. This desire comes through

in the roundness (“various circles”) of his poetry; it centers itself in time, place and social circumstances, through the mechanics that have been stressed throughout this chapter: punctuation, line breaks and syntax that solicit calm readings. Berrigan’s famous cut-and-paste style, and his repeated habit of referencing exact times (5:15am, for example) locate many of his poems in the center of a continuous, never ending, but also stilled, moment. Robinson calls Berrigan’s repeated reference to 5:15am part of “Berrigan’s use of the big clock device,” and Timothy Henry writes a thorough essay on Berrigan’s use of time as “the strategy of simultaneity.”¹⁹⁰ But why has Berrigan’s attention to space escaped critical attention? Perhaps because Berrigan refers to so many kinds of spaces: rooms, cities, blocks, stanzas, and pieces of furniture, time feels less elusive a subject. Whether environmental setting, or physical locator, Berrigan glosses types of space to suggest that it doesn’t matter how vast the space is, but rather how sensed the place is. “A sense of place actually precedes and creates a sense of space,” writes Philip Sheldrake.¹⁹¹ Sheldrake’s argument is part of a larger conversation among psycho-geographers and place philosophers, rebutting the traditional emphasis on space over place. As Berrigan’s poetry permits, contemporary views attempt to shift attention back to the place-making faculties of the sensory subject. The poem offers this very kind of place for space to be sensed from: stanzas reflective of the very physical constructs that create senses of space.

¹⁹⁰ In his previously referenced “Time and Time Again: The Strategy of Simultaneity in Ted Berrigan.”

¹⁹¹ Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 2001) 7.

Train Ride

After writing *The Sonnets*, Berrigan wrote *Train Ride*, a poem taking place in a very specific kind of mobile space, and dedicated and written to Joe Brainard, on the occasion of leaving Brainard's house (CP 240-285). Emory University's Manuscript and Rare Books Library holds three boxes of correspondence, proofs, galleys, receipts and notes about Berrigan's book length poem, *Train Ride*. The poem starts off as many of Berrigan's seem to: with an observation about daily life in an urban space, and ends on the page with an art-meets-life moment:

... I just got up
 in,
 &
 walked thru
 &
 now am off of,
 at
 the end of this book,

*

TRAIN RIDE

On the bookshelf, the poem rests as a seamless production. When viewed in final, mass produced form (as is offered through *The Collected Poems*) this poem looks like many others of Berrigan's: it plays with punctuation, capital letters, and indents, and talks about sex, writing, money and friendship. But the poem was initially published as a handwritten photocopy (in 26 signed copies), and then (in 1500 copies) as a small and, as Anne Lebowitz, the publisher, calls it, "sensuous" small book with thoughtful cover art by Brainard.¹⁹² Because Emory University's collection of galleys, drafts, and letters related to this book's publication offers the opportunity to consider deliberation in the poem's production, it is worth considering first the message of the poem, and then the

¹⁹² Lebowitz's comments are available in the "Notes on Train Ride" folder at Emory University's MARBL.

medium, and finally—and mostly—the way the message and medium are intertwined. In his interview with Tom Clark, Berrigan reflects on the relationship he intended medium and message to have in *The Sonnets*:

... It was totally a method book, in that the media and the message... I mean, there is no such thing as a message and a media in the abstract. But I mean, they're the same thing to the perfect extent. That is, surpassing McLuhan where he says the message is the media. No. When it all works right there's no message, it's only sort of the media. Which is fascinating because of just the words. I mean, this house is made out of all the things it's made out of. In effect this house is nothing but the media and everything in it. (*Talking in Tranquility* 20-21)

This attention to “media” over message is an attention to place. *Train Ride* offers a locale for the compartmentalization—place-wise *and* time-wise—of the poem, to become its clear point. Notley offers a succinct and informative summary of the poem in her footnotes to *The Collected Poems*:

The writing of *Train Ride* was occasioned by the circumstance that Ted had an empty notebook and was sitting on a train from New York to Providence, but also by the circumstance that he was reading a gay pornographic novel that Joe Brainard had given him back in New York. The poem is thus “about” the fact of the train—passengers and how they look and talk, what’s out the window, etc.; the fact of the notebook—Ted actually leaves blank pages for Brainard (to whom the poem is addressed) to fill in words if he wishes; and sex—the pornographic novel provokes a long meditation on “fucking,” a word that is repeated many times. Sex eventually segues into love, and Ted expresses his love for his friend Joe; but there is another subject in the poem, as immediate as sex/love, the notebook, the train, which is money. Ted had hardly any money in his pocket: he will get off the train with four dollars and spend most of it on a cab. *Train Ride* is a poem written exactly in the now moment, about who is there, both materially and in mind, and what is urgent. By the early 70s Ted had become quite adept at this kind of in-the-instant work. (684-685)

Subtly, Notley outlines two contradictory issues: that the poem is tied up in many things, and that it was written “in the instant.” *Train Ride* is at once part of a moment, and concerned with transcending that moment. These contradictory impulses are reconciled by the poem’s heartfelt ending:

I love you a whole lot.

*

I'm glad we were together
on this train.

*

I had a really nice time
at your place today.

*

I felt really alive &
warmed
walking toward the
train
That I just got up
in,
&
walked thru
&
now am off of,
at
the end of this book,

*

TRAIN RIDE

In its end, the poem takes on a strong O'Hara-ian impulse, echoing the justification that is the climax and the end of "Having a Coke with You." It plays out a New York School's mantra: something is beautiful just because it is shared, as O'Hara's poem explains in its end, too: "which is why I'm telling you about it" (*CP of O'Hara* 360). The idea that having someone to tell something to is as important as having something to tell comes into O'Hara's love of "quickness" (as he claims in "My Heart" (*CP of O'Hara* 231)), and material "immediacy"—the poem being "squarely between the person and the poet" (*CP of O'Hara* 498). Berrigan comments on the imperative which informs the above lines, and most of his own poems' tones and tenses in his above, frequently referenced interview with Tom Savage on January 28, 1970. Berrigan tells Savage of a poem that "was a total failure." He explains:

I've never been really very good at going back to last week, because I just would lose the details and only remember the feeling, and therefore, the feeling would not—the words would be about the feeling, not of the

feeling. They wouldn't personify it. There would be no space between the words. (*The Reminiscences of Ted Berrigan* 41)

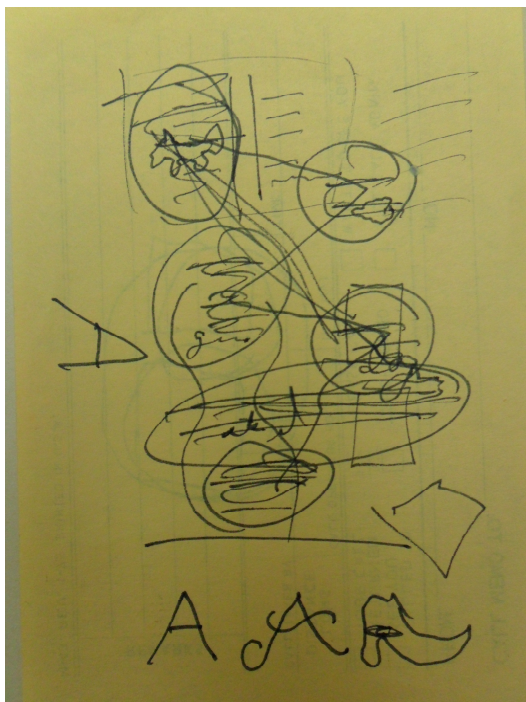
As the interview continues, Savage asks: “[Do]... you find yourself taking notes as things are happening rather than trying to recollect them in tranquility?” Berrigan answers: “No Tom. To tell you the honest truth—you’re going to like this answer—I like to recollect things in tranquility while they’re happening as a matter of fact” (*The Reminiscences of Ted Berrigan* 41) As Berrigan continues the interview, he outlines the kind of space that should be between a feeling and its expression on the page, asking it to be nearly invisible for it to be genuine, valorizing “in-the-instant” writing.

In the case of *Train Ride*, Emory’s holdings reveal that after Berrigan’s sentiments were written down, the next most important thing to that immediacy of feeling was its layout on the page. Earlier on in the first pages of his interview with Savage (*The Reminiscences of Ted Berrigan*), Berrigan implies that an attention to form began early. He recalls his first published poem:

... When my grandfather died I was ten... and you could traditionally insert a little quatrain in the newspaper saying ‘Grandfather, we miss you and we’re sorry you’re dead.’ Not quite so formally as that. And actually, all on my own, I whipped out a little quatrain... And that was published in *The Providence Journal*. And I remember being very incensed because they’d published only three of the lines and left out one of the lines. It was my first experience with publishers, and it was similar to all my future experiences with publishers, too. And I was very incensed for that exact reason that I would be now. That is, it didn’t read right with a line left out. You know, I’d written it so it would rhyme in meter. I have no idea what it said. It would be very interesting to try to go back and see. That must have been about 1946. So I mean, I didn’t make that up out of nothing. I must have gotten a sense of the quatrain and of rhyme already from poetry. (13)

These sentiments are particularly relevant to this study of poetic form and place in Berrigan’s poetry, as they insinuate that this seemingly of-the-moment poet was as deeply concerned with what he calls “clearing the air” (*The Reminiscences of Ted Berrigan* 13) as he was with getting words on a page in a very specific order. This concern with the layout of the poem is evident in the notes towards the publication of *Train Ride*, as

Berrigan repeatedly adjusted galleys to reflect the initial layout of the poem, enforcing and highlighting line breaks, spaces, indents and punctuation. Below, for example, is a copy from the last page of the first galley of the poem,¹⁹³ doodled by Berrigan, which points to an insistence on an over-arching layout:



Looking at *Train Ride* the way it was published—in small Brainard illustrated book form—the poem’s font, paper, colorings and binding, all heavily deliberated, help to suggest that the book is an earnest, friendly love letter. In *The Collected*, the poem barely stands out, as it shares the themes and medium of many other poems, but takes longer than most to deliver message. But the holdings at Emory, which include multiple photocopies of the galleys and the original hand-written poem, suggest that behind this

¹⁹³ “Manuscript with Corrections,” Ted Berrigan Papers, Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

seeming out-of-the-blue work,¹⁹⁴ is a very deliberate approach to poetry of place, and its subsequent layout. While the actual words that make up the poem were barely edited (only six phrases were changed in the entire poem, including two lines that were cut out¹⁹⁵), the poem endured many edits relating to punctuation, line breaks, line spacing, indents, word spacing and typescript (bolded and capitalized words).

The result is a poem with a very deliberate shape. Stanzas are consistently separated by asterisks or lines. Separated with these lines and punctuation,¹⁹⁶ the space

¹⁹⁴ In the original corrections to the first galleys of *Train Ride*, Berrigan inserted the following lines:

I just saw a blue
 electric
 A
 which I thought
at first
 was a beautiful evening slipper.

These lines were hand-written, and inserted over this stanza in the original text:

This is a blue train ride.
 *
I don't feel blue,
 but I can see it.

Both the handwritten lines, and the original text survive in *The Collected Poems* (256).

¹⁹⁵ The section that begins on page 280 of *The Collected Poems*, which lists what Berrigan should do and be, originally began: “should go straight / should have girlfriends.” (“Manuscript with Corrections,” Ted Berrigan Papers, Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University).

¹⁹⁶ Berrigan makes an interesting note on the punctuation he chose to break up “Tambourine Life” with: “So I just decided to use numbers. I used Arab numerals as opposed to Roman numerals which I used in *The Sonnets* because *The Sonnets* seemed to me to go sideways, that is, they go by you the way a comic strip would do if it were stretched end to end. Roman numerals all seem to be very heavy, like they were made out of bricks. They were on

and pace of the poem become inflected with purpose. Stanzas of the poem come to take on the look of train compartments, or train segments. The poem begins:

Here comes the Man!
 He's talking a lot..
 New York to Providence
 &
 I've got a ticket to ride!

SMOKING PERMITTED

The seats are blue

I'm sitting with MYSELF

A long naked pair of legs
 about 17 yrs old
 stare at me
 across the linoleum
 aisle

I'm a mild Sex Fiend!

The topics of the poem and its unconventional abbreviations take attention away from the deliberate format and to the punk rock mentality. The line-d breaks, when focused on, serve as borders for these separate and seemingly disconnected thoughts. Whether the lines are meant to separate or connect is not immediately clear, but the fact that they are deliberate becomes obvious through a look at the manuscripts. The above version of the poem's beginning is reproduced from the first galley of the poem. Published, it is more frequently broken up by page breaks. Lines are added and removed from sections

stones, so they seemed to weigh it down, whereas "Tambourine Life" seemed to go as a graph or cardiogram" (*Talking in Tranquility* 37).

in the second galley of the poem, and one of the larger, un-broken-up sections, also concerned with sex, takes on locales and domestic space, listing both:

Let me see: I've fucked in
 Rhode Island
 Maine
 Vermont
 New York
 Florida
 Texas
 Oklahoma
 New Mexico
 Colorado
 California
 Michigan
 Iowa
 Pennsylvania
 Kansas
 Connecticut

*

Japan
 &
 Korea

And
 In beds
 On floors
 In bathrooms at Parties
 In Hallways
 In Cars
 On Rooftops
 Window-Sills
 &
 At a bus Stop

Cities and places are catalogued in these long slender stanzas, which endured no editorial changes formally or syntactically throughout the publication of the poem. In this way, the places of romantic sprawling find neat order on the poem's page; tucked in and folded into each other syntactically, through capitalizations (which unite and elevate), and formally through indentation (which unite through lineation for the eye).

Contrasting with the seeming immediate and sudden circumstance of the poem's writing, is the fact of being on the train—a physical container, mobile and

urban room, and spatially timed experience—as a formal anchor. The train’s shape is emulated in the poem’s use of lines as separators (marking compartments), jagged lines created through indents serve as tracks encouraging the sense of motion (and requesting it of the reading eye), and asterisks as conductor’s calls:

What I like is

ASTERISKS

* * * * *

They’re so
 Bold, confident, like you
 Have a plan, you’re in
 Control, you’ll be back
 In a minute.

*

The “plan” of *Train Ride* is made clear in the galley: to write a letter to Brainard, in poem form, responsive to the train’s time and form, and the objects around Berrigan (the pornographic book). Most of what Berrigan wrote was kept, implying a “confidence” in the “first thought; best thought” (Kerouac) mode of the poem, with “control”. Apart from the formal layout of the poem in publication, only small sections of the poem were deliberated over (like the “blue slipper” section (*CP* 256)). So the poem survives as record of the actual train ride taken, and all the trains of thoughts had in the train and through the course of the ride, as Notley says “a poem written exactly in the now moment, both materially and in mind, and what is urgent” (*CP* 684-685). This definition of urgency seems particular to city writing, as the poem joins a long list of poems written about train rides, including, relevantly, Kenneth Koch’s “The Train” from “The Green Step,” and “One Train May Hide Another” from *One Train* and, more recently, Jacques Jouet’s “Subway Poems.”¹⁹⁷ Berrigan treats the train ride as medium and message—allowing the poem to be spatially and temporarily bound to its

¹⁹⁷ Jacques Jouet, “Subway Poems,” trans. Ian Monk, *SubStance Issue 96: Special Section* 30.3. (2001): 64-70.

composition. Notley's notes on the poem allow for further contrast between what she calls the "in-the-instant work" and the long laboring over the poem's transcription from notebook to print. Reconsider: "The writing of *Train Ride* was occasioned by ... circumstance... The poem is thus 'about' the fact of the train... the fact of the notebook.... By the early 70s Ted had become quite adept at this kind of in-the-instant work" (CP 684-685). As Notley suggests, the notebook and the train are equally *informing*—both offer and request containment of sentiment.

Berrigan explains that while his work is organic, his poetry is loaded with a sense of informing rhythm:

You've got to have a phrase or two, and that involves a rhythm, a musical ... A musical rhythm. And then where the fingers come in is when you have that rhythm, and the feeling is all really there in you, and you have a phrase or two, you have them in a way like being pregnant and about to have a baby. You have the whole rhythm and you sit down and you start coming you, you start typing. By the time I've typed up the phrases... or, if I don't want to use them at the beginning. I use one of my standard phrases, like what time it is and everything. But this day, I had one at the beginning. It was "what do do when the day's heavy heart." I mean "heavy heart" was what I had right there.... That the fingers were dancing. So Duncan's right, I guess. It *is* a dance. (*Talking in Tranquility* 22)

Berrigan's poetry is tense because of its oscillations between seemingly haphazard quotidian circumstances, and the deliberations of these circumstances—which are manifest in form (as in the dance over the dancer). This dynamic finds its parallel in tensions between internal structures (poems, "hearts" and rooms) and outside structures (cities, dying bodies and the American poetry field). Berrigan recorded the previously cited O'Hara note in his own unpublished pamphlet:¹⁹⁸ "To put it very

¹⁹⁸ "~A Gladness as Remote from Ecstasy as it Is From Fear~ (for Annabel)," *Op cit.*

gently, I have a feeling that the philosophical reduction of reality to a dealable with system so distorts life that one's 'reward' for this endeavor (a minor one, at that) is illness both from inside and outside."¹⁹⁹ The line comes from O'Hara's "Notes to *Second Avenue*" (CP 495) and Berrigan's recorded it among other place-based reflections, like: "My brain is shaped like Manhattan Island" (a line he attributes to Alex Katz). One's brain is not shaped like Manhattan Island, and people do, daily, philosophically reduce reality to "dealable with systems" in order to live. At heart, both of these reflections imply that is the place of art to record the brain as Manhattan-shaped and life as irreducible.

"Illness from inside and outside" is reconciled, in Berrigan's poetry, through the harmony of finding a medium which is message. Notley explains in her introduction to *The Collected Poems*: "Ted Berrigan's poems are very *deliberate*. They have a graven quality as if they were drawn on the page, word by word" (15). Viewed formally, Berrigan's work takes on shape—graven and deliberate—reflective of the inside-outside spaces Berrigan constantly created. At very least, Berrigan's creations stand as "senses" of "dementing" dimensions, which undo "dealable with" form, and offer in its place a "messy red heart" (CP 455); palpitating, drawn out, vital and, above all, formally functional.

¹⁹⁹ This sentence from O'Hara's "Notes on *Second Avenue*" is discussed in the previous chapter.

III. The Living New York School's

Poetry of Inner Space: Alice Notley and Ron Padgett

*... I'm pushed far inside
At this moment finding space down the well of myself
Though I am this land this apartment in hieroglyphs
inscribed round
the well as I drift down.*

--Alice Notley²⁰⁰

*I'm not crazy
about the emptiness of outer space. I have to live
here, with finite life and inner space and with
the horrible desire to love everything and be disappointed*

-Ron Padgett²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ Alice Notley, *Mysteries of Small Houses* (New York: Penguin, 1998) 112.

²⁰¹ Ron Padgett *How to Be Perfect* (New York: Coffee House P, 2007) 48.

After Frank O'Hara died, the New York School continued living, thanks partly to O'Hara's own living peers: Kenneth Koch and John Ashbery. But the New York School's survival was also due to the energy and will of Ted Berrigan, as outlined in the previous chapter. And after Berrigan's death, the New York School's survival would come to be attributed to a less local presence: while Koch and Ashbery were still writing, Berrigan's peers—that Second Generation New York School he so excitedly formed—also quietly continued writing, through the eighties and nineties, continuing to sustain the New York School's poetic form (or seeming formlessness) into the time of this study. Specifically, Alice Notley, Berrigan's widow, and Ron Padgett, Berrigan's longtime friend from Tulsa, past roommate, and frequent collaborator, continue to publish prolifically.

In an essay²⁰² finally comparing their poetry, Eric Selinger assumed that Berrigan wrote the following line about Notley: "Technically, she is impeccable, & / If She is clumsy in places, those are clumsy places." The line is actually inspired by Anne Waldman,²⁰³ but the mistake is understandable—there is care and love in the line, and it speaks to the entire second generation of poets who wrote poetry that is "answerable" in Bakhtin's terms, to place. Furthermore, throughout Notley's poetry, her stanzas emulate the looks of the places they are written from. In "101" Notley's spatial memory is impeccable, tripping often, it seems, just to suggest that New York's East Village is a place one can trip within. Second Generation New York School Poetry tends to ask: What happens when the place you come out into is the messy city or the overcrowded apartment? And when this place is recalled in a poem, do stanzas take on

²⁰² Eric Selinger, "That Awkward Grace," *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* 21.2 (1996): 298-324, 299.

²⁰³ Notley mentions this in her interview, in Chapter IV.

the literal contours their etymologies recall? In considering how a city may overwhelm, Notley's interview confession illuminates: "I got interested in the fact that there was this control on the page."²⁰⁴

While many other poets of New York School tendencies lived on through the nineties—including Koch and Barbara Guest (who died in 2001 and 2006 respectively), and Ashbery and Anne Waldman, still writing—Padgett and Notley's work merits formal consideration because of their poetry's emphasis and repeated returns to inner spaces. Their New York School stanzas employ a variety of forms to explore the relationship inhabiting poetry has with inhabiting city rooms. Their poems engage in a particularly urban spatiality, while maintaining very distinct tones, so that their lived proximity to Berrigan and the St. Marks Poetry Project solicits attention. Because Notley and Padgett are alive and writing to the present day, their poems and poetry's trajectories invite this study of art and its answerability into a fittingly reflexive conclusion.

“How Did It All Fit In”: Alice Notley's “101”

A finalist for the 1999 Pulitzer Prize, *Mysteries of Small Houses* chronicles Notley's moves throughout affordable apartments, bungalows and streets of America and Europe. And though it almost won one of the most prestigious literary awards, few critics have

²⁰⁴ “Cross-Cultural Poetics: An Interview with Alice Notley, Hosted by Leonard Schwartz,” Penn Sound, 23 Mar. 2007, 2 Feb. 2012, <<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/XCP.html>>.

written about the thoroughly engaging collection²⁰⁵ of poems. The collection fits into and almost explicitly requests a study of New York School's formal tendencies, as it echoes and rejects many contemporary American influences, while exhausting its lyric voice with deliberations over inhabiting spaces—on the page, in the domestic sphere, and physically—within architected constructions. Particularly informing are Notley's poems, "Flowers," "Mysteries of Small Houses," and "101" (*Mysteries of Small Houses* 80; 136; 112). Throughout *Mysteries of Small Houses*' poems, domestic space is linked not only to the self that actually remembers and inhabits space, but to the poem, or creation within that space, which accordingly takes on the look of its surroundings. In this way, Notley's *Mysteries of Small Houses* may be situated within a larger scope of twentieth century poetry which—in the process of dealing with place—takes on the shapes (real and felt) of housed city life.

Specifically, Notley's *Mysteries of Small Houses* muses, as a collection of poems, on the thin line between imagining and re-placing oneself within an architected time and place.²⁰⁶ More particularly and broadly, Notley's "101" points to the way Second Generation New York School poets inhabited their built environment. The poem retraces the apartment she and Berrigan lived in throughout their time together in New York

²⁰⁵ Peter Middleton wrote a piece on "101" for the website "Intercapillary Space" ("101." *Intercapillary Space*. Oct. 2008. Web. 20 Sept. 2011. <<http://www.intercapillaryspace.org/2008/10/>>), which provides a good general introduction to the poem; Libbie Rifkin concludes her *Career Moves* with a look at "Flowers" from the book.

²⁰⁶ Notley explains the impulse to create and recreate: "... The only response to tragedy is to try to create the world again. And I don't know if it's true, but it's become something I live by. Whatever happens, I try to create everything again. And I do that over and over and write poetry that is like a creation rite" ("Alice Notley, In Conversation with Yasmine Shamma," *Jacket* 40, Late 2010. 2 Feb. 2011. <<http://jacketmagazine.com/40/>>).

City, in the neighborhood then known as The Lower East Side, as members of the unofficial Second Generation New York School. The hypotactic structure of their lives gets figured into their poetry's layered structures. In this way, their poems become relics of their lived-in physical place, and that place's particularly imaginative space (downtown New York City in the seventies and eighties). Since the two decades Notley lived in New York (a patchwork of years between 1971 and 1994), Notley has moved to Paris, and to other forms of writing (her 2011 *Culture of One*²⁰⁷ is a novel-poem). But *Mysteries of Small Houses* (which holds "101") survives as a collection that not only remembers places, but becomes, in its traces, an artifact of places—offering blueprints of experiences in the forms of poems named after the places those experiences were had in.

In terms of context, *Mysteries of Small Houses* is unique. Written in the nineties, Notley's poems stand opposed to nineties poems (tending to be about "the self," and most fully crystallized in the poetry of Jorie Graham).²⁰⁸ Roger Gilbert charts the changes from eighties poetry to nineties poetry in America:²⁰⁹

In spatial terms, the movement was decidedly upward, from the 'low' realms favored by eighties poetry to the 'high' realms preferred in the nineties: myth, religion, literature, art... If the typical eighties poem was written with the TV on, figuratively if not literally, the typical nineties poem was written with the TV off, a Gregorian chant playing softly in the background. (242)

²⁰⁷ Alice Notley, *Culture of One* (New York: Penguin, 2011).

²⁰⁸ Willard Spiegelman's "The Nineties Revisited" provides a useful overview of trends in nineties poetry. (*Contemporary Literature Vol. 42.2* (Summer 2001): 206-237).

²⁰⁹ Roger Gilbert, "Awash with Angels: The Religious Turn in Nineties Poetry." (*Contemporary Literature Vol. 42.2* (Summer 2001): 238-269).

Notley's own footnotes to Berrigan's *Collected Poems* explain that Berrigan's very last poem, at least, was written with the TV loudly on.²¹⁰ And though Notley's *Mysteries of Small Houses* was mainly written away from that New York City TV set (and, instead, from Paris), it features no remnants of a Gregorian chant. The few references to spirituality within the collection are to an eastern spirituality, as Notley's poems embrace the notion of the Hindu *Atman* (explicitly, in the title poem's line: "And the body-self such a shadowy fragile house").²¹¹

Relishing and outlining the physical fragility of that "house" of the body and soul, Notley's collection stands apart from its time. It was written when the University of Iowa Creative Writing Program (where Notley met Berrigan) was churning out many a female experimentalist poet—like Jorie Graham who, drew extensively on myth in her poetry²¹² throughout her rise to fame in the 1990s, and won the prize Notley was later nominated for (the 1996 Pulitzer). Though Notley didn't win, her poems stand out as

²¹⁰ The circumstances of Berrigan's last-written poem are recorded by Notley in the footnotes to Berrigan's *CP*, and in the book's introduction: "... Ted's very last poem is a lovely six-page work, 'This Will be Her Shining Hour,' written in dialogue with myself and the voices in a Fred Astaire movie on TV. "Their lives as fragile as *The Glass Menagerie*.' That line near the end of Ted's final poem refers to the people in the movie, the people in the poem, and the two of us as both people in the poem and ourselves, comparing them/ us to Tennessee Williams's play, to glass figures, to the enduringness of the play about fragile people. What does *lives* mean then? *Lives* seems to be "art," and so one is left thinking about the strength of poetry" (*CP of Ted Berrigan* 14).

²¹¹ *Mysteries of Small Houses* 137.

²¹² See Graham's collection *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems 1974-1994* (USA: Ecco, 1996), and specifically, poems within the selection from *The End of Beauty*.

resisting tendencies towards abstraction. Writing persona-less,²¹³ and situating her voice within the places she lived, remembered, envisioned and conducted daily errands, her collection is aware of the risks of “getting too far away from earth” which Adrienne Rich warns against: “Even in the struggle against free-floating abstraction, we have abstracted.”²¹⁴ While the poems of *Mysteries of Small Houses*, are lodged in a proximity to the earth (focusing on physical constructions and the “poverty” of simple living), Notley also refuses to be part of a “women’s” struggle.²¹⁵ Pivoting away from generalizations, *Mysteries of Small Houses*—and more specifically “101”—warrant attention as work concerned with concrete place, written by “just a poet.”²¹⁶

It is tempting to read “101”—a poem about one’s place—as a contemporary “Room of One’s Own.” But Notley asks her audience not to gender her poetry. She responds to Rich’s feminist criticism: “I don’t like the way she uses the pronoun ‘We.’ I think she emotionally blackmails you with it. And I never feel like I’m part of her

²¹³ See Chapter IV.

²¹⁴ Adrienne Rich, “The Politics of Dis-location,” *Women, Feminist Identity, and Society in the 1980s*, eds. Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz and Iris M. Zavala (Amsterdam: John Benjamin’s Publishing, 1985) 7-25.

²¹⁵ Notley most fully takes up the question of “womanhood” by answering it quickly, in a two page essay available in her collection of essays, *Coming After* ((Michigan: U of Michigan P, 2005) 168.

²¹⁶ In “Place myself in New York, Need One More Time There,” Notley glosses her speaker’s role as wife by explaining: “For example I’m married to but I sing “Just / A poet? he’d described me the highest compliment,” and before the stanza end, also glosses the radical nature of women’s poetry in the nineties: “Not a diva experimentalist genus or ferocious outlaw—Just a poet.” As the poem begins to end, she relates this “justness” to the way she treats being a mother: “Just pick up words not toys” (*Mysteries of Small Houses* 56).

‘We’.²¹⁷ Yet reading Notley as a woman writing about the place of women has recently become more difficult to resist, as her two following books “look down” (to borrow a phrase from “101” (*Mysteries of Small Houses* 112)), into the role of heroines in epics.²¹⁸ For example: *The Descent of Allette* (published in 1996), *Disobedience* (published in 2001), *Alma, or The Dead Woman* (published in 2006) and *Culture of One* (published most recently, in 2011), are all book-length poems. These long poems challenge norms in their forms, and feature rebellious women narrators navigating imagined spaces that are, implicitly, masculine. But before she began exploring the relationship of women to epics, Notley’s *Mysteries of Small Houses*, asked softer and potentially larger questions about poverty, utility and place, promising, in “1992” (*Mysteries of Small Houses* 119):

I’ll make a poem for you which holds locked up a living voice—
the key’s on your own tongue—
I’ll teach you some things about Berrigan Padgett
Kyger Thomas Oliver Riley or how to
win a poetry prize given out by yourself
but that’s not the ending it’s walking
in a wet Parisian dark that’s
utilizable, every inch, even used up

Valuing the materiality, containment and utility of the poem, alongside the mobility of citted life, *Mysteries of Small Houses* repeatedly explores the relationship of poetry, and a poet, to varying forms of place (the body, the poem, the city and the

²¹⁷ See interview in Chapter IV.

²¹⁸ Lara Glenum writes of Notley’s crisis of persona in Notley’s *Descent of Allete*, attempting to answer a question posited by Susan McCabe: “The essential question for Notley is thus, as Susan McCabe puts it, ‘Can form and embodiment, snugly in the province of masculine privilege, be remapped along lines other than the phallic?’ While Notley does, in some sense, settle on a series of tactics to radically disrupt epic form, she more or less decides, quite brilliantly, to perform the crisis.” (“The Performance of Crisis in Alice Notley” in *Jacket* 25, Feb. 2004, 20 Apr. 2011, <<http://jacketmagazine.com/25/>>).

scene). Throughout the collection, Notley recalls her time not only in New York City, but in apartments and small living spaces throughout the world, and the way those spaces become lived in and subsequently remembered and (in “Mysteries of Small Houses”) layered. Because the book dwells on themes of inhabiting (“I like how small the apartment it pulls us closer”)²¹⁹ and treats the fact of being a woman as a mere fact (“Not a diva experimentalist genius or ferocious outlaw— / just a poet”; “just pick up words not toys / just a poet”),²²⁰ this book deserves attention as a book about those various small places, and that “living voice” perceiving them.

In 2009, during an interview²²¹ conducted in Paris, Notley was asked about the apartment that she and Berrigan wrote from, started a family in, and hosted a movement out of. Her response outlines the apartment’s physical structure, alongside its emotional infrastructure:

Well, it was one of those railroad apartments, and we lived there for a long time. It was a really famous apartment because we were there. And you came in through the kitchen, and there was a kitchen and this little toilet, and in the kitchen was the bathtub, and if you came in at the right time, you’d catch one of us in the bathtub. My friend George Schneeman—who recently died—came in once and saw Ted in the bathtub, and he couldn’t believe it, because there was this tiny bathtub and this bearded giant in the bathtub, and he didn’t want to leave the kitchen! There were these two tiny bedrooms which eventually became Anselm and Edmund’s bedrooms after Ted died. And Anselm and Edmund had bunkbeds in the first one and Ted and I had the second one, and there was this really nice kind of big living room space — big for New York, and it had good light. But it was a dump. It really really was a dump. But there were good things; there were good things about it. It was a great neighborhood. It’s not a great neighborhood anymore... But it was, it really was a great block, and our neighbors were terrific. They were just all characters. And they were the people I missed the most when I left. I missed the people in the building. ...

... I never wanted to leave that place, and I knew I would leave that place. I always knew I would leave that place. But when we moved

²¹⁹ “Place Myself in New York (Need One More Time There)” (*Mysteries of Small Houses* 56).

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

²²¹ See Chapter IV.

into it, Ted — Ted just took to it — but it was really — it was always too small. And then like a month or two before he died, he said to me, “I always knew I would die here, die in this apartment. The moment I saw it I knew I would die here...”

Notley stayed in “that place” until 1992. Nine years after Berrigan’s death, after a total of 16 years at 101 St. Mark’s Place, she moved to Paris with her second husband, poet Douglass Oliver. Her Paris apartment was equally cluttered,²²² and within it she wrote *Mysteries of Small Houses*.²²³ The “too small”-ness of 101 St. Mark’s Place, the apartment, gets written into “101,” her poem named after her past residence. In “101,” stanzas are incredibly full, lines vary in length, rhythm and subjects, while the limited and awkwardly interjected spaces within these various lines invite an out-of-breath reading (discussed, in detail, below). The end effect is a poem which reads—on the page and out loud—as exhausting. But it is also a poem that creates in its reader’s imagining mind the very situation remembered, making it possible to sense the dimensions of “endless conversations on a bed” (*Mysteries of Small Houses* 113).

The “conversations” of “101” are as much with ghosts as with perceived spaces, both “endless” in urban apartments. And the relationship of external space to internal space is the at-large subject of much of *Mysteries of Small Houses*. Death, talk of

²²² In her interview in Chapter IV, Notley is asked if her Paris apartment is less cluttered, and responds: “Oh no, it’s much more cluttered. All I have are books and papers and I don’t know what to do with any of them. I have the residue of two husbands and myself. Two literary husbands and my literary self, and it’s impossible; there are mice, I’m terrible. But the building goes back to the French Revolution — there’s just such solidity in the building and in the neighborhood, that it seems to me that I’m not going to leave. But on the other hand I’d really like to leave, because it’s so tiny, because it’s so lonely. But I don’t know if I will or not. I don’t know.”

²²³ “I wrote it all here,” she says, in the abovementioned interview.

the self,²²⁴ poverty (emotional, physical and economic) are all large and abstract contours informing the book's overarching discussions of space or "small houses." In her poem, "Flowers," Notley's speaker suggests that it wasn't just 101 St. Mark's Place that was "too small" (80):

I was there because of the poetry
 I thought it only grew in really dirty dirt
 And there was so much of it everywhere
 Ugly-beautiful red rag petals, folksongs of agitation elation
 Waving streaming or floating in or through bad air

I lived in a lovely redpetal slowly burning house
 On fire because
 I lived in a situation which would end
 With someone who would die because
 Ill-health, excess, poverty, neglect
 Are a common sight along roadsides
 Orange to scarlet then deep blue as I always say

And so some of it we did and some was done to us
 Of the so-called negative characteristics and
 happenstance
 Some of the flowers were ugly and leathery
 Swamp-stink brown-spotted fights
 I'm not being clear, we had inappropriate emotions
 The American poetry vacant lot's small and overgrown

The "redpetal" house of the poem's second stanza is a crop of the New York City field of poetry, burning—nearing disintegration—because of the approach of Berrigan's

²²⁴ She explains in an essay: "In ... *Mysteries Of Small Houses*, I was firstly trying to realize the first person singular as fully and nakedly as possible... Saying I in that way I tried to trace I's path through my past. I've never understood that word ["self"] very well and how people use it now in any of the camps that use it pro or con--I guess I partly wrote *Mysteries* in order to understand it better. I came to the conclusion, in the final poem of the book, that self means 'I' and also means 'poverty,' it's what one strips down to, who you are when you've stripped down." (Alice Notley, "The Poetics of Disobedience," *Poetry Foundation*, 2 Feb. 2012, <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/>>).

death.²²⁵ By the first stanza's middle line, the speaker effectively situates the reader *in medias res*, as "there was so much of it everywhere" speaks to a plenty of poetry and dirt, and enforces an entanglement. The "it" that there was "so much of" refers upwards (in the poem) to "poetry" and downwards (in imagery) to "dirty dirt," and its "ugly-beautiful" "folksongs" which move laterally ("waving streaming or floating in or through bad air"). As the poem's second stanza begins, the reader is led out of the vision of poetry-making to what may be practical real life: "I lived in a lovely redpetal slowly burning house." Because the "redpetal" speaks back to the first stanza, and the "burning house" to the final stanza (where the burning finishes), the poem's timeframe is outlined as a memory very much alive and temporary, as the "burning" process—in all its metaphorical potential—promises to serve as a structuring trope, speaking to a poetry scene, a "squabbling,"²²⁶ a time-limit and, eventually, a release.

"Flowers" explains what its subject is explicitly, taking pains to "be clear" as most of Notley's poems do. "I'm not being clear," she writes, setting the stage for a confession: "We had inappropriate emotions / The American poetry vacant lot's small and overgrown." So her speaker directly alludes not only to city life, but to the syntax of a poetry movement. A trope of emergence becomes traceable, with Koch's "boiling water," O'Hara's "re-emerging," Ginsberg's "howling" and what Notley calls "Popping

²²⁵ The poem's final stanza begins: "I have a headache in a burning house for years / Hardly know that it's burning / Then after the death event itself." The lines also suggest that the head is a house, which speaks to Notley's view of the "Atman" (Notley comments on the Hindu notion of the "Atman" in her interview in Chapter IV).

²²⁶ The fourth stanza begins: "So you squabble with everyone / That can be healthy or vicious."

free from time” (*Mysteries of Small Houses* 113) all suggesting an underlying unnaturally supernatural push radiating from the urban sidewalk.

In the poetry of the Second Generation New York School, the image of the sidewalk tends to push the poem’s speaker inwards. The last stanza of “Flowers,” for example, features last lines that turn half-way towards an audience: “I wonder if this is an obnoxious poem / I wonder if it’s really understood that Poetry and I are its subject” (81). This turn outwards is a half-turn because it is missing the word “you,” otherwise ubiquitous in New York School Poetry. Moreover, it asks for a re-review of a poem and place, seemingly otherwise occupied by “the death-event itself” (81). Along with the references to “death,” come references throughout the poem to “the lot.”²²⁷ Notley explains in an interview: “A vacant lot is where you play. There were always these significant vacant lots when I was young. There was one next to the house in Needles, and there was a really important one next to my cousin’s house in Prescott that I’ve been thinking a lot about...”²²⁸ In “Flowers,” the house (of poetry, people and death), which inhabits a “lot”—vacant and vacating which, abstractly and at-large, fills and plays out the pun of “lots” by pointing both to an emptying and a multitude:

We are used for various purposes in return for
subsistence
But it’s always hoped that one
Will contain oneself
Will you not overflow into the lot
As anything beyond your dirt
As Prophecy cry-for-help cry-of-rage cry-of-too-much-
Love cry-of-knowledge, not overflow?

This stanza ends at the question marked idea of spilling over, and so the question about overflowing is at once stopped by the stanza break from overflowing, and ushered into

²²⁷ “The American poetry vacant lot’s small...”; “overflow into the lot”; “Nothing so grand as that dream in our lot”; “I must leave the lot of flowers” (*Mysteries of Small Houses* 80; 81).

²²⁸ See Interview in Chapter IV.

an abstract overflowing by the parameters of its inconclusive question mark. As “ones” hopes are pointed to, line-breaks sever “one” and “oneself,” so that the “overflow” is felt in all its fracturing potential (the hyphenated “cries” also help this fracture to be felt). The collective and less personal “one” and “we” alongside the lines’ negatives (“Will you not”... “not overflow?”) mark a tone distinct from that of other New York School poets, like, Berrigan or even O’Hara. More commonly, in New York School Poetry, overflowing is almost explained, but eventually shied away from, as happens repeatedly in O’Hara’s “Ode to Michael Goldberg (?’s Birth and Other Births)” (*CP of O’Hara* 290-299). A timidity exists in Notley’s “Flowers,” but it is offset by the gusto of the accusation, which implores the reader in, while also expelling them out: “Will you not overflow...?” This inviting and immobilizing question occurs in the poem’s fourth stanza—which is the first stanza that uses the pronoun “you.” But as the fifth stanza begins, the “you” is quickly shied away from: “I feel that others don’t want to know” (81). The poem traps the reader in a pull-push-pull force-field, and the speaker in a constant state of self-questioning reflexivity. This reflexivity, though, is in line with Notley’s generation of poetry, as Notley’s “Flowers” speaker repeatedly explains that her own oscillations in form and directionality are “in order to be honest” (81).²²⁹ Deciding, out-loud and in-verse, that being “honest” means changing “my poem / Drastically, can’t get there this way—the “drastic” change in “Flowers” becomes a change of form: the sixth stanza of the poem (and its last stanza) becomes one long breathless stanza. Relatively unpunctuated, the stanza pushes out to a “there” by

²²⁹ The fifth stanza’s turn is explained (*Mysteries of Small Houses* 81):

I feel that others don’t want to know
 Speaking even now as a later presence.
 But in order to be honest
 I must change my poem
 Drastically, can’t get there this way—
 I am now the poet in this story

creating a space which welcomes and cushions self-questioning and explanations of intent (reconsider that the poem's last lines include the unanswerable self-directed questions: "I wonder if this is an obnoxious poem/ I wonder if it's really understood").

Between "Flowers," and *Mysteries of Small Houses*' last (and title) poem, the book's central question surfaces: How is the self contained? Specifically, *Mysteries of Small Houses* asks how the containment of the self fits, or doesn't fit, and how that fitting is imitate-able and, or, malleable in poetry. These questions are articulated through "Mysteries of Small Houses" (*Mysteries of Small Houses* 136-137), the title-poem that clothes the mysteriousness of the book's title with a humble sublimity. The poem's first stanza explains, at last:

Poverty much maligned but beautiful
has resulted in smaller houses replete with mysteries
How can something so finite
so petite and shallow have
the infinite center I sense there? There

The central paradox of the book (and this study) is articulated here. Physical space, like the body and the poem, is a constructed and (eventually) finite, tangible object, so how is it that this finitude has an abstract axis reaching out into an infinity or intangibility, which, in turn is marked—not by time—but by (still physical) depth? The stanza above, for example, ends with "there? There." This double "there" highlights a disjunction and a layering, as the second "There," points to a remembered past place, to be explored in the second stanza, alongside the places within that past question-marked place:

in the alley house for example
I enter it again, utterly still in the morning and with
shadows around its door mouth and throughout
frontroom bedroom diningroom kitchen room of
washtubs and
porch made my room, all
small, small and worn linoleum blue pattern pink
flowers, but now it's all shadows
'cause inside its center I'm, or is it we're
It's I'm that I won't ever know
completely unless I do when I die

How
do
we manage to base ourselves on dark ignorance so
house of pressed-down pushed-in
origin, is such poverty; or
apartments where people die, again the strange dense
center of the four tiny rooms on St. Mark's Place may be
that
Ted died there and so left a mystery vortex inside that
fragile
apartment on stilts—Doug, do you think so?

The stanza continues setting up its own “stilts” (crafted by deliberate line spacing and breaking, as in “How / do,” above), which reach out into the present tense, prop up, and provide an infrastructure. Within this infrastructure, multiple past-lived-in places may be remembered and resurrected (the apartment with Doug, “my grandparents’ house” and all its rooms subsequently get recalled). But throughout all these remembered places, the cohesive element is the living: entering “it again” (the “alley house”) leads not only to a present-tense momentary shift, but also to the house coming to life, having a “mouth” for a door. As the speaker moves through the remembered place and the poem, a “frontroom bedroom dining room kitchen room” are offered in quick succession, which leave only a “pressed-down pushed-in” place for the “center I’m” to exist within. It’s appropriate, then, that the book’s title poem presents, in its center, a long, difficult-to-navigate stanza. This central stanza brings to surface the speaker’s underlying difficulty in navigating experiences, as different forms of poverty are inextricably experienced throughout apartments and poems. “Inside its center,” the words, “I’m, or is it we’re / It’s I’m that I won’t ever know” need commas, spaces, parenthesis or—more physically—walls for proper separation and processing, much like the “frontroom bedroom diningroom kitchen room of washtubs and / porch made my room” needs, for both clarity and comfort, to not to be one big and personal “my room.”

Is this wall-less-ness the problem leading to “the American poetry vacant lot” being “small and overgrown” in “Flowers” (*Mysteries of Small Houses* 80)? Nowhere is the question more fully taken up than in Notley’s own elegy to 101 St. Mark’s place—an apartment inhabited daily by four, and often by many more who met there, as the home served as a meeting place for a generation of American poets. “101” remembers the apartment Notley and Berrigan began a family within, just a few doors down from the Poetry Project Berrigan ran (*Mysteries of Small Houses* 112-114). The poem provides a floor-plan of the apartment and, implicitly of “The American poetry’s vacant lot” (*Mysteries of Small Houses* 80). So entrenched in issues of form, the poem merits formal consideration.

“101,” long in the way of New York poetry, begins by conditioning a perception:

It's possible that I still live there
 Apartment that is path-narrow
 I don't want to be there in this poem if
 Anyone else is, from the past, I want it to be empty
 A lot of dust I let fall
 It gets smaller See mobiles from when, a flasher
 Whose penis had broken off That other mobile I
 Made it's talismanic objects
 A bottlecap a rose a centaur a cactus a coin
 tiny rooms

Throughout interviews, essays, poems and her life, Notley affirms, almost unwaveringly, that she is “interested in the true.”²³⁰ Here and throughout the poem, details are recalled, corrected, and recollected, with the act of writing and documenting “the true” in tension with the position of remembering—the “stilling” of the speaker is a grammatical impossibility (syntactically implied), and yet the entire poem is based on it. The situation of the poem is impossible because following the implied present-tense,

²³⁰ Notley explains this in her above referenced interview with Leonard Schwarz.

“is,” the word “still” points to a past and to a stasis; combined, indicative of a first-person death. As the impossible tour of “101” begins, the poem indulges in the speaker’s “wants” momentarily, before they inevitably become meddled with the stasis of the vision—for though the speaker “wants it to be empty,” it *is* and also *wasn’t*, as subsequent stanzas make just enough room for the memory of plenty to feel flooding. The question of control, then, becomes immediate. “I don’t want to be there, in this poem, if / anyone else is, from the past.” But the mention of “anyone else” summons in the ghosts (both of Notley’s husbands—Berrigan and Douglas Oliver—died), so that they, and the speaker’s resistance to them, come to occupy the poem.

Further implying a tension between crowdedness and emptiness, everything in the first stanza has a potential double: “It’s possible that I still live there” suggests that “there” is the “Apartment that is path narrow,” but is also “there in this poem”; The abovementioned “want” for emptiness comes up against what the poem/apartment has, in being a memory, and lacked, in actuality; empty spaces become deliberate in the “lot of dust I let fall / It gets smaller See”; the word “see” invites the reader into the poem, but the missing subject (who should see? and what should they see?) makes it possible to apply the imperative to the absented-“I” (in absentia because she can not, actually, “still live there”), and to the unmentioned “you”; The “mobile” which hangs with a memory of other-ness, and contrasts to “that other mobile I / made”; in the sixth and seventh lines, two gaps are offered—allowing the closing of space to relate to the fracturing of memory; and finally and most precisely, Notley’s “talismanic” objects—the named mobile and the “bottlecap,” “rose,” “centaur,” “cactus,” and “coin” are at once souvenirs of the remembered place, and, implicitly, resulting and sustained by memory, as the poem becomes a talismanic object itself.

for them, there are no people in this stanza, and apart from the poet-speaker, there are no *living* people “enumerated”²³¹ in the entire poem.

Out of these layers, we are led into the spatially concerned third stanza: “Come into the kitchen from outside look down through slanty-floored narrow nearly-rooms.” Navigating, the verse starts with two verbs: “Come,” and “look.” Following the elusive “See” of the first stanza, these two words are the poem’s first real present-tense verbs, and they are also imperative. The imperative to “look” is restricted by what follows, as the reader is guided downwards: “into,” here, and “in”—repeated seven times throughout this stanza. This looking, then, is directed, and the resulting impression is that the space being probed is internal. Time and place are, for the poem’s moment, fixed spatially below, pinned down or even “slowed.” Marking the third time the reader is half-called in (after “See” and “Come”), the reader’s role is outlined: to participate in envisioning something within. As the speaker begins to muse on further artifacts of the past, it is unclear whether the reader is being brought inside it all, or being given a realtor’s gloss:

The mobiles dangle on the way to the real front room where
radiant south light
is
 And there’s some light in the kitchen in spring and summer
 As well as in the corridorish bedrooms
 In the kitchen’s a small bathtub underneath it’s dark cockroach hell
 In the toilet room off the kitchen are the Christmas tree decorations
 On top of the kitchen cabinet are dead radios never sent to Nicaragua
 In the 80s and in the 70s are minor plants on the sill three or four
 They look like a few arms reaching malformed something always
Hangs beside the window
 A plastic medallion someone once found or a shoehorn
 No the shoehorn was in a bedroom

²³¹ “They keep coming in I won’t enumerate but they’re all there” (*Mysteries of Small Houses* 113).

far inside
 At this moment finding space down the well of myself
 Though I am this land this apartment in hieroglyphs inscribed round
 the well as I drift down

The various people with “various codes” apply pressure to the doorbell and to the poet’s ability to remember the apartment and create “this poem,” as she outlined a need for the memory to be empty, without “anyone else ... from the past,” at the very start. In the middle of feeling the flood of many (“There isn’t any room”), a simple two-person situation is suggested in the stanza’s physical middle: “we / were.” The line break makes the memory of being a “we,” feel tucked away and prone to a bigger breaking. And here, in this “we / were”, is also the middle point, or crux, of the entire poem. Appropriately, it is at this point that the person remembering gets “pushed far inside.”

In their co-authored study of “Perceived Density: How Apartment Dwellers View their Surroundings,” Annie Moch, Florence Bordas and Daniele Hermand note that “actual physical density” is not as important as “perceived density.”²³⁴ In this way, the fact that the apartment was physically small translates, perceptively, to a stanza that is dense—in tense, emotion, and frenzy. The apartment’s density, then, is perceived as registered in the stanza. The study of density cites two situations in one neighborhood: both apartments were technically the same size, but in one, people had to walk through a corridor to get to their space. They explain: “Even though the average amount of space per person was the same... the ‘corridor’ students experienced a stronger feeling of living in overpopulated housing, complained of unwanted encounters, tried to avoid and often cut themselves off from others.... The need to be alone is greater and so is

²³⁴ “Perceived Density: How Apartment Dwellers View their Surroundings,” *Le Courier du CNRS* #82, (1996): 131-132.

vanish,” is the apartment and poem’s ceiling caving in. And, as Bachelard²³⁶ suggests, “the outside becomes a prison,” the city subject confirms that it “wasn’t me it was everyone else it was the outerworld”—marking her own confines. The preceding stanza’s note, “I am this land this apartment /... as I drift down” marks the poem’s spatial crux, and “I sit up half the night,” highlighted by a line break, marks the emotional one.

Mysteries of Small Houses collectively calls on the death of Notley’s father, brother, and two husbands. But when asked why she left New York, Notley explains first that it was “Doug’s idea,” and then in a mere sentence: “Too much had happened for me there; I couldn’t be there anymore.”²³⁷ In “101” though, she offers something more of an explanation, in the poem’s final stanza, beginning still simply with the causality of the word, “So”:

So I walk up the block trapped in time not even so much in those
times
But the time of walking up the block and around it to the store
Over the years I had too often walked on that block to the store and
back
What do you do in life go to the store and the next day and the next and
Trapped in the time of walking to the store
And back one day I popped free from time
I popped out of sequence out of walking that stretch for a second
everything felt light I wasn’t there
That wasn’t the first time something like this had happened
It had happened a few years earlier on Third Avenue
I didn’t exactly leave time that time time slowed
And people slowed and walked in slow motion and had naked faces
They all looked vulnerable benign not hard but this time in
1991
I realized I wasn’t even there at all I was unlocated untimed

About a year and a half later and there is no connection particularly
I left New York

²³⁶ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon P, 1958) 216.

²³⁷ See Notley’s earlier referenced interview with Leonard Schwartz.

The previous stanzas are full of things: unnamed people, named artists, artworks, created objects, found objects—fragments which fill the floorplan with a sense of haphazardness and *Art-Povera* elements of collage. In this final stanza, though, the poet recalls an actual activity and sets it into its repetitive cycle, to emulate its entrancing effect. However mundane, that walk to the supermarket becomes the one thing that the speaker actually *does* in the poem. In being remembered as something that happens with some timed-frequency to it: “Trapped in the time of walking to the store,” it receives the only detectable rhythm in the poem, as daily habits do in life. For this short moment of the poem, a faint iambic pentameter is set in motion by anapests, and followed by the traditionally elegiac dactylic pentameter. And it all halts or explodes, too appropriately, when the moment comes to be “popped out of time,” and the rhythmic nature of the preceding lines gets replaced by lines that force the reader out of breath. Actually inviting a breathlessness from its beginning, the stanza’s first word, “So,” meets the seeming contradictory, “there is no connection particularly” that almost ends the stanza. However, there being “no connection particularly” excuses the poem’s sense of clutter (cause and effect of the clutter), permits the poem’s multiple tenses, enables the speaker to have left the setting of New York, and, in the present tense, allows speaker and reader to exit this poem of too-much. “101” the poem, is present, then, and “101” the apartment, is past. It is in these last lines that the impossible ambiguity of the poem (repeatedly implied through its mangling tenses) is reconciled, as the speaker’s leaving is a way choosing to no longer be “trapped in that time.”

As the speaker notes innumerable things happening, rooms filling, and people coming in and vanishing almost despite or regardless of her, “101” shows how the “particular” may become victim to effacement. The poem suggests that because these happenings happen to the speaker, and in her house, the “self,” house and poem

become inseparably shaped, and, overwhelmed by detachable particulars, subject to “popping out.” Leaving New York becomes, as a reverse kidnapping, crucial. In “101,” Notley confesses “it wasn’t me,” and so answers by eventually leaving the poem *and* New York City, formally surviving clutter through poetic exit.

But this poem does not invite escape. Written during a time when poets were using characters from myths to rise above dailiness,²³⁸ Notley’s “101” situates itself in the physical dimensions of the daily, and from there, charts the role of poetic creation. Ginsberg sensitively explains after “Howl”: “Mind is shapely. Art is shapely,”²³⁹ and Berrigan (Notley’s first personal teacher) echoed: “I want to make the poems have shape, be shapely... Because there is a person inside all of these poems.”²⁴⁰ *Mysteries of Small Houses* suggests that a laboring over outsides (apartments, houses, “third story nests” etc) is, more acutely, like laboring over insides—the city is “embodied” in the room, the room “embodied” in the stanza. As the alleyway becomes the recess of the cityscape, and the room the recess of the street, the poem or painting or even flower arrangement become recesses of the room. But in Notley’s *Mysteries of Small Houses*, the want to get everything inside right, materializes in a reverse arrangement—with a want to get out. Sensing the threat of muddle and estrangement caused by the city’s too-muchness and its housed excess, Notley’s speaker subtly explains, in the calm shaped by the coupling of “101”’s last lines—safely popped out in the carved white space of a

²³⁸ Jorie Graham’s *The Region of Unlikeness* and *The Dream of the Unified Field* were published, and acclaimed, in 1991 and 1995 respectively, and feature speakers like Penelope, Mary Magdalene, and Eurydice.

²³⁹ Allen Ginsberg “Notes for Howl and Other Poems,” *The New American Poetry*, ed. Donald M. Allen (New York: Grove, 1960) 415.

²⁴⁰ *Nice to See You*, ed. Anne Waldman (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press: 1991) 113.

stanza break—that ending a poem, moving out of an apartment, and departing a city are all ways of resisting abstraction.

“Dancing in a Sraightjacket”:²⁴¹ Ron Padgett

Ron Padgett exhibits a control on the page that reflects a control of thought. And though Padgett’s poems don’t immediately appear to be as entrenched in formal considerations as Notley’s and Berrigan’s do, imagistically, Padgett’s poems take great care in constructing metaphors that explode formal constraints.

In an interview conducted a block away from Notley and Berrigan’s old apartment, Padgett explains:

...What’s really interesting is finding the form that’s in each free verse work. That’s what’s interesting. When I say “nuts and bolts,” I don’t mean “ABAB”; I’m really talking about how a really shapely, well made poem, in free verse—how does that work? That’s really interesting. The strict forms, the fixed forms, are interesting for a different reason, to me, i.e.: How do you put yourself in a straight-jacket and still dance gracefully as if you’re not in a straight-jacket? That’s a tough challenge, and it’s fun.²⁴²

Some of Padgett’s poetry does take place within traditional form, or “a straight-jacket,” while other poems of Padgett’s dance from within a straight-jacketed perspective but not prescription—that is, Padgett’s poems are often concerned with formal limitations (and escaping them) while being written seemingly free from form. This is particularly

²⁴¹ An interview was conducted with Ron Padgett on 11 April, 2011 in a café on 1st avenue and 11th street, in New York City. During the interview, Padgett reflected both on fellow New York School poetry, and his own, and alludes to poetic form as a way of “dancing in a straightjacket.” The interview may be found, in its entirety, in this study’s Chapter IV.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

true for Padgett's many poems that are set in the moment when one steps outside urban constructs, and into New York City.

In 1969, Padgett published his first solo book of poetry, and called it *Great Balls of Fire*²⁴³ (his very first publication was *Bean Spasms*, a collaboration with Berrigan and Joe Brainard, two years earlier). In title and content, Padgett's *Great Balls of Fire* declares a formally considered poetic agenda: things are treated as physical portals to abstract worlds, where every thing is connected by very virtue of having a figurative counterpart, and therefore, nothing is restricted to linearity. Accordingly, Padgett's poems offer the possibility of "popping out" of binary schemes.

Perhaps because such an idea is difficult to literally and critically treat, Padgett's poetry has not received much critical attention (he is written about as a member of The New York School, often, but seldom as a poet on his own). Nick Selby writes about Lee Harwood's poetry²⁴⁴ in a way that may be applicable to Padgett's. Selby quotes Harwood's "The Argentine" (239):

We parted at 1st Avenue and 51st Street—it was July.
Wearing a cream-coloured suit and dark glasses
he crossed the street and then turned to wave—twice—
the lunch-time traffic was very heavy and I soon
lost sight of him.

Selby offers an explanation, both for why Harwood's speaker loses "sight," and why Padgett's poems so frequently try to. Relating Harwood's poem to Heidegger's concept of "things" and "thingliness," Selby writes:

Such notes of distance, departure and fleetingness of everyday moments
in the face of the traffic of modern experience are part of Harwood's

²⁴³ Ron Padgett, *Great Balls of Fire* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969).

²⁴⁴ Nick Selby, "'A Generous Time': Lee Harwood in New York," *Don't Ever Get Famous: Essays on New York Writing Beyond the New York School*, ed. Daniel Kane (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive P, 2006) 215-241.

response to New York. These tell us much, though, about Harwood's poetics of dwelling—of how his poetry attends to a sense of longing for, and belonging to, the landscape of experience. (239)

Selby's essay on Harwood as a British voice in New York continues by locating this kind of "poetics of dwelling" within things: "The world, that is, is made manifest in our feeling of nearness to it... Harwood's poetics represents an attempt to respond openly to the world it inhabits, or to the 'things' it lays possession of" (239).

Might the opposite be true of Padgett's poetics? Padgett's "Strawberries in Mexico"²⁴⁵ is one of his earliest and most often quoted poems. It begins:

At 14th Street and First Avenue
 Is a bank and in the bank the sexiest teller of all time
 Next to her the greatest thing about today
 Is today itself
 Through which I go up
 To buy books

They float by under a bluer sky

Selby's comments on Harwood's poetics stem from Heidegger's notions of space: "All distances in time and space are shrinking. Man now reaches overnight, by plane, places which formerly took weeks and months of travel."²⁴⁶ In Harwood's "The Argentine," time shrinks before the reader's eyes, as the disappearance of the person on the corner leads to the very palpable dissolution of a moment, and a subsequently dislocated speaker. In Padgett's poem, things don't dissolve, but expand. The "teller" is a gateway, through which Padgett's speaker "floats" up, through the "greatness" of "today" and all its possibilities.

²⁴⁵ First published in Padgett and Shapiro's *Anthology of New York Poets* (New York: Random House, 1970) 466.

²⁴⁶ This line is the epigraph to Selby's above referenced essay "A Generous Time": Lee Harwood in New York" (215).

Throughout his fifty years of poetry so far, Padgett's poems are consistently places where it is possible to celebrate what is gained in space, rather than what (or who, in Notley's poetry's case), is lost. While most poetry is associative, Padgett's is particularly so, as he allows his poems—as varied as those from his 1969 *Great Balls of Fire*,²⁴⁷ to those in the recently published, 2011 *How Long*—to unfold and “dance” in the light of the citted day. In “Gentlemen Prefer Carrots,” one of Padgett's earlier poems (published in the 1976 collection, *Toujours L'Amour*),²⁴⁸ he explores a moment similar to the one Notley's speaker experiences at the end of “101.”²⁴⁹ Here is Padgett's poem, “Gentlemen Prefer Carrots,” in its entirety:

I nearly went to sleep standing on a corner today.
The light turned green
People charged down into the street, arms
with bags and boxes
while I stood there disappearing.
And after dinner, forehead resting
on the table, I saw some gentlemen
eating carrots in a dining car
with a landscape whizzing past outside,
really fat trees and hills, varied sights
and views, and those carrots disappearing
into the eaters' mouths. I raised
my eyes: music on the machine,
light; and fall coming on.

²⁴⁷ While the 1969 first edition features a hardcover scattered with drawings of stars, the second edition of this book (published in 1990) features a drawing on its cover by Trevor Winkfield, of a house, upside down.

²⁴⁸ Ron Padgett, “Gentlemen Prefer Carrots,” *Toujours L'Amour* (New York: Sun, 1976) 67.

²⁴⁹ Notley's second to last stanza includes the following lines about “popping out”:

Trapped in the time of walking to the store
And back one day I popped free from time
I popped out of sequence out of walking that stretch for a second
everything felt light I wasn't there
(*Mysteries of Small Houses* 114)

At fourteen lines, the poem flirts with the idea of being a sonnet.²⁵⁰ So, at very least, it presents a question: Is the poem a sonnet? The usual sonnet-markers of rhythm and rhyme are nearly missing, save the rhyme of the second line's "green" and the second to last line's "machine," and the repetition of "disappearing" with its end rhymed "resting." These rhymes lend a very simple sense of cohesion to the poem's message, as does the initial varied line length. The varied line length prohibits a sense of rhythm from developing, and implores the reader to slow down, lest they too fall subject to "disappearing."

Just as Notley's "101" begins within an almost-state (recall its first line: "It's possible that I still live there"), Padgett's speaker begins in a "nearly." And while the poem's ideas about city life echo many of Notley's poems', "Gentlemen Prefer Carrots" is marked by more formal parameters: It is shorter, written in a length that calls on tradition (with a title that echoes a similarly past-tensed call), is limited in reach (there is no actual "you," nor is there a necessary / implied audience), and sets out a time-limit from its beginning: "I nearly went to sleep... today." The poem immediately promises to explain why the speaker "nearly" fell asleep and why he didn't, and implies, in the word "today," that this explanation is happening at the end of the day (as the poem mentions the later-day practice of "dining" and not the mid-day one of "lunching"). Though the speaker positions himself physically in the middle of the city, the poem's start is positioned in a peculiar form of *in medias res* (with the "things" being a state of boredom). The disjunctive dynamic between such a vibrant setting and such a dulling feeling offers the poem its abstract parameters; much like the sonnet-length but not-

²⁵⁰ This is especially the case for many of Padgett's earlier poems, particularly those in *Toujours L'Amour*, which tend to be shorter (and nearer to a sonnet's length) than the more recently published poems in, (appropriately), *How Long* (Minneapolis: Coffee House P, 2011).

sonnet form offers a physical one. Both sets of parameters supply an instantly generative tension.

The poem's second line, for example, in length and sentiment, suggests an impending shift: "The light turned green." But instead of offering a place for the speaker to move from, it ushers in the speaker's disappearance. The idea of feeling crowded out of a city by its other inhabitants is not new. Notley points to it: "on Third Avenue / I didn't exactly leave time that time time slowed / And people slowed and walked in slow motion and had naked faces" ("101"), and Eliot famously explains that the city's "unrealness" is especially obvious when juxtaposed not only against time but with human fixtures, as he writes in *The Waste Land*:²⁵¹

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many.
Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet

But Padgett's speaker disappears in an even quieter, more subversively small way: Swamped by "so many" running daily errands ("arms with bags and boxes"), Padgett's speaker considers drifting out of consciousness while in the middle of lively action. In this way, Padgett's speaker stands out, from within the O'Hara-ian tradition of loudly celebrating the city. For O'Hara, too, tends to set his poems in stop-light curbed moments, but in O'Hara's poems, this happens to declare mini-triumphs—instead of being crowded out of the traffic, O'Hara's speaker pushes (sexually) into it, as in "Steps" (*CP of O'Hara* 370):

and even the traffic halt so thick is a way
for people to rub up against each other
and when their surgical appliances lock
they stay together
for the rest of the day (what a day)

²⁵¹ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, "The Burial of the Dead," *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. ed.

In stark contrast, Padgett's speaker returns from the same street walking pause/re-begin situation to spend "the rest of the day" recovering from "disappearing." Specifically, "after dinner," his speaker's point of view is subject to a contortion instead of a seduction: "forehead resting / on the table." Though less charged than O'Hara's sentiment, Padgett provides these two lines which quietly invite consideration, as they break at a resting point (implicitly dislocating that confused "forehead" further), and rest, in turn, in a way that makes the speaker's view at best obscured, and, at most, upside-down. It is from this upside down view that the "gentlemen" are seen anachronistically, "eating carrots in a dining car." The out-of-time element of the line is compounded by its out-of-place context: these gentlemen are the first thing apprehended after the speaker's "disappearing." The poem permits a wandering across space and time, which is the precise kind of indistinct mind-wandering permitted when waiting for a street light to change. With the mention of gentlemen "in a dining car," the reader is further allowed to wonder if the speaker *did* fall asleep on the street corner, and if, consequently, this poem is the leftover of a dream, or a death. But that is what makes this poem—and many of Padgett's—special: its movement is not linear. The speaker starts half-asleep and moves to an upside-down half-awake state, raising, followed again by a line break, "eyes" to a bigger sense of the street ("music on the machine, / light; and fall coming on"). Padgett so incorporates the city street's utility, obscurity and context into a greater sense of time, as the time of day ("light"), and season ("fall") point to bigger, or at least longer, moments.

Where Notley's speaker explains that this kind of contextualization leads a speaker to feel "popped out," and subsequently earns a sense of permission to "leave New York," Padgett's speaker puts New York City in its place by pointing to its self-absorbed and consumptive qualities. The only other reference to "disappearing" occurs

when the speaker is watching, from his strange vantage point, the consumption of carrots:

... varied sights
and views, and those carrots disappearing
into the eaters' mouths.

The word “eaters” is uncomfortable to see and to say, and so it begets attention: Why not just call them “the gentlemen’s mouths”? Implicit is an emphasis on the consumption of carrots, and, deductively realized, the consumption habits of city subjects, both of and by the city.

While Notley’s poem hinges on the question, “Will I ever vanish?”, Padgett’s focuses on the implosive dimensions of a vanishing point, as acutely realizable in, not a sonnet, but “those carrots disappearing.” Padgett exercises his poetic skill in exploring the associative powers of domestic props repeatedly, throughout his work. In *Toujours L’Amour*, “Gentlemen Prefer Carrots” is followed by “Ladies and Gentlemen in Outer Space”—another poem that explores the power of vegetables to mean, generally, more. In this poem, Padgett posits a philosophy (68):

Ladies and Gentlemen in Outer Space
Here is my philosophy:
Everything changes (the word “everything”
has just changed as the word “change” has: it
now means “no change”) so
quickly that it literally surpasses my belief,
charges right past it
like some of the giant ideas in this area
I had no beginning and I shall have
no end: the beam of light
stretches out before and behind
and I cook the vegetables
for a few minutes only,
the fewer the better. Butter
and serve. Here is my
philosophy: butter and serve.

The vegetables of “Ladies and Gentlemen of Outer Space” are the only actual, physical, realizable object alluded to, and so anchor the poem in a real-space. Otherwise the

poem thrives on intangibilities, as “everything changes.” Just as the crowds of people with “bags and boxes” flowed downward and into the speaker’s view, here the speaker, who at first might be speaking to a crowd of fellow outer-spacemen, is subject to being quickly passed by. “It”—ambiguously, “everything,” and the word “changes”—“charges by” “belief” “so / quickly,” changing its own “n” to an “r” in its rush.

But what is the point of the poem, and how does it relate to the “So-Called New York School” (as Padgett calls it)²⁵² and its formal reflections of inhabited space? The relation is roundabout: “Ladies and Gentleman of Outer Space,” “Gentlemen Prefer Carrots,” Notley’s “101,” and many other New York School poems articulate the passing of time, and how, as a city subject, it can feel for it and you, to stand still. Space is important in as much as it is transitory, or can facilitate passing. The words that start each line of “Ladies and Gentleman of Outer Space” after the first line—where “Everything changes” is proclaimed—do, in themselves, help to articulate the rush of the changing world, or its entropy. Consider the poem’s line-starters: “quickly,” “charges,” “no end,” and “stretches out.” These words also help to generalize the ways of New York School Poetry: it acknowledges time’s passing, while simultaneously tending to place emphasis on the physical space it, and its subjects, inhabit (“in this area,” “outerspace,” “surpasses,” “no end,” “before and behind” are outlined in “Ladies and Gentlemen of Outerspace,” for example). And as Padgett’s speaker seems to tell aliens: “I had no beginning and I shall have no end,” the boast is tinged with terror, for

²⁵² See Chapter IV for Padgett’s frequent amendments to “The New York School” title: “Oh there are a number of people that have written things about the So-Called New York School that have been intelligent and, you know, apt. I don’t think anyone’s ever told me anything that I didn’t already know. And I’m not criticizing it.”

to have no locatable beginning and no locatable end is to have an unsure middle.²⁵³

In urban, multitudinous life, the own subject perceiving density (as mentioned in the above study of apartment dwellers) is at risk, constantly, of feeling that they might be disappearing.

Padgett's poem, "Realizing"²⁵⁴ sits beside "Ladies and Gentlemen in Outer Space," and grounds itself on the city street to articulate this feeling of apprehending ephemera and becoming ephemeral:

Walking briskly past Schrafft's
 I saw Anne Kepler's face
 smiling at me and raising her eyebrows:
 How nice, she's
 not dead, I can see her
 later, I thought
 on my way to
 a marvelous and touching extravaganza
 of clowns dancers orchestras movies &c.,
 the show ending with Muddy Waters
 coming down into the audience next to me
 to embrace Leadbelly and sing
 "What a Gloomy Day in London"
 so beautiful it brought tears to my eyes.
 Later, walking down
 into a moment in which
 the light seemed to stop
 in a way as familiar to itself as I am to myself, I
 remembered my dream—

²⁵³ Simone Weil's *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind* (trans. Arthur Wills (New York: Routledge, 2003)) considers the need for physical and emotional senses of place extensively. She writes of uprootedness: "To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community... Every human being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary for him to draw wellnigh the whole of his moral, intellectual and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a natural part" (43).

²⁵⁴ *Toujours L'Amour* 69.

and realizing I was remembering pushed
me ahead into whatever else was going to happen,
my writing this, you reading

The poem would seem to consist of two parts: the walk in the city, passing physical locators (like “Schrafft’s”), and the walk “into a moment,” passing sensations. But because the city’s objects are met by a particularly sensitive subject—walking not just to a show but to a “marvelous and touching extravaganza / of clowns dancers orchestras movies &c.” “so beautiful it brought tears to my eyes”—the walks are one. “How funny you are today New York / like Ginger Rogers in *Swingtime*” begins O’Hara’s “Steps,” and in this way Padgett’s “Realizing” continues a walk begun awhile ago.

Padgett’s register of the city’s intensity is unique in that it pays special attention to the re-placement of the subject. In “Realizing,” where does the “I” go? In “Ladies and Gentlemen of Outer Space,” the speaker who has “no beginning” and “no end” sits somewhere under “the beam of light” that stretches “before and behind.” In “Realizing,” the speaker engages in what Lucian Freud calls “downward travel”:²⁵⁵

My idea of travel is downward travel really, getting to know where you are better and exploring feelings that you know more deeply. I always think that “knowing something by heart” gives you a depth of possibility which is more potential than seeing sights however marvelous and exciting they are.

When the directions of their travels are traced, both “Ladies and Gentlemen of Outerspace,” and “Realizing” move downwards, to rest on a table and walk “into a moment,” respectively, exploring the relationship of the mind’s byways and the city’s streets, and so perceiving, knowing and accentuating a “potential” depth. This depth is most often accessed through abstraction in Padgett’s poems, and may be why Lorenzo

²⁵⁵ Freud stated this in an unpublished interview, referenced by Andrew Motion in his article, “The secret Constable,” (*The Guardian*, 22 Nov. 2003, 22 Oct. 2011, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2003/nov/22/>>).

Thomas titled his informative article²⁵⁶ on Padgett: “The Pleasures of Elusiveness: What is in and Around Ron Padgett’s Poetry.” Thomas’s article succeeds in tracing the parameters of Padgett’s beginning. Thomas explores where Padgett’s poetry was written from, who it was written around, and the ideas brought up by those intersecting influences. But the article pays most of its attention to the “What is... Around” and “What is in”—that is, it considers the way that things *outside* Padgett’s work come into it. As Padgett’s poetry is elusively abstract and material at once, one may ask, more precisely: Where does Padgett actually go, inside New York City (imaginatively and spatially), and in the construction of his poetry?

The above discussed three poems were written towards the beginning of Padgett’s career, and published in his second solo book of poems. As Padgett’s writing progresses through his subsequent publications, his poems continue with an exacting precision and calming pace, set going somewhat rebelliously in the context of the Lower East Side. Padgett’s credo crystallizes in his most recent book of poems, *How Long*. But there are clues to suggest that Padgett has always been a poet with a very particular point. In what might qualify as one of Padgett’s middle poems (because it was published in 1990),²⁵⁷ the direction of Padgett’s abstracting tendencies surfaces. Viewed alongside the recently published title poem, “How Long” for example, “First Drift” (*The Big Something* 10-11) reads like a first draft:

The writing of poems
and the living of life
seem to require
paying hard attention to any and everything,

²⁵⁶ Lorenzo Thomas, “The Pleasures of Elusiveness: What is in and Around Ron Padgett’s Poetry,” *Don’t Ever Get Famous: Essays on New York Writing after The New York School*, ed. Daniel Kane. (Champaign, Ill.: Dalkey Archive P, 2006) 288-302.

²⁵⁷ Ron Padgett, *The Big Something* (Massachusetts: The Figures, 1990).

and experiencing
 a kind of mental orgasm.
 Yikes! Do I
 mean that?
 Unfortunately, I'm afraid
 I did, dipped to scoop
 an idea from the roadside,
 the mental roadside that runs
 alongside the mental highway
 that leads to a mental hospital.
 I have never been a patient
 in a mental hospital, because
 I think it would be an extremely bad place to be.
 So I stay out.
 And stay home.
 And go down the street,
 looking intently at everything.
 Sometimes the people in the street
 laugh and turn into sheet music
 torn from the sky and left to flutter down
 into the metaphor that hides behind the deity,
 and will not show itself,
 like a basement beneath the ocean,
 with a tree that grew through a sheet of glass
 on which your face was painted,
 like a clown's, in the early morning
 when it was just starting to rain
 and the animals are moving, and the tents
 are rippling in the breeze, and inside Glenda
 the chimpanzee is completing a quadruple somersault
 from shining bar to shining bar.

“First Drift” does not demonstrate Padgett’s ability to move “from shining bar to shining bar” as well as some of his more recent poems do. The fact that there are gaps in the movement from concrete descriptions to abstract ones, marks the poem as less strong than his later poems. For example: while the connection between “basement” and “ocean” is quickly possible—because an ocean has a floor—the connection between “ocean” and “sheet of glass” requires a double stretch—as the reader must imagine the top of the ocean, and the way it shines, and the way that shining is glassy, without the help of any implied (dead) metaphors or allusions. In this way, this “first” poem has gaps. In his later poems (discussed below), these gaps are almost invisible.

But the poem's relative weakness does allow the *will* to "quadruple somersault" to shine through.

"First Drift" clears up any potential confusion about what Padgett's speaker values and strives for. Both in the "writing of poetry," and "living of life" (which are syntactically made synonymous) the poem calls for "attention." With references to things like "mental orgasms," which both beget his reader's attention, and distract it, Padgett creates spaces in his poems which are as slippery as the spaces he lives in and draws on. But he also brings attention, repeatedly, to the serious hinges in life, through what many think of as "jokes." Critics have often mistaken Padgett's Koch-ian seriousness for "funny."²⁵⁸

Though his poetry's debt to O'Hara's is often stated, Padgett's poetic career has consistently pursued a "downward travel" that parallels Kenneth Koch's (and was inspired by Koch's—as Koch taught Padgett at Columbia University). Koch's poem, "The Boiling Water"²⁵⁹ affirms that everything is "serious," while situating itself in the quotidian—allowing, like Padgett's poems do, the possibility for the "serious" to be at once accessible, ubiquitous, and light. In beginning of "The Boiling Water," Koch's speaker explains to understand potential misunderstandings of this seriousness:

A serious moment for the water is when it boils
 And though one usually regards it merely as a convenience
 To have the boiling water available for bath or table
 Occasionally there is someone around who understands
 The importance of this moment for the water—maybe a saint,
 Maybe a poet, maybe a crazy man, or just someone temporarily

²⁵⁸ "This essay represents a modest attempt to examine one or two aspects of what goes into and around the making of Padgett's funny, poignant, and often astonishingly surprising poems" (Thomas 288).

²⁵⁹ Kenneth Koch, *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2006) 330-335.

disturbed
 With his mind “floating,” in a sense, away from the deepest
 Personal concerns to more “unreal” things. A lot of poetry
 Can come from perceptions of this kind, as well as a lot of
 insane conversations

The lines of Koch’s poetry direct attention to “this moment,” and attention is fixed, more or less, until the speaker tangentially remarks that “a lot of insane conversations” can “come from perceptions of this kind.” In a similar way, Padgett’s “First Drift,” forces its reader to “pay” the very kind of “hard attention” that the “living of life” requires, before its lines offer an explosive way out (“mental orgasm / Yikes!”). So it’s no surprise that even Thomas’s article begins by referencing Padgett’s poetry as “funny” (288).

Harry Thorne suggests²⁶⁰ that the “joke” of the New York School is exactly what attracted Berrigan to it: “It could even be said that Berrigan was attracted to the New York School precisely because it was a joke, and as such it prevented critics from getting a handle on what it represented” (76). And while the “joke” of The New York School may have attracted its many witty poets to it, it remains for the reader to ask what the role of the joke is in New York School Poetry. In Padgett’s poetry, the joke surfaces (and this is especially true of his later poetry, discussed below), as a way of expanding the rational and imagined space of the poem; the “joke” is a way of getting closer to the gut of “inner space,” while also exercising its elasticity. In “First Drift,” for example, the reader’s attention is summoned to work as strong as it can (“pay hard attention”), focusing in, almost, to become at once sexual, and external (as attention shifts from the lines and the “living,” to the idea of a physical reaction). After this kind

²⁶⁰ Harry Thorne, “‘The New York School is a Joke’: The Disruptive Poetics of *C: A Journal of Poetry*,” *Don’t Ever Get Famous*, ed. Daniel Kane. (Champaign, Ill.: Dalkey Archive P, 2006) 74-89.

of internal-external space is probed, a colloquialism is offered (“Yikes!”) and followed by a thrown voice (“Did I mean that?”), so that—as in Notley’s “101,” Berrigan’s “A Final Sonnet,” O’Hara’s “Nocturne,” and even Eliot’s “Portrait of a Lady,”—the tension between inner-space and outer-space is given a place, in the form of the poem, to oscillate.

Such formal-poetic maneuvers also create the slipperiness Thorne refers to, preventing “critics from getting a handle on what is represented” (76). Padgett is aware of both the mistakes and the difficulty in writing about his poetry, explaining, “I’ve always said that my work is hard to write about.”²⁶¹ He continues his recent remarks:

And I don’t think that’s either here nor there. But a couple people have, in recent years, written some really smart things that have really struck me as pretty sharp. But for a long time, all anybody could say about my work was “Oh, he writes a lot of different kinds of poems, and he’s funny.” The first thing is true, and the second is occasionally true. . . . I remember some critic criticizing me a few years ago by saying, Padgett’s very funny and jokey, but why doesn’t he write about something serious, like death? And it was such a wrong-headed idea, and also inaccurate, so I wrote the guy a list of the poems I had written about death and published in my books, but I never heard from him. . . .

Asked if his poetry’s difficulty has to do with a poetic slight of hand, Padgett continues:

Two things come to mind: one is that openness was, for a number of poets from my age and before, openness was a characteristic that I admired, and I still do. Doesn’t mean you’re going to write a good poem because you’re open. You could be spilling your guts or confessing to something horrible that I actually may rather not know about. But on the other hand, without openness to yourself, I think it’s very difficult sometimes for poets to actually grow or to figure out what to do next in a poem, and to figure out who they are even. The other thing I wanted to say was that, in fact, I have a poem called “The Coat Hanger.” I talk about this very subject. It’s in a new book of mine that just came out.

Padgett does take up issues of formalism, space, humor, death, influence, abstraction, physicality and openness all within that one poem, titled “The Coat Hanger” (*How Long* 81-3). And where the larger-than-life poem, “How Long,” allows for Padgett’s credo to

²⁶¹ See “Interview with Ron Padgett,” in Chapter IV.

crystallize—almost once and for all—, “The Coat Hanger,” set towards the back of this recent collection, smudges the book’s sense of clarity, and, in turn, the lines between influence, abstraction, formalism, space, humor, death, physicality and openness. With its title pointing to a shaping, a wanting, a waiting, and an absence all at once, “The Coat Hanger” pursues many large verbs with an unusual, overwhelming sense of sobriety.

“The Coat Hanger” begins by offering a sense of perspective, almost immediately obscured: “Starting from the left but seen from the right I am / an open parenthesis” (*How Long* 81). The reader is immediately invited to be in two places at once, before the parenthesis is clarified to be a punctuation mark, borrowed not only for its poetical structuring purposes, but also for its similarity to the shape of an aging man. The poem then moves backward, to remember the things that old friends said, the lines older poets wrote, and the way all of those poets (Berrigan, Whitman, Mallarmé, Pound, Olson, O’Hara, Koch, and Brainard)²⁶² approached both poetry and their ends—embracing a sense of “always wanting to be as open as possible,” on the page, in the heart, and in the mind. After this gloss of influences and influential thoughts, the Padgett reader might think that the poem is over, because the idea of “always wanting to be as open as possible”—arrived at through people, references to punctuations, objects, quotes and times—would constitute a New York School poem. But with the flip of the page (there is no stanza break, but the book’s publication makes way for at least a slight pause in reading), Padgett’s own form of openness opens the poem and the speaker up to a reader, who in turn, must open to let the following images in:

... and Joe too
 always wanting to be as open as possible.
 -- [page break]--

²⁶² All mentioned at the poem’s beginning (*How Long* 81).

It's hard to do because everything rushes toward you
 and demands that you close up a little here, a little there,
 so you can have for instance breakfast instead of floating off over a star
 ringed with glory and an immortality that goes on for an instant.
 That's why or partly why (because everything is "partly") I
 when seen from the right am an open parenthesis,
 though at this very moment I am closing slightly
 because I came to and found myself alone in a room:
 the open part of me had disappeared
 and been replaced by a strategy. But I am smarter
 than any strategy when I remember that I am,
 that majesty can build from its own underground
 and exultation rises like a train station in the mind of a boy,
 a station built of straight lines and sunlight dappled water,
 though you are dragging your great trunk along the ground
 trying to figure out if you are legless or an elephant
 and the dust rises about you like a chorus of angels
 come not to sing thee to thy rest but to giggle like curlicues
 in the air around the head of a headless person,
 for though the body is dead the head is alive inside itself,
 even more alive than when it was connected to the body.

Flooded with images that serve to nestle a couple of intimate confessions, these lines are appropriately "hard to do." While the first page of the poem almost reads like a literature lesson (listing figures and theories), these subsequent lines catch the reader off-guard. "It's hard to do because everything rushes towards you," is the kind of line that at once invites the reader to lean in, and overwhelms the reader into almost needing to lean out. And yet this is precisely the kind of lived-in feeling that these lines are in pursuit of articulating. So the poem offers itself as a microcosm of the very life filled with "everything" that "demands that you close up a little here, a little there,"—while opening and closing through imagery, syntax, punctuation and line length (a "little here" is kept from overflowing by a comma, as is "a little there,"). Moreover, the line, "because everything rushes towards you" has, for a moment, the distinction of anapestic rhythm—completely fitting, as *anapest* means "to be completely struck back." This rhythm fades, in turn, with the "demand" that "you close up a little." So the lines make way for a see-saw, as the reader's imagination and sense of location are played on. While the phrase "everything rushes towards you" implies a stillness, the next lines

beget departures—“off,” “over” into the kind of longness and shortness of “immortality” that is suddenly mortal (“for an instant”).

Most importantly, it is “the room,” that forces the speaker to, as O’Hara puts it, “Reflect a moment on the flesh in which you’re mired” (*CP of O’Hara* 208), or as Padgett puts it, “come to.” After opening the reader up, the speaker leads the reader to sit within the walls of the room, requesting both speaker and reader to be aware of the parameters of their own bodies, and of the body of the poem. The lines, speaker and poem threaten to close: “though at this very moment I am closing slightly / because I came to and found myself in a room” as “a strategy” surfaces as the force behind the poem. It is from this point of almost-clarity, that the poem gains its gusto—fully taking off into an almost untraceably imaginative open parenthesis. The poem points to this fogginess:

... Me I am at an angle,
but when I stand up straight as the lines in that station,
I see, before the fog rolls in, the tracks that take us all
across ourselves,
metaphorical fog thicker than real fog,
just as barking is thicker than a dog,
though the dog is clearing up too, like a sky
(How Long 83)

“Metaphorical fog thicker than real fog” blankets these lines, as a “dog”—only “really” relevant for its rhyming power, is entered into this otherwise completely outdoor, abstract picture. Again moving from a room to an outside, Padgett’s images move from those of concrete confinement to abstract stimulation and freedom. It is in this way that Padgett’s poems continuously challenge his reader: the metaphorical and real are two poles put almost too close to one another, so that the reader is forced to negotiate their vibrations. Where the “dog” of this poem would normally be welcome for its anchoring, locating potential (we would clearly be in “real” life), in Padgett’s poem the dog is yet another portal to yet another world.

If O'Hara's point was, as "The Coat Hanger" explains, to have poems and heart "be open," and Koch's was to "think about" "things that keep opening up," and Olson's to create a "field that you can put anything in," Padgett takes openness—if possible—further, by offering a form of punctuation to literally and figuratively be shaped by: "I am an open parenthesis." Nowhere is this openness and "instant" "immortality," more fully reckoned with than in Padgett's most recent collection's title poem, "How Long" (*How Long* 47-58).

"How Long" is long, but in a way that is different from Padgett's other poems. In terms of form, simply and superficially, Padgett's early poems tend to be short in length and tall and narrow in shape, while his later poems are longer, broken into more (and less regular) stanzas, with longer lines. This later tendency is especially true for "How Long," composed of 44 irregular stanzas that span 12 pages. The variations in the stanzas of "How Long," make way for a variety of voices to enter the poem which, in turn, expand the poem's dimensions. Through rhetorical questions, the reader is continuously invited in. Because the questions are so rhetorical (for example: "Supposed. What does that mean?" (49), or "What do you want to do with your life?" (52)), the reader is at once pushed to probe into themselves, and to probe deep within the poem for answers, all while being constantly reminded that the entire poem is a kind of utterance—both spoken outwards to an audience—called upon, but mute ("What? I didn't hear you," the speaker teases (49))—and inwards ("There is a lot of room left in me" (48)). The poem's inward-moving moments are its most challenging, as the speaker insists on a sense of space and emptiness, creating simultaneous senses of freedom and dislocation. For example, after asking the reader to "turn your mind on its side / and let it lie there, inert" in order to allow a "white wing" to "arise" "from this inertia," which will (according to the poetry) then in turn be able to "fold and unfold itself / like the magnetic field it rises above / in wave after wave after wave," Padgett

gives his reader a stanza break for the waves to ripple in, before jolting the reader into the concrete: “Then it’s back to basics: / If you bone or debone a chicken / it comes out the same” (50-51). The chicken does not belong in the poem—the only reference to anything chicken-ly is in the above-mentioned “wing.” But the image of deboning a chicken has the power to force the reader to consider why they would rather not consider it—creating an energy of desire, as the reader moves through the stanza to return to the poem’s somewheres that are filled with more desirable things than “the basics” of the concrete world.

Throughout the poem, the reader is placed in an imaginary space to be displaced by locatable objects, places, and activities. The speaker, too, comes and goes. The speaker surfaces, first, on the poem’s second page, to be standing on a “track”—potentially of a railroad station, or a song. He then explains “nothing belongs to me,” projecting a vagabond disposition by at once negating fixity and asserting a wholeness. As the poem continues to outline the parameter-less of its setting, the possibility of a trope surfaces, as the “Ladies and Gentlemen of Outerspace” reader is reminded of the line, “I had no beginning and I shall have no end,” and the more contemporary Padgett reader might feel reminiscent for the image of “Hidden Valley” referred to throughout *How Long’s* “What Are You On?” (21-28).

A very relevant and revealing tangent-poem, “What Are You On?” is another Padgett construction that makes a point of creating a sense of space, while glorifying a placeless-ness. The poem’s middle offers grandchildren from “Hidden Valley,” before turning outwards and questioning the reader’s senses:

You think I don’t know where [Hidden Valley] is
 or is that just a ploy to get me to tell you?
 You are like the guy who looked all over
 for his hat and later learned it was on his head
 but it didn’t mean anything until he realized he had a head
 and that the hat was both on and inside it

and when he did
 it was not a rabbit that he pulled out
 but a rectangle in which the rabbit was imprisoned
 You don't want to be that guy, do you?
 You would rather be the rabbit
 when all along you could have been the waterfall
 We move ahead in our story to five years later
 then we move five years back
 because there is no story
 only a collection of events with no beginning,
 no end, and therefore no middle, it is all
 one big beginning, middle, and end every second
 and though you are in it you are also to the side
 (*How Long* 24-25)

Resisting fixity and insisting on a sense of space, the poem creates the kind of space for non-sequiturs to flow within: beginnings, ends, middles, insides, outsides, heads, hats, waterfalls, rabbits, and sides become, like the poem's lines, rapidly moving planes to jump onto and off of. Padgett's poems afford the opportunity to jump, and to be "the waterfall." The sooner his reader embraces this mobility, the bouncier and more potentially full their experience of Padgett's poetry will be. In this way, Padgett's lines invite four dimensional wandering: the reader is propelled through non-linear imagery and syntax, to be pushed through the "inner spaces" of the speaker, the poem, and themselves and bounce, most frequently, out.

If Padgett's work has a locatable climax, it is split between the middle and last lines of "How Long." After creating the sense of a song overhead in a railway station ("How long, how long / will this baby take to depart?" (48)), "How Long" moves to play with its audience's attention span:

Do you mind my going on like this?
 You want something else, right?
 Perhaps you want what you think poetry should give you,
 but poetry doesn't give anyone anything,
 it simply puts the syllables on the table
 and lets you rearrange them in your head,
 which you can do unless your head is a square
 the size of the tabletop.
 So why don't you lift your head off the table

and go lie down somewhere more comfortable
 and not worry about anything,
 including the list of things to worry about
 that you keep revising in your head,
 for there is a slot through which that list
 can slip and float down like a baby in a rocking crib,
 down to a comfy dreamland
 and be transformed into a list of gods whose jokes are
 wonderful.

(*How Long* 51)

Beginning with a contemporary “defense of poesy,” and ending with the resurfacing of the idea of the joke, these lines ask the reader to simultaneously let go, open up, fall asleep, and implode. The “slot” “through which” Padgett’s poems slip is here, finally, valorized. It is the repeated “slip”—and the repetition of the “slipping”—that gives Padgett’s poems the power to move at once down (“to a comfy dreamland”) and up (“unto a list of gods whose jokes are wonderful”). In the above lines, the “slip” begins with a reference—again—to a concrete object: “the table.” The shape of the table is traced as “square,” but not directly, with the allusion to a table making way for an allusion to a square. But Padgett makes the lines “slip”: a “table” is given as a line-ending word, and though we all know that tables tend to be square, the table’s squareness is not actually mentioned. Instead, the following line ends with the word “head,” which we are warned, in the subsequent line, should not be “square.” So the “squareness” of the table is dislocated from it, by the reader’s own head—poetically and actually (as the reading mind must make these leaps). After this “slot” is created, the poem allows the very “slip” it describes, as the reader is invited to remove the imagined squareness of their head from the actual squareness of the table and “go lie down somewhere more comfortable.”

Padgett’s career as a New York School Poet began with *Great Balls of Fire*, and sits, in the contemporary moment, with the energy of a “ball of laughter.” Taking the typically outward moving power of a question mark and turning into the inward power

of the imagination, Padgett ends “How Long” by preemptively ventriloquizing his audience’s big question mark and answering it with an exclaima-bang: “*Humb?* // I keep a ball of laughter inside that *Humb.*” But it would be lethal for the reader to debone *How Long* and think it means to be funny. Padgett’s poetry is filled to its brim—not only with the abovementioned oscillations from speaker to reader; inside space to outside space; and imagined senses of shape to real shapes—but also it is also filled with oscillations between the life and mind of the living (reader and speaker) and the memory of those who *informed* the life and mind of the speaker. “How Long,” for example, features stanzas about Hitler, Santa Clause, Padgett’s mother and father, Jimmy Schuyler, Joe Brainard, Berrigan, and a piece of wallpaper they all seemed to touch.²⁶³ In *How to be Perfect*,²⁶⁴ Padgett gives a title to the energizing, constructive and deconstructive power of jokes, laughter and fire, in the title of a poem: “The Absolute Huge and Incredible Injustice of the World” (48-58). Harnessing the “hugeness,” “incredibleness,” “absoluteness” and “injustice” of “the World,” Padgett’s poems come to be lined by all of these shaping and erasing things. It is in the vitality of this hugeness (awful and

²⁶³ The poem reads (50-51):

Now that you are convinced of something
that you already believed, the wallpaper becomes a fact
in the home of Anne and Fairfield Porter,
in the upstairs hallway and the bedroom
where Jimmy stayed, the wallpaper that here and there
was curling off the wall so Joe could tear it off
and glue it to a big white sheet of paper.
There is no other wallpaper I would ever want.
Now the wallpaper goes away,
back on the wall in 1969
where I stood and gazed at it for a long time
and then went downstairs to add coal to Fairfield’s stove,
the big Aga he had shipped all the way from Sweden
because he was very determined to have it.
All day its warmth rose up to the second floor
and caressed the wallpaper.

²⁶⁴ Ron Padgett, *How to be Perfect* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2007).

great), that Padgett's poems (and those of his fellow "So-Called New York School" friends and peers) spring.

"The Absolute Huge and Incredible Injustice of the World" is one of Padgett's clearest and most explicitly domestic poems. In it, he locates a "somewhere" that has the power to "transform" a list of "worries" into a list of funny gods, while also tracing the glorious, claustrophobic and heart-breaking parameters of its time and space. The poem begins by outlining forms of "meanness" (like killing people), before turning inward to a marriage composed of one balding lover and another lover gaining weight, "Which means that my bald head feels good on your soft round belly that feels good too." This second stanza confession turns the poem into a love-poem, so that the "you" of it is invited to be soft. With the reader thus placed "somewhere" comfortable, the speaker considers the wonderfulness of words, and the horribleness of "numbers," before going further inwards, to the contemporary urban apartment, where both the wonderful and horrible exist:

... you dial 1-800-mattress and in no time get a mattress
 that is complete and comfy and almost under you,
 even though you didn't need one! The men
 come in and say Here's the mattress where's
 the bedroom? And the bedroom realizes it can't run away.
 You can't say that the people who invented the bedroom were mean,
 only a bedroom could say that, if it could say anything.
 It's a good thing that bedrooms can't talk!
 They might keep you up all night telling you things
 you don't want to know. "Many years ago,
 in this very room ..." Eek, shut up! I mean,
 please don't tell me anything, I'm sorry I shouted at you.
 And the walls subside into their somewhat foreverness.
 The wrecking ball will mash its grimace into the plaster and oof,
 down they will come, lathe and layers of personal history
 ...

... So good-bye, building
 where we made love, laughed, wept, ate, and watched TV
 all at the same time! Where our dog waited by the door,
 eyes fixed on the knob, where a runaway stream came whooshing
 down the hallway, where I once expanded to fill the whole room
 and then deflated, just to see what it would feel like,
 where on Saturday mornings my infant son stood by the bedside

and sang, quietly, “Wa-a-a-ke up” to his snoozing parents.
 I could never leave all the kindness I have felt in this apartment
 but if a big black iron wrecking ball comes flying toward me,
 zoop, out I go! For there must be kindness somewhere else in the world,
 maybe even out of it, though I’m not crazy
 about the emptiness of outer space. I have to live
 here, with finite life and inner space and with
 the horrible desire to love everything and be disappointed
 the way my mother was until that moment
 when she rolled her eyes toward me as best she could
 and squeezed my hand when I asked, “Do you know who I am?”
 then let go of life.

(How to be Perfect 51-52)

Just as O’Hara offered the image of a speaking sun, and laid out his poetic program within a conversation with that sun, so too Padgett arms “the bedroom” with a voice, to say something serious: “and the walls subside into their somewhat foreverness.” In the above lines, this is the “slot” through which the reader is invited to slip. But this time, because the matter is almost wholly domestic, the slot leads to a very serious, very intimate, very detectibly layered place. The reader lands in a family’s life within finite time and physical space: “down they will come, lathe and layers of personal history.” The poem’s line breaks serve to promote the potential for ambiguity, while the very clear vantage point of the “I” makes the point clear: “I’m not crazy / about the emptiness of outer space. I have to live / here, with finite life and inner space.” Finally, this is the poet forced to reckon with the potential unsustainability of apartmented life, proclaiming within it a love of life, a fear of death, and a sense of shakiness. “This apartment” allows “all the kindness” of “inner space” to be sensed, while simultaneously forcing the poet to consider outer-space. Padgett’s comments on form translate to comments on apartment-ed life: “How do you dance inside a straightjacket?”—or, more simply, how does one live within walls that they know will “subside?”

Through his poetry, Padgett suggests that alternate, softer and therefore more permeable places exist. By repeatedly offering the opportunity to “slip” within his poetry, Padgett creates both flexible places and tangential escapes. “I could never leave all the kindness I have felt in this apartment” his speaker explains, but then immediately makes way for an alternate: “But if a big black iron wrecking ball comes flying toward me” and accommodates it: “zoop, out I go!” This poetry does the same: It offers “kindness” inside, and in so doing accounts for the possibility of “kindness somewhere else in the world / maybe even out of it” while affirming that it must be “inner”: “though I’m not crazy / about the emptiness of outer space. I have to live / here, with finite life and inner space.” The “finitude” of “inner space” is what leads to inevitable “disappointments.” In almost protective and liberating contrast, Padgett repeatedly offers inner spaces in his poems that make room for infinities. He so offers the very “infinite riches in a little room”²⁶⁵ which he references in the following chapter’s interview.

²⁶⁵ This line comes from Christopher Marlowe’s Act i. of *The Jew of Malta*, though in the following chapter Padgett attributes the line to Ben Johnson.

IV. **Interviews**

Interviews with *Alice Notley* and *Ron Padgett*

In order to test, within this thesis, the validity of the reading of the New York School poets proposed here, interviews were arranged with the living poets discussed—Alice Notley and Ron Padgett. They were written to and asked if they would be willing to talk about the formal elements of their poetry, and both kindly responded positively. With the aim of infusing this discussion of New York Poetics with living testament, the following interviews were conducted in March of 2009 and April of 2011. Because of the span of time between the interviews, the interview with Notley is more general in scope, and the interview with Padgett more narrow and specific. Both poets have seen the text of these interviews and graciously permit their inclusion within this study. What follows is an edited form of the conversations that took place in cafes in Paris and New York City, respectively.

“Walking that Stretch for a Second”²⁶⁶

Interview with Alice Notley, conducted in Paris on 18 March, 2009.

Yasmine Shamma: You’ve experimented with many different styles and many different movements, but today I want to focus on *Mysteries of Small Houses*.²⁶⁷ There’s a

²⁶⁶ A portion of this interview was published (non-exclusively) in *Jacket Magazine*, Vol. 40, Late 2010 (<<http://jacketmagazine.com/40/iv-notley-ivb-shamma-2009.shtml>> last accessed September 20, 2011). This interview’s aim was to contextualize *Mysteries of Small Houses* in terms of times and places.

²⁶⁷ *Mysteries of Small Houses* (New York: Penguin, 1998).

line from “101” which gives me the feeling that these poems were very deliberate: “I don’t want to be there in this poem, if anyone else is from the past.”

Alice Notley: I don’t remember these poems. A very odd thing happened, which was that I put all of my memories into the book, and now, I don’t have them anymore. They’re actually totally inscribed into the book, so now I don’t have them. I never thought that would happen to me.

YS: Is it a relief?

AN: No. Well, kind of, because then I’m not saddled with a lot of anecdotes. But I don’t like to lose memories because it makes me feel mentally deficient... Oh [looking at “101”] I’m trying to make the apartment be empty for me to talk about it. It was really interesting that later, I asked one of my sons—it was Edmund—if I had “gotten” the apartment, and he said to me, “I have my own 101.” So, I was trying to get my own 101.

YS: When I read it, I get the sense that the poem offers a floor-plan to trace.

AN: Well, it was one of those railroad apartments, and we lived there for a long time. It was a really famous apartment because we were there. And you came in through the kitchen, and there was a kitchen and this little toilet, and in the kitchen was the bathtub, and if you came in at the right time, you’d catch one of us in the bathtub. My friend George Schneeman—who recently died—came in once and saw Ted in the bathtub, and he couldn’t believe it, because there was this tiny bathtub and this bearded giant in the bathtub, and he didn’t want to leave the kitchen! There were these two tiny

bedrooms which eventually became Anselm and Edmund's bedrooms after Ted died. And Anselm and Edmund had bunkbeds in the first one and Ted and I had the second one, and there was this really nice kind of big living room space—big for New York, and it had good light. But it was a dump. It really really was a dump. But there were good things; there were good things about it. It was a great neighborhood. It's not a great neighborhood anymore... But it was, it really was a great block, and our neighbors were terrific. They were just all characters. And they were the people I missed the most when I left. I missed the people in the building.

YS: Are they still there?

AN: No, they all left or died. There were these two guys on either side of the building. There was Leroy, and there was Dolphy. Leroy ran this place called Coif House—he did Black hair—and Dolphy was a carpenter and they stood outside and kind of monitored the block, they made everything go right! And we were entirely dependent on them. There were people like that. There were dope dealers, and people who loved rough lives, and people who would get stabbed, and it was all really interesting.

YS: It's not like that anymore, is it?

AN: No. There are a few of those people who apparently still live on the block, and Anselm sees them from time to time. But I'm not answering any questions about the poem am I?

YS: No it's ok—any talk of rooms is appreciated.

AN: Well, I never wanted to leave that place, and I knew I would leave that place. I always knew I would leave that place. But when we moved into it, Ted—Ted just took to it—but it was really—it was always too small. And then like a month or two before he died, he said to me, “I always knew I would die here, die in this apartment. The moment I saw it I knew I would die here...”

YS: And you always knew you would leave it?

AN: Yeah. Well, yes.

YS: The feeling that you were always going to leave—did that somehow get inscribed into these poems?

AN: Well, no. I didn't have the feeling always, but I did write a poem—a little poem that's never been published, when I was doing the postcard project, where I placed myself into the future, and I tried to remember what it was like to be in the apartment—I wrote it while I was in the apartment, and that's when I knew I was going to leave it. That was the first time I knew I was going to leave it. But I always knew I was going to leave it. But I live in an apartment now that's even smaller, so I can't figure out if I'm going to leave this apartment or not. But it has more solidity to it. The building is older.

YS: Is it less cluttered?

AN: Oh no, it's much more cluttered. All I have are books and papers and I don't know what to do with any of them. I have the residue of two husbands and myself.

Two literary husbands and my literary self, and it's impossible; there are mice, I'm terrible. But the building goes back to the French Revolution—there's just such solidity in the building and in the neighborhood, that it seems to me that I'm not going to leave. But on the other hand I'd really like to leave, because it's so tiny, because it's so lonely. But I don't know if I will or not. I don't know.

YS: There's an interview in which you mention imagining your house in Needles, which you describe as fragile... you say "it was like wearing light clothes..." And I get the sense that you feel the smaller house is more like our state—that it's more like our true state, that it's more human?

AN: Yes, something like that. Probably more human. There's also some class thing in there as well. I just identify with... I don't know, my grandparents' house and the house that I was four in are the essential houses. Those are the houses I identify with most. And I like the house I grew up in too. It was a little bit bigger—it was my daddy's dream. You know, he had grown up really poor, and his mother was this widow, and she had lost three husbands, and she had had five kids . . . and she didn't know what to do! They lived in tents during part of the depression, part of the time, and she sort of gradually got to have a house. I never met her. She died the week I was born. But my other grandparents had this really tiny house in Phoenix and they also had 5 kids! And I don't know how they managed to bring up the kids, but these two people were my ideals. They lived into their 90s and they never had anything, and they were just very solid people. There was some solidity I got from them. And my parents lived in the alley house, and there were a couple of houses before that, but I don't remember them very clearly. And then there was an architect, and I learned the word: "Architect"! And the architect came and built this house for my parents and it was actually too small, but

it seemed fantastically large.

YS: Because it was built for them?

AN: Yes. And it had three bedrooms, and a living room and a bathroom and a kitchen. And there was a certain point when I moved out that my grandmother came to live there too. And all this space in the desert has yards, so that the space spills out into the yards. The kids spent a lot of time outside. Whereas in New York, my kids played in the street. LeRoy and Dolphy...

YS: Monitored?

AN: They monitored, and they made that space habitable and playable in. But they had to play football up and down in between the crosstown buses, and I would be upstairs listening! I'd hear the busses come and go, and they'd be out there in the street, screaming terrible things. Calling each other Stupid queers and stuff, which is what boys do.

YS: How do you feel about apartments versus houses?

AN: Oh I wouldn't mind having a house. I have a fantasy of owning a house. But I don't have any money. I have less money than any poet I know, I think.

YS: Really? Was that a conscience decision?

AN: I sort of float in and out of decisions. And it just kind of happened. I didn't want

to have an academic career. I could have had some money...

YS: Do you teach now?

AN: No.

YS: But you did for awhile?

AN: Yes, but in tiny ways. I've always avoided having a position. I just can't read papers and grade them. I like working with people, and I do good workshops. But the academic thing is a pain in the ass. They don't—the students evaluate you—they don't have the right to do that!

YS: I heard about your Tarot workshops, or the trance workshops?

AN: Those are two different ones. I did the trance workshops around the time I wrote that book [*Mysteries...*]. Those were really interesting. I did one in Vancouver—it was really interesting. I was going around trying to get people to write poems the way I wrote those poems. You've probably read the description of how I did that. I discovered that there were people who didn't want to go back to when they were four (because I went back to the time when I was four, in a trance state, when I wrote these poems). My stepdaughter was doing hypnotherapy at the time, and she told me this technique where you go into the future, although she would hypnotize other people so that they could do it. You fly up in the air and you find a river, and you follow this river into the future and you kind of alight into the house where you'll be—more houses. And I did it myself, and it was great. I was in this house, it was actually quite foreseeing:

I was in this house and there was a washing machine, and I don't know how to explain that it was correct but it was correct, and there was a washing machine, the laundry was being done, and I was wearing orange, and I was sitting at a table, writing. So I explained in this workshop that if they didn't want to go back, they could go forward. And this lady didn't want to go back so she went forward. This older lady she didn't want to go back but she went forward and got really upset. She was from South Africa, I think it had something to do with South African politics. I don't know, there were some other things we did . . . There was one where this woman said, later, that when she was doing it she got this vision that there was something wrong with her car and when she went out to it during the break her alarm was going off!

YS: That's completely bizarre...

AN: Yes, there were several events like that. It was really interesting. Yes, it all worked.

YS: About the Tarot Workshop, I read something about you buying a deck in French, and that being interesting to you...

AN: Well I always wanted to work with the images: I had read that Michael McClure had done something with the Tarot, and it had been written up in one of the anthologies for Naropa, he'd gotten a class to make up personal symbols, using them to write poems. I got these workshops to make a deck, and I would say that we wanted to make a new Major Arcana and think about cards that are applicable now. I wanted a card for Immigration—there probably is a card, but it isn't clear. We needed one for worldwide immigration, and there wasn't a card for the worldwide ecological crisis...

YS: You've immigrated from New York City. Does the relationship of your long poetic line have anything to do with the city?

AN: It's just a long line, like in Latin poetry.

YS: So it isn't responding to the street, or the city block?

AN: It responds to conversation. It's very much a conversational line. But it's different—the way it is in O'Hara is different from the way it is in Koch, and the way it is in Koch is different from the way it is in Schuyler. John Ashbery does an entirely different thing. It's different according to what the different person is like. And I probably got more from O'Hara, but his line is really about conversation, I think.

YS: So poems that deal with New York City...

AN: They come out of, well the line comes out of Whitman, I guess. Well Whitman's line was very different because it's much statelier, and Kenneth's line is a lot like Whitman's, it's always bowing to Whitman. Whereas Frank didn't do that, and Jimmy did a different thing.²⁶⁸

YS: I understand you wrote most of [*Mysteries of Small Houses*] in...

AN: I wrote it all here.

²⁶⁸ The reference here is to James Schuyler.

YS: Right. Did you think you were writing to an American audience, or to a New York sensibility?

AN: To an American audience. I think I said this in some interview, but I used to always imagine when I was writing my poems that they were being read to the audience at St. Marks in that room, I don't know if you've been in that room?

YS: Yes, I have.

AN: That room is the most perfect place to read in the world. It has beautiful acoustics, and the size is perfect and the audience is attentive. And so I always imagined myself reading there. Then when I moved here, I kind of had to imagine a different space, and so I guess I don't see a room anymore.

YS: You don't? Do you think you did when you wrote this?

AN: No, I was writing for a larger audience than that one. It's hard to explain it. I was writing for the entire poetry world of America. But I was trying to explain something. And I was writing to Britain, and I was trying to explain something. I was trying to explain something about style as well: I was trying to explain that you could change styles and that you could go back and use old styles, and it didn't mean anything; that all the aesthetic wars were shit; they were stupid. And all aesthetic stances were just nonsense. That's part of what the book means.

YS: And the sense then is, that if all the aesthetic styles are nonsense—I mean I'm with you and I caught that drift from the book and liked it, especially in "Flowers" where

you write, “The American Poetry vacant lot’s small and overgrown.” This is the feeling you give in “Flowers” but it takes a turn...

AN: Yes, I’d forgotten about that poem and then you mentioned it—that poem had a dream in it. It had a dream in the middle of it.

YS: Is that where the purple flower comes in?

AN: Yes. The flower, I mean the tree with the cunt-shaped mouth. That was a dream. It was a dream I had at a very particular time. I wrote a play called “Anne’s White Glove.” I started writing it a year after Ted died. It was commissioned by Ada Katz, Alex Katz’s wife. She was doing a theater project and she commissioned poets to write plays. They were usually rather short, but I wrote a three-act play, basically about Ted dying. It was put on for a week at La Mama. I’d known things about the theater but I’d never been involved in it, and it kind of ripped all of my insides out, and I didn’t know how to attend the play; I didn’t know how to be the person who had written it. I was very upset all of the time it was going on. I think it’s a very beautiful play. But I had this dream: I was being told by the tree to accept my laurels. And I didn’t really get any for the play; but it was like an indication that I should, that that was what my future was; the laurel tree. Accepting it; it was internal as much as it was external.

YS: Is that where the last line comes in?

AN: [reading]: “It’s my neglect I’m entranced by / And my garland of the everlasting laurel leaves / evergreen darkgreen elliptical thick and bunched.” I don’t know why it’s elliptical but it’s great isn’t it?

YS: It is, and I think this poem is my favorite.

AN: I don't know how I wrote that line. That was a dream too: "scatter marijuana on the waters to quieten them." It was a dream that Atlantis was rising and I scattered marijuana on the waters. There are a lot of dreams in this book. But all the dreams in this book are really important dreams. They're dreams I remembered for a long time but I didn't necessarily write down. They were dreams that were important experiences.

YS: You write in one poem of a time when you couldn't tell the difference between sleeping and waking...

AN: That's in "101". Yes, well that happened at the end of the year that Ted died. I was dreaming a lot and learning from my dreams. One day I walked out onto the street and I was in a dream. I was dreaming and everyone was out on the street, complicit with my state.

YS: Oh, and that's why "everyone was benign"?

AN: No that wasn't a dream, that was a vision. That's a different time. I remember that vision, but I don't remember the other one at the end, the part about being "popped out." But I remember the previous one, where everything seemed to slow down. It was really weird. It was like I was in the light of a different species; like an insect or something; I was in a different time. If you stepped out of this dimension, because time is so relative. I just saw everyone being slow. And they walked slowly and I saw everyone's face clearly. I could see everybody. I was walking on Third Avenue. It

New Addresses. I think it was because I was using him, and then I played it back, and so it was like it was all new again.

YS: He liked the way he sounded! So I have to ask one last question about “101.”

There’s a line that’s troubled me for awhile—the second last line, where you write “There is no connection particularly / I left New York...” Are there really no connections, or is the idea that because there’s no connection you can leave?

AN: There’s no connection. There is just no connection. I left New York for entirely other reasons. There aren’t a lot of connections. That’s what I consistently find out; the real connections are the ones that you don’t see. Sometimes your poetry shows you what the connections are, and you discover them after 20 years. Nothing ever connects for me. That’s one of the reasons I don’t like to have a job; they’re asking you to be connected to everything.

YS: Is that one of the reasons you feel you can come in and out of apartments?

AN: Yes, because nothing makes sense. I don’t understand why people do anything that they do. And they always think that they understand what they’re doing, and it’s always mysterious to me.

YS: So the *mysteries* of small houses...The mysteries being the illusions?

AN: Well everybody’s mysterious. All those houses are mysterious. There’s a very interesting artist—she was a very great girlfriend of Ted’s, and she and I were rivals for Ted at one point: Donna Dennis. And some parts of her art are about small houses.

But I wasn't thinking about her. She's also done subways. The first show of hers that I remember being like this was of Maine Cottages. She made these little white vacation cottages, or sometimes motels. She built these little cottages that are about 2/3 the size of a person. She built these installations of these houses, and then it was all dark around the houses when they were shown. It was beautiful; they were really beautiful. She did a Holland tunnel—she's done some really amazing art.

YS: All New York based?

AN: Pretty much, although they were Maine cottages, Maine was where all the New York artists went over the summer.

YS: I'm going to switch poems now—"The Person that You Were Will be Replaced"—is any part of that a dream? Going into the icy water and all?

AN: No, that really happened. It was Thanksgiving, and my brother-in-law took me and the kids out on a hike. He was famous for this—he takes people on these horrible hikes! And he's always saying "another quarter of a mile, another quarter of a mile..." And you climb these mountains and you go through all these bushes and end up all scratched.

YS: In California?

AN: No, it was in upstate New York. Right now he's in Texas. And there was one point where you couldn't go any further unless you crossed a stream, and there were no rocks. So we all had to take our shoes and socks off and cross this stream. And I put

my feet in the icy water, and I felt great. And I realized it was the first time that I had forgotten that Ted had died, since he had died. Just for that minute. I later read that Norman Cousins wrote a book about cancer. He survived cancer. The two prescriptions for surviving cancer to remember were, one of them was to watch the Marx brothers, and the other was to put your feet in icy water every day. It just jolts you out of your thoughts; out of your head. Oh [looking at the poem] and in this poem I dreamed of “The Ship of Death”—D.H. Lawrence’s poem—I’ve always been very affected by that poem. The first line is “Oh build your ship of death, for you will need it...” It’s about dying, and it’s got this Egyptian thing in it about being on a boat with your things. My father had done that when he was dying, he had talked about getting on a boat and needing his jacket and some sandwiches. And Lawrence talks about it, he describes this very beautiful line at the end of the poem, a thin line on the horizon like dawn... It’s the last image you’re left with, this line; it’s a new life. You get on the ship and you die, but there’s another life. It’s completely ambiguous as to what it is, but it’s so beautiful. You should read the poem. There’s that poem and there’s another poem of his which I’ve been very impressed by, “Bavarian Gentians.” It’s the one about the blue flowers, and going down into hell with these blue flowers for a torch instead of fire.

YS: You seem to be very responsive to colors. There’s a lot of orange mentioned...

AN: Yes. I’m an artist. But not very good.

YS: Are you still collaging?

AN: Yes, but not very often, because I don’t have a lot of space. You just have to have

some room to put your stuff. I had the most room in Chicago, and I made a lot of stuff there.

YS: How long were you in Chicago?

AN: Three years.

YS: Was it after Iowa?

AN: No. First there was Iowa, then there was New York. And then I hooked up with Ted, finally, and then we went to Buffalo, then we went to San Francisco and Bolinas. Then we went to Chicago, and then we went to England, and then we went back to Chicago.

YS: Where in England did you go?

AN: First we went to London, and then Ted got a job at Essex, and we lived in Essex for a year, and I had Eddie in Essex—at Colchester Hospital.

YS: How about all that moving?

AN: We moved a lot.

YS: It's sort of dizzying.

AN: I sort of wore out with moving.

YS: Yes, it wears you out.

AN: You're kind of supposed to do it when you're young. Poets sometimes do it a lot, even when they're older.

YS: I think a lot of this grief poem.

AN: Grief is a god. It's almost better to be Greek than American to understand it. It's a spirit that comes from the outside—it's a spirit that gets into you. I've thought about grief and sorrow a lot because evolutionary theory obviously doesn't take it into account very well—because it doesn't help the species go on! It's very mysterious, and it hasn't been discussed properly. Scientists are always afraid of things like grief and dreams. They don't do either of them very well.

YS: In your poem you call it a medium: "The medium that you grown in is grief?"

AN: Yes, like a scientific medium, like agar agar.

YS: All these tiny spaces that are described are also made elastic...

AN: Yes, they can be very large. They get very large. As you go down into yourself everything opens up. Whereas when you go up, you seem to come to a hierarchical point and then you have to fall. I have all of these dreams where there are these beautiful mountains but if I get to the top of the mountain, it's dangerous. Whereas

going down...

YS: You must be an earth sign!

AN: What, no! I'm a Scorpio.

YS: Well then, I guess that doesn't answer anything.

AN: Well, it answers a lot if you do astrology, but I'm actually very doubtful about it.

Scorpio's the sign of death and regeneration

YS: Oh really?

AN: Yes, it's sort of horrifying as a sun sign. It works quite well for what's perceived as my sort of psychology. It's all about sex and death.

YS: Is that why you've mentioned loving the High Priestess card from the Tarot deck?

AN: Well the high priestess is the wisdom card. It always goes back to this time... do you know who Harry Smith was?

YS: I don't think so

AN: Harry Smith was this funny guy who—this anecdote won't mean anything to you—but he was an avant-garde filmmaker, who also put out this incredible anthology of songs. He collected all these records from the twenties, of folk songs, and in the

fifties the Harry Smith anthology came out, and it influenced all the folk singers, including Dylan. I never really knew him, but he was a close friend of Allen's.²⁶⁹ If you go into the Harry Smith lore, Allen wrote this incredibly great introduction to this book of interviews with Harry, where he talks about how Harry would bring him over, make him smoke a lot of dope, watch his movies and then Harry would hit him up for money—and he would always give it to him! Harry was living with him at the end of his life, he went to live in Allen's apartment, and became incontinent. So he started doing these shit paintings and driving everyone in the apartment crazy. Allen was seeing this younger woman psychiatrist who was really good with him, and Allen went to her and said, "What do I do about Harry?" and she said, "Send him to Boulder." And so they sent him to Naropa and he lived his few remaining years at Naropa.²⁷⁰ And so if you go to Naropa, there's this door and it still says: "Harry Smith, Resident Shaman" or "Shaman in Residence," one or the other. But the only time I ever had any contact with Harry, I was in the old St. Marks Bookstore, the second one... it used to be on St. Marks Place—and you used to have to walk down these stairs to go to the lower part of it. And I was in there, and I was wearing this very peculiar outer garment, which was a kind of sweater coat. Jim Carroll had given it to me. He had bought it in the airport at Reykjavik; it was all blue-striped and had this peaked hood. It was beautiful. And Jim gave it to me because I saw it on him and I just told him it was so beautiful, and so he gave it to me. And so I walked out the door and there was this little wizard Harry carrying his cane, and he dropped his cane at the bottom of the stairs. And I stooped down and picked it up and handed it to him and he looked up at me and said, "The

²⁶⁹ Allen Ginsberg.

²⁷⁰ Naropa University is in Boulder, Colorado, and specializes in "Buddhist Inspired Contemplative Education" (See website: <<http://www.naropa.edu/>>).

High Priestess!” And then we parted company... That was the only time I ever spoke to him, I didn’t even say anything! But he knew a lot about the Tarot.

YS: That’s fantastic—do you still have the coat?

AN: No, I wore it out. The pockets ripped finally and I had to throw it away.

YS: Well I can only wish that I would one day look like a Tarot card. ... I guess I’d like to return to that earlier question about writing from Paris to New York—what about Paris, in that way?

AN: I’ve always tried to write about Paris. *Disobedience* is about Paris. And *Alma* isn’t about anywhere, really exactly, except it becomes about the desert, though I couldn’t have written it from anywhere else but here; I can’t explain why.

YS: I was reading this essay you wrote in *Coming After* on Frank O’Hara, and you write that his poetry came alive when you came here?

AN: Yes, it had gotten dead and it became alive again. After Ted and then Kate died—I think it was after Kate died, everything died. Everything seemed dead. And when I came here, it became alive again.²⁷¹

YS: Did New York sort of become saturated with that grief?

²⁷¹ Kate Berrigan was Ted Berrigan’s daughter from his first marriage (with Sandy Berrigan), and Notley’s step-daughter. She died in a traffic accident in the 1982.

AN: Yes. It's like you're alive in certain eras, and then the era's over. But some people just keep living in them. I couldn't do it. It's kind of one definition of "art going stale"—staying in the era you were happy in at some point. Your art dies if you do that. People stop reading younger poets; they just get frozen into their set.

YS: Any young poets that you're reading these days?

AN: I read my sons and their friends, all the time.

YS: I saw your son read at St. Marks—do you find it the same as it used to be?

AN: At St. Marks? No, because there are all these younger people. Anselm essentially became the director because he could bring them in and also keep the older people. He was this bridge figure and he made it possible for that to happen. He did a very good job. And now Stacy's there, and she's really good.

YS: Do you ever write in response to older poetry?

AN: All the time.

YS: I guess, more specifically, were you ever an avid reader of T.S. Eliot's?

AN: Only when I was made to. I like *The Waste Land*.

YS: Well you and he both write of vacant lots. When you write of vacant lots in

“Flowers” are you making any connection?

AN: A vacant lot is where you play. There were always these significant vacant lots when I was young. There was one next to the house in Needles, and there was a really important one next to my cousin’s house in Prescott that I’ve been thinking a lot about recently. Prescott was in the pines in Arizona, and it just had this entirely different vegetation from the desert. So this vacant lot had all these grasses and vines and things. But there was another vacant lot which figures in a poem Adrienne Rich liked—“One of the Longest Times.”

YS: How do you feel about her essays on womanhood?

AN: Well, I have opinions about her poems, but they’re just opinionated. I don’t like the way she uses the pronoun “We.” I think she emotionally blackmails you with it. And I never feel like I’m part of her “We”.

YS: She has this line about getting too far away from the earth, and I thought it linked up to this essay you wrote on Women and Poetry.

AN: Oh no--the two pager!

YS: Yes, and I thought it pointed to the same thing: women not being properly addressed.

AN: No, we’ve been written out of everything. We have no power, and we never ask for it. All we ask for are abortion rights. It’s so disgusting.

YS: You write about trying to imagine a beginning...

AN: I was very influenced by Mircea Eliade at that point. After Kate died I read all of Eliade. I didn't know he was a Nazi. Everyone always turns out to have been a Nazi—he was a Romanian Nazi for a brief period of his life and probably spent the rest of his life trying to get over it. And one of the things he writes of in his books—I'm not sure if it's true or not—but for indigenous peoples, the only response to tragedy is to try to create the world again. And I don't know if it's true, but it's become something I live by. Whatever happens, I try to create everything again. And I do that over and over and write poetry that is like a creation rite.

YS: Do you consider the poem a construction?

AN: Sometimes, but not always. A lot of the time for me it's vocalizing. It's pure voice. But I'm also very much a craftsman.

YS: So a poem could be a "talismanic object"?

AN: Oh sure. Like the "Ship of Death" is for me, or was. It probably still is. I presented it to a class and I burst into tears. There are poems that always do that to me. You know, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed"—that always does that to me.

YS: Do you think of going back to America?

AN: Yes, but I don't see it as a possibility. I have an apartment and healthcare here. I

can't—I'd have to take a "position" and I'm getting kind of old now; sort of too old to start a job.

YS: How about Iowa?

AN: I went to Iowa as a prose writer. I was accepted into the fiction workshop—I was the only woman that year accepted into the fiction workshop. And my friend Mary was the only woman that year accepted into the poetry workshop. There weren't many women there at that point; now they take a lot of women. But I went there to try to figure out how to be a writer, and I didn't understand that it was a teaching thing. Because at the time there weren't a lot of programs, so how were you supposed to get a job? I think there were only Iowa and San Francisco State, and a couple of others were just starting up: Columbia, and one maybe at Wisconsin—and those were the only ones in the entire country. And they immediately wanted me to teach a class, and that's what you go do—you teach composition. And everyone started teaching and I refused. I became the ditto girl. I dittographed (because you had to do something) all the handouts for all the workshops, instead of teaching a class. And I never taught a class there. Gradually I figured out that I wanted to be a poet. I started writing poems, kind of, right away... I heard Bob Creeley read, and I wrote my second poem, and I started writing poems.

YS: Is that second poem published?

AN: Oh no, I don't have any of them. They were all terrible. I was trying to figure out who to read, and I read Plath, and James Wright. Then Anselm Hollo came that spring, and I left and went to Morocco and I thought I was never going to come back.

YS: So that Marrakesh house you mention in “Go in and Out the Window” is a real house?

AN: Yes that was a real house.. I went to Morocco and we were just smoking dope all the time and it was so boring! And one day I went to the café we went to every day in Marrakesh in the plaza, and there was this guy there and he was reading William Stafford. And he was a geek—you know this guy was a geek and I started talking to him about William Stafford, and I just thought, “I’ve got to go back.” I sent my parents a telegram asking them for some money to come home. And then I went home and then Mary called me, (I never had a clue about what was going on academically after I left Barnard) she suggested I could go back to Iowa. They were starting up in about two weeks, and I called them up and they said, “Sure you can come back.” And I went back, and then Ted was there. When I met him he had just broken up with his wife, it was all very rocky because he’d just broken up with Sandy and I was very young.

YS: So—it’s all true. Everything in the poems is true?

AN: Yes, everything’s true. Sometimes it’s a vision or a dream, but the account of my life is all true. I did have a life.

YS: Do you have a book coming out soon? *Negativity’s Kiss*?

AN: Quite a bit of it has been put out online, but it’s just a manuscript.

YS: Well I guess my last question is about womanhood. I wonder if you think the way

some writers do about mothering a poem.

AN: No, I've never thought about mothering in connection with anything except for my kids. I have no interest in the notion of "nurture" or anything like that. As a matter of fact I detest it, I think it keeps me down.

YS: You mention the idea of utility in the poem you wrote when you first came here to Paris. In your poem that references Oxford, Cambridge and Penguin poets...

AN: All the space is used here because it's so old. It's dense. Everything gets used up right away—it's just much denser than even New York is. And it's difficult to live inside that density.

YS: It is. But you enjoy it?

AN: It's a mixed experience. It's not a totally positive experience; I don't know if it should be, I don't know if anything should be.

YS: Do you ever think of moving out of city life?

AN: Oh, I think of it sometimes in the evening. But I can't see myself as a nature poet. I kind of see myself as a narrative poet or an epic poet. I suppose one could do that anywhere. I'm not sure I write out of place. I write out of something else. And I've stayed faithful—or I've come back around to—where I started out, which was as a fiction writer. I've incorporated it. I finally learned how to tell a story.

YS: But not necessarily in fictional stories?

AN: *Alette's* fictional, and *Negativity's Kiss* is totally fictional... and there's one that I haven't published yet called *Culture of One* about this woman who lived outside of Needles where I grew up. She lived in a dump. I've always been very fond of Stevens' poem "The Man on the Dump." And I knew a woman who actually lived in a dump, and it's very different from Stevens' conception of living in a dump. She's always popping up in my writing. Her name was Marie, and my mother called her that for a long time, but then they started calling her Gravel Gertie because of the Dick Tracy comic strip. She's in "Kiss of Fire." Where it says "Eerie / eerie you might stay and / become Gravel Gertie, bag lady in a gully / out by the dump." And then it occurred to me that I probably had become that woman. So I started writing about her several years ago, and so I have a book where she's the main character—that's *Culture of One*. She's the main culture.

YS: If you don't write out of place, what it is out of? Experience or occasion?

AN: Some combination of all of it. You can't—I can't pin it down. Everybody tries to pin everything down right now. It seems to be more important to pin things down than to write the poems. I can't do that. I can't get anything pinned down. I only have about two ideas, but then I have a lot of ideas, like too many, and I'm always between those two places.

Interview with Ron Padgett

Conducted on 11 April, 2011, at 4 pm, in Di Robertis pastry shop at 1st Avenue and 11th Street, NYC.

Yasmine Shamma: Diving into *An Anthology of New York Poets*,²⁷² I was rereading the introduction, and noting that it was written in 1970—

Ron Padgett: I was a child when I wrote that, along with David Shapiro, who was even more of a child.

YS: But you did say something that people have been saying ever since then: That the term, “The New York School” isn’t helpful, and that it doesn’t do as a generalization or an abstraction. I was wondering if you still feel that way?

RP: Yes, but I’m tired of telling people that. They keep using the term, and by now there have been a lot of disclaimers. When John Ashbery gets asked, he says pretty much the same thing. Other people do too. I don’t have much use for the term. I’m not a critic or an essayist, so I don’t need to use it.

YS: Do you think that there are definitive characteristics of the people who wrote in this area in the 1970s and 80s?

²⁷² *Anthology of New York Poets*. eds. Ron Padgett and David Shapiro (New York: Random House, 1970). This anthology made announced the arrival of many Second Generation poets onto the New York School scene.

RP: You'll have to tell me which poets. Otherwise I won't know what I'm generalizing about.

YS: Ok, so Berrigan, Denby²⁷³...

RP: You couldn't find two people more...

YS: I know. Ok, Schuyler etc. Basically I'm thinking of the post-O'Hara and Koch wave.²⁷⁴

RP: Except Edwin [Denby] was a pre-O'Hara wave, really. Are you trying to point to people who came after Frank?

YS: I guess I'm trying to point to the group of people published in *C Magazine*.

RP: Even there you'll find quite a variety of people, from F. T. Prince to Harry Fainlight. Ted's editorial policy was stated on the copyright page, something like: "C

²⁷³ The reference here is to Edwin Denby, dance critic and poet. Denby lived in New York City for the latter half of his life, and died in 1983. He has often been affiliated with The New York Schools. For example, Ford and Winkfield's *New York Poets II: An Anthology* (Glasgow: Carcanet, 2006) begins with Denby's poetry.

²⁷⁴ References are to James Schuyler, Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch.

will print anything the editor likes,” which is a pretty good editorial statement. And Ted liked a lot of different things.²⁷⁵

YS: I guess I’m talking about people who were illustrated by Joe Brainard?

RP: When you look at this anthology, you find people as diverse as Clark Coolidge and Edwin Denby, Tom Veitch, Ed Sanders. That’s why we didn’t call it a school—just *An Anthology of New York Poets*: people whose work we liked, sort of like Ted’s policy.²⁷⁶

YS: To like it?

RP: Yes. Also, we knew or had met everyone in the book, except Clark Coolidge. But most of the poets in that book—but let’s just talk about John, Jimmy, Frank, and Kenneth. All four of them were (and John is still alive, of course) very smart people, very well read, sophisticated in their thinking, witty, and they had pretty high standards. They were interested in different kinds of art—dance, visual art, music—and three of the four were gay. They were all white males, and three of those four were Harvard graduates.

²⁷⁵ F.T. Prince (1912-2003) was a British poet and academic who lived in the USA in the 1970s. Harry Fainlight (1935-1982) was also a poet living between the USA and the UK, associated with the Beatnik movement.

²⁷⁶ Clark Coolidge (born in 1939) is associated with The New York Schools and Language poets. Ed Sanders (also born in 1939) is a poet associated with the Beatniks, who was also a musician (in a band called “The Fugs”).

YS: Very different, I guess, from the subsequent sort of group—I mean I know you went to Columbia.

RP: Yes, how awful!

YS: Well you mention being taught by Kenneth [in the introduction to Kenneth Koch's *Selected*], and that he taught you how to be witty?

RP: He didn't teach me how to be witty, he gave me permission to be witty.

YS: I guess that feeling of permission gets passed on through the generations as a marker?

RP: As many things do.

YS: Well I guess it seems that most of the subsequent poets were somewhat more self-taught?

RP: I don't know about that. Ted Berrigan had a Masters degree in English, Tom Veitch did a year or so at Columbia, Tom Clark had an MA in Poetry from Michigan, won the Hopwood award, and also did graduate work in Cambridge and the University of Essex in England, David Shapiro got a PhD... I could go on and on. There aren't many self-educated people in the anthology. Whether you're educated by yourself or by somebody else, or a combination—I don't really make a distinction. But going to Harvard confers a kind of distinction on you. It was the first and is the oldest university in the United States, it has a great reputation, the largest endowment. So being a

“Harvard man” has a kind of ring to it, like being a “Princeton man.” Whereas if you graduated from Podunk University, you go out to professional life with one strike against you. Of course, all the people in the anthology were in poetry, so higher education credentials didn’t make all that much difference. To me, none.²⁷⁷

YS: Right. Well I guess the reason that I’m trying to make a distinction about education is because immediately, in your face, reading this kind of poetry, it’s clear how daily, or everyday, or conversational the poetry is.

RP: The so-called second generation New York School had more of the conversational element in it. Back in those days, John’s poetry didn’t have a lot of it. Frank’s did though, and there was a kind of conversational poetry that came from Williams through Frank, and people like Ted and me and others picked up on that. Another distinction between the earlier guys and us was that they were of a generation that liked alcohol. My generation wasn’t that much into drinking. We were more into smoking pot or whatever people did.

YS: Why do you think that was?

RP: For me smoking pot was a lot more fun than drinking. Heavy drinking made me feel awful. I’ve been drunk twice in my life, and I hated it both times.

²⁷⁷ Tom Veitch (1951) is a poet and is well-known for his contributions to comic books. Tom Clark is the author of *Late Returns, a Memoir of Ted Berrigan* (Bolinias, CA: Tombouctou Books, 1985) and a poet, born in 1941 and writing today from California.

YS: That might be a record for poets!

RP: I had a lot of fun smoking pot. Pot had become much more available. When I was growing up in Oklahoma it was virtually impossible to find it there.

YS: And then you come to New York City in the sixties...

RP: It was easier in New York. Especially after I came back from living in France, after 1966, everybody was smoking dope like crazy.

YS: So was *Great Balls of Fire*²⁷⁸ written in France?

RP: The earliest poem in that book was written in 1963 in New York when I was a junior at Columbia. The book came out in 1969. I guess the latest poem in the book was written around 1967. So some of them were written in France, yes.

YS: And did you see a change in your work after going to Paris?

RP: I guess it did change, but I've never thought about it much. In Paris I was reading a lot of poetry in French, and I was speaking French, and immersed in French, so I had the resonance of that language in my head. It kind of got confused with English. In fact, by the end of my stay in France I was so used to speaking French that sometimes I would try to say something in English and all of a sudden I couldn't quite remember how to do that. It was a very strange experience.

²⁷⁸ *Great Balls of Fire* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969).

YS: Yes I can imagine how that happens.

RP: Anyway, I'm not good at analyzing my own work.

YS: Have you read any analysis of your work?

RP: Yes.

YS: Have you found it true?

RP: Every once in awhile somebody writes something that strikes me as smart and true and perceptive.

YS: Are there any critics of the New York School that you think are particularly on-to-it?

RP: There are a number of people who have written things about the so-called New York School that have been intelligent and apt, but I don't think anyone's ever told me anything that I didn't already know.

YS: It's all been pretty obvious?

RP: To me, yes. But some poets are much harder to write about than others. Some are elusive—hard to get in prose descriptions exactly of what's going on. Others are easy. My work is hard to write about.

YS: Yes, it is.

RP: And that's neither here nor there. But a couple of people have, in recent years, written some things that have struck me as pretty sharp. For a long time, all anybody could say about my work was "Oh, he writes a lot of different kinds of poems, and he's funny." The first thing is true, and the second is only occasionally true.

YS: Yeah, I was actually going to say that I don't think that second thing is true.

RP: I remember some critic's taking me to task by saying, "Padgett's very funny and jokey, but why doesn't he write about something serious, like death?" It was such a wrong-headed way of seeing things, and also inaccurate, so I sent the guy a list of the poems I had written about death and published in my books, but I never heard from him.

YS: I can't believe you didn't hear from him!

RP: Well, anybody who's stupid enough to say the first thing is stupid enough not to answer. I wasn't arguing with him, I was giving him empirical evidence: here are the books you claim I'm being funny in, look at all the poems that are about death.

YS: This is me going on a limb, but I find that you and some of your peers write with such—maybe this is me being naive—but you write with such honesty that it becomes really difficult to talk about anything, because it's just there. It's this sort of half-showing, that you don't expect. I mean I don't see how you could come to this kind of

page and be closed as a reader. And so, turning to criticism and academic stuff, it becomes really difficult to say anything seemingly worth saying.

RP: I see what you're saying, I think. Two things come to mind: one is that, in the work of a number of poets of my age and before, openness was a characteristic that I admired, and I still do. It doesn't mean you're going to write a good poem just because you're open. You could be spilling your guts or confessing to something horrible that I might rather not know about. But on the other hand, without openness toward oneself, I think it can be difficult for poets to figure out what to do next in a poem, and to figure out who they are even. The other thing I wanted to say was that, in fact, I have a poem called "The Coat Hanger," in which I talk about this very subject. It's in a new book of mine.

YS: Is this the one that's being published right now, in April 2012?

RP: Yes, and I think I might read that poem tomorrow night at The Poetry Project. Anyway, if you check the poem you'll see some of the things I say there, and the people I quote. What's the other thing I wanted to say?

YS: About openness?

RP: Oh dear, at a certain age, the brain cells crust over. The other thing I was going to say was more interesting than that, to me anyway. What did you say before that?

YS: Well, I was going to say, in terms of Frank O'Hara mainly, as a poet who says he wants his poems to be "open" and his face to be "shaven."

stylistic or structural or kinetic point of view: How does a poem work? And why does it work, if it does? What's the machinery involved here? (I use the word *machinery* metaphorically). To me that's the nuts and bolts point of view. There are two kinds of criticism I like. One is Nuts and Bolts, the other is gossip. I think they're both illuminating. One from an empirical, workman-like view, and the other one from a superficial point of view, which which can be illuminating. Like Joe LeSueuer's book on O'Hara. Do you know it?

YS: Yes, it's beautiful.

RP: There's a lot of gossip in there, and it's actually quite illuminating.

YS: Well even your book on Ted Berrigan is just so fun and beautiful to read, especially sitting in the middle of an academic library, you get to that kind of book and think, "This is wonderful, this is exactly what I want to read."

RP: It's like looking at a family snapshot album.

YS: Right. I saw some actual albums in Emory's collection of Berrigan and Brainard's correspondence which make you feel like you're learning more from touching artifacts than from reading criticism.

RP: To me those are wonderful. There's a terrific archive of Joe Brainard's in San Diego. And my archive is up at the Beinecke at Yale, fifty years of papers.

YS: Well, in all of the “So-Called’s” archives, there’s a lot of papers. It’s overwhelming, on top of the sort of honesty and “my heart your heart” [a line from Berrigan] mode of the poetry is the sheer number of pages of poetry written. With Koch’s collected at what is it, 754 pages?

RP: That’s his collected *shorter* poems. There are the longer ones as well. Kenneth was prolific. He loved to write and he liked to write long works and he worked almost every day. He loved the act of writing. And then there were all his plays and his fiction. He didn’t publish everything, either. If you look at his archive in the Berg collection in the New York Public Library, you’ll see some of the material he never published.

YS: In looking in Berrigan’s collection you can see this deliberation over form and the nuts and bolts of it all that isn’t immediately present on the printed page, which to me seem to validate a study of form.

RP: Yes. Kenneth himself wrote some formal poems. In his poem called “The Railway Stationery,” each stanza is actually a sonnet. But you don’t notice it at first. Kenneth also wrote sestinas and catalogue poems, and experimented with some other forms. Frank did a lot of that too. Ashbery too. Jimmy less, I think. But what’s really interesting is finding the form that’s particular to each free verse work. When I say “nuts and bolts” I don’t mean ABABCC, I’m talking about how a really shapely, well-made poem in free verse—how does it work? That’s truly interesting. The strict forms, the fixed forms, are interesting for a different reason, to me. How do you put yourself

in a straight-jacket and still dance as gracefully as if you're not in a strait-jacket?

That's a tough challenge, and it's fun.²⁸¹

YS: I don't know if he's in a straight-jacket, but it kind of happens in O'Hara's "Aus Einem April," with how that first stanza begins.

RP: Yes, it's the one that begins "We dust the walls."

YS: Yeah, and then you end up in what looks like a quatrain, but when you get close to that second formal-looking stanza it's talking about moving outside and being "turbulent and green."

RP: In that poem, he wasn't exactly using a form, though in some sense he was, insofar as it's actually based on a poem by Rilke. The first line of Rilke's is something like, "Wieder duftet der wald," which means something like "We walk through the woods,"* or something like that—I just made up some fake German there. Frank just did a homophonic translation: "We dust the walls." I haven't studied it in years, but as I recall he sort of followed Rilke's arrangement. It's something like following a sonnet or a villanelle arrangement.²⁸²

²⁸¹ References to "Jimmy" are to James Schuyler.

²⁸² The reference here is to Rainer Marie Rilke's poem. O'Hara's homophonic translation of the poem is discussed in Chapter 1. Rilke's poem's first line means "Again the forest is green," and O'Hara's starts with "We dust the walls."

YS: Are you also familiar with “Nocturne”?

RP: Frank’s? Yes.

YS: Well I love how he constructs this really narrow poem, and talks about how the buildings are too narrow: in the summer “too hot,” and in the winter “too cold.” These are the sorts of poems that I’m interested in—the kind that recreate buildings. Complaining “it’s the architect’s fault” and architecting, in turn, an exact replica. And it’s in all of Berrigan’s references to rooms in his *The Sonnets*.

RP: “Is there room in the room that you room in?”

YS: Yeah, and “Bring me red demented rooms.”

RP: That’s a line of mine that he stole.

YS: Was it? No! I love that line, I’ve been trying to figure it out for awhile.

RP: Well then I have just given you a little secret.

YS: Where did it come from?

RP: A poem I wrote in 1961. I never published it.

YS: Why not?

RP: It wasn't good.

YS: So can I ask what the "dementedness" of the room was?

RP: I have no idea.

YS: Well, I love how the line sounds like what it's asking for.

RP: I'm trying to remember the rest of that poem. I wrote in the fall of 1961. I was here in New York, I was a student either finishing my first year at Columbia or starting my second. Starting my second year, Ted and I shared an apartment. Maybe it was then that I wrote that. It was right around then. Ted, as you know, appropriated a lot of lines, from Dick Gallup and others.²⁸³

YS: Did you?

RP: Less than Ted, but I did some, collaged poems and centos.

YS: Did you see yourself or your poems registering the city?

RP: Yes, the poems did, because I was here and aware of the fact that I was here. But with some exceptions, I didn't set out to write poems about New York, or poems that reflected New York. I wasn't Whitman writing "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" or

²⁸³ Padgett started the *White Dove Review* with Gallup and Brainard, when they were all in high school in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Mayakovsky “Brooklyn Bridge” or Hart Crane “The Bridge” or Edwin Denby poems about the streets of New York—alas. But the fact that I was here had a big influence, of course. It was more of a general, osmotic seeping of New York into my work—things just got into there because I was here, things such as actual places and people. But also energy, for the energy of New York was huge. And I had come from Tulsa, which actually wasn’t as bad as I say it was, but the energy level was lower there. And of course it was calmer, too, and slower, and in some ways quite pleasant. But it didn’t have the street energy of New York. It had car energy. You could go out and drive a car around fast, you could get in a car and drive straight to Texas, and then turn right around and come back.

YS: And enjoy the mobility of being in American?

RP: You could drive around the whole night—drive around and stop in diners with your friends, have coffee, and talk like crazy. Sort of *On the Road* behavior.²⁸⁴

YS: Do you think that when you’re in a place that has an explicit energy, like New York, that you don’t have to create as much energy from yourself? That you can just kind of bounce off of it? Like being in Tulsa, perhaps, might force someone with the propensity to be energized...

RP: There was a certain amount of general inertia in Tulsa—artistic too. And one had to sort of push against the inertia. Fortunately I was young there. I left when I had just turned 18. So I was a young, testosterone-driven male, bursting with energy. And then

²⁸⁴ Padgett is referring to Jack Kerouac’s novel, *On the Road*.

when I came to New York, it was like jumping into a swiftly flowing river. You have to generate more energy just to stay afloat, and if you do you're really zooming along. Does that make sense to you?

YS: Yes, it makes complete sense to me. I lived here in New York before I moved to Oxford, to a complete opposite energy level.

RP: Yes, I once visited Oxford. It was quiet. But as you know, it's not just the place you're living in—it's the place that's living in you. And if you're involved in studies, or any type of pursuit that's intellectual or interior, you can be anywhere, because a lot of your life goes on inside your head, or your spirit. So I wouldn't knock it so much.

YS: Yes, it makes you calm down.

RP: It's great to be calm. Especially here in New York, where everything's telling you not to be. But to get back to your comment about rooms: Jimmy Schuyler is wonderful for the purposes of your work. His poetry's very sedentary. He's almost always sitting in a room—giving you the impression he's sitting in a room, if not giving you the actual information—often looking out a window. He spatially locates himself. Sometimes he's outdoors, like in Maine, but a lot of his great work is located by his sitting in a room and looking around. And of course Frank's work is also quite good that way, although Frank often doesn't give the impression of being in a room. His conversational poetry happens more on the street. But poems like "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday" tell you explicitly that he's in a room, listening to the radio.

YS: And there does seem to be a frustration whenever he mentions being inside, like in the lines, “Am I a door,” and “The crack in the ceiling spreads” in “Anxiety.” You get the sense that he never wants to be pin-down-able within domestic spaces.

RP: Well, he lived in New York in some really dumpy apartments, until his last place.

YS: And when he lived in that last apartment, he didn’t write much poetry, did he?

RP: No, he didn’t.

YS: Why do you think that is?

RP: That’s a question that a lot of people have asked.

YS: Well it’s interesting that the crummier apartments gave space for creating poetry.

RP: I’m not sure he wanted to spend a lot of time in those places. He liked being out. He liked going to artist’s studios and to bars and to parties, and to openings and art galleries, and friend’s places, and the Hamptons.

YS: He seemed to enjoy the mobility that the city offers.

RP: He didn’t want to be cooped up. But his last place, a loft, was nice. It wasn’t fancy, but it was very spacious, and I thought it was a terrific place. There was a big view out the window of the Grace Church across the street, which he never wrote about. His building’s been torn down, by the way. It’s been replaced by some modern thing. His

apartment on 49th Street was also replaced. Apparently that was a really awful place, though you could look out the side of the back and see the UN building.

YS: Yes, I read about that one. It was the one with the cockroaches and the beer bottles everywhere.

RP: Frank was not a great housekeeper. Jimmy was even worse. But you know, in John Ashbery's poetry, you're never really sure where you are, except in the poem "The Instruction Manual." It's the only one I can think of where you know where you are.

YS: I'm actually not writing about him for that very reason. Even though I know that he is of the same generation, I feel like his poetry is inherently very different.

RP: It is. And Kenneth's too. It's largely free of specific occasions. Much of it is very artful, often located in the imagination. Frank wrote some very occasional poetry, and by "occasional" I mean not just about birthdays and funerals.

YS: Time-based?

RP: Yes, time-based with specific people and specific places. Now whether or not it's an accurate reflection of those occasions—in terms of details—that's neither here nor there really. But it has that feeling—Jimmy's too—of sitting in a room. You feel he really did that. But with Kenneth's poems, you have no idea where he wrote them.

YS: Except for maybe "One Train May Hide Another."

RP: Yes, and that’s an account of a real trip. But even there, it’s written on reflection, later, not on the spot.

YS: Right, like “The Art of Love”—would be a complete trip. You have no idea where that is written from.²⁸⁵

RP: Right, that’s like when Ovid wrote his: where was he?²⁸⁶

YS: But Kenneth did move a lot, right?

RP: He got around. He spent a lot of time in France and Italy, and he traveled to China twice, and to Africa, and Greece, and all over Western Europe especially. Mexico, and Guatamala, Antarcitca—he got around. He lived in New York City but also had a house in the Hamptons. He liked the excitement of travel, and fresh, new beautiful vistas, and interesting cuisines, and art and opera, and exotic beautiful girls. He was an appreciator of life. He didn’t like the idea of sitting in the same room all of the time. Edwin, though, really can give you a sense of being in a room, especially in his poem “Elegy: The Streets”—you can see him in that room, hearing the sounds of 21st Street outside.

YS: And a few of your poems mention street intersections and rooms.

²⁸⁵ Both “One Train” and “The Art of Love” are available in Koch’s *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2006) 441; 276.

²⁸⁶ Padgett is referring to Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*, a guide to love, in verse form, in 2 CE.

RP: There's a poem of mine called "Poema del City"—there's actually two of them: "Poema Del City I" and "Poema Del City II." Two is a very straightforward account of being in my apartment, in the front room, at night, with a bathrobe or housecoat on. I've written a number like that.

YS: I think of "Poem for Joan Inglis."

RP: That one is a complete fantasy.

YS: Is it?

RP: A total fantasy. Totally fabricated.

YS: I don't know what to do when I hear things like that. So it's a fabricated landscape of a room—it's a fabricated space?

RP: Yes. My prose poem called "My Room"—do you know that one?

YS: Yes I do.

RP: That one's very much about being in a real room. And actually the new book that I just brought out has a poem that talks about sitting in a room in the house that my wife and I have in Vermont. And my grandson, who was just a very little baby at the time, is asleep in the next room. The poem is about the experience of sitting in the room and thinking of my grandson on the other side of the wall.

YS: I have to ask the really simple question about the word “stanza” meaning room, and the material metaphors you all use—like your sense of “the machine,” and Ted Berrigan’s sense of words being “bricks” and even says at one point that he thought of his stanzas “being rooms.” You get the sense of a construction being built.

RP: Right, building a house.

YS: Yes. Does the shape of a room come into play in shaping the actual stanzas written out of rooms?

RP: Not consciously, no. I mean it’s okay to work that way, but I don’t seem to be interested in doing that. I’m sure I’m influenced by the room I’m in, just like you’re influenced by what you had for breakfast. Like in Vermont, the room that I’ve written a lot of rooms in is what I call my study. It’s a fairly small room with a pitched roof, and it’s kind of cozy, and it’s just my room. The only one I’ve ever had like that, in my adult life. That cozy space is conducive to a certain kind of privacy that fosters rumination, or a kind of dreamy poetic state. You’re safe, it’s quiet, you’re alone, and it’s very pleasant to be in that room. So it helps me.

Kenneth wrote in his living room. As a professor at Columbia, he had a very nice large apartment, with a big open area with French doors. He had a table there, facing a wall, but not facing a window. That’s another thing you might want to think about: Jimmy looks out the window when he writes, and he’s able to do it. But a lot of other writers, I’ve heard, think it’s murder to have a window right in front of you.

YS: Well I’ve seen pictures of Frank O’Hara and Ted Berrigan’s desks, and Berrigan’s was sideways against a wall.

RP: The brick wall?

YS: Yes, and O'Hara's was facing a wall.

RP: Ted, just after he wrote the sonnets and had just started *C Magazine*, had a desk that faced a wall, and on his right was an exposed brick wall. And I've often set up my desk so I don't look out the window. But in Vermont, I can look to my left and out a window. Otherwise, straight ahead of me is just wooden pine boards. But I still spend a lot of time looking out that window.

YS: I wonder if your poems are accordingly different—your Vermont poems.

RP: I don't know. But here in New York I've had my desk facing a wall since I moved into the apartment, in 1967. Apollinaire, too—I've noticed his study was cramped. Apollinaire was not very tall, but was a big bulky guy, cramped into his garret's narrow space, facing a wall. There's no window.

YS: Well it's interesting, formally, to consider how the wall informs poems. Looking at, or being aware of the dimensions of the room can inform the dimensions of a poem. But also, the turning away from the other space in the room, but writing a very personal poem, talking to a "you" but looking at a wall. It's a strange kind of energy. I'm not really sure what to do with it.

RP: An interesting question is: What happens to the eyes of the writer as he or she is writing? Do they look at the wall? In Hollywood movies, they do. I'm not sure I do.

Unusually I'm looking down at the page, and there's a "room" there on that page, or at least a floor-plan ... Or if it's a computer screen it's a window, and I'm looking through that window. That'd be another interesting approach: to see the computer screen as a window.

YS: Yes I was looking at your essay on the computer writing (and what kind of art it might produce).²⁸⁷

RP: That's a really old piece.

YS: Yes, and it has a footnote about how funny it is that this [innovative computer-based writing] didn't actually end up happening.

RP: That was a concept that my son and I came up with when he was a kid. I thought there was going to be a brand new kind of writing. It never happened. It's interesting though that it *didn't* happen.

YS: I was thinking about it in terms of graphic design, and wondering if that has become a new kind of writing—manipulations less with words, and more with what the screen in general allows.

RP: I predicted a writing that would be a synthesis of visual art and music and everything. That's an avant-garde idea from way back, but its realization seemed

²⁸⁷ The essay is called "Camel Serenade" and is available in *The Straight Line: Writing on Poetry and Poets* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2000) 109.

imminent. And then it just didn't happen, because computer companies made it impossible for the average person to program. The Mac and the pc were the death of that possibility. If you go back to earlier programs, written in BASIC—even the Atari 800, built mainly for games—you could actually program an Atari, and it was fun.

YS: Yes it's all become very consumer, end-product based.

RP: The technocrats took it over and did some sexy, attractive things, but made it so that nobody could program the more advanced computers except advanced programmers.

YS: I saw an interesting advertisement for the iPad, pitching that it was smaller, thinner and lighter to get out of the way so that you can have more life.

RP: It's to get you further hooked on it. Try to withdraw from it and see what happens to your life. My hard drive crashed a couple of weeks ago and I was without a computer for a few days, and I found myself yearning for it. Like drug withdrawal. And I realized: Ah! They have you hooked. You have to upgrade all the time, and if you don't you suffer. It's like taking more and more heroin. They have you psychologically addicted.

But to get back to the room idea: Take the physical structure and components of the room and to see what poems, or parts of the poem relate to parts of the room. Like the poem as "window"—Apollinaire has a poem called "The Windows." The ceiling—what does the ceiling, the feeling of the ceiling, and the presence of a ceiling do to someone writing in a room? If you're writing in a room with a high ceiling or a low one, or a tin ceiling—like this one here at Di Robertis—what does that do to you? And also the dimensions and proportions of the room—what do they do to one's

feelings and thinking? Also the walls. What are they made of? What do they look like? And the floors! Floors are more important than ceilings. Why is that? Why do I think that?

YS: Well, because of stability.

RP: Yes, but also I look at floors. I don't look at ceilings. And I don't walk on them, not very much!

YS: You don't need a ceiling as much as you need a floor?

RP: No, you don't. If you don't have a floor, you're in trouble. But then there are certain kinds of floors, and the way you feel walking across them. Walking across the beautiful marble inlaid floors in the Duomo in Siena is different from walking across the spruce-board floors of my house in Vermont. What does that do to the feeling about being where you are? Our responses can be somewhat subtle and even subliminal, but they're interesting to think about. Then there are the shutters and blinds and curtains. . . .

YS: See, these are domestic details. I've been looking at layouts and floor-plans. Like railway apartments and the lack of space they present, and how that lack of space comes into a poem. Like your "Crazy Compositions," or [Berrigan's] "Tambourine Life" that are super spread out. Or even Berrigan's *Train Ride*—these are long poems that came to be written out of smaller spaces. I'm not sure about where your spread-out poems were written.

RP: The three poems you mentioned—in “Crazy Compositions”—were written in Vermont after spending nine months in New York City. I wrote them in a couple of days. I put them together—I constructed them, I actually hand-wrote part of them—a few days after getting to Vermont, where the space felt incredibly open... I put them together up there, but it wasn’t only because I was in Vermont and could be in the great outdoors. It was because I felt an urge to write that kind of poem. Maybe it was just coincidental that I did it right after getting to Vermont. I could’ve done it here in New York. Ted wrote those kinds of poems here: “February Air,” and a poem called “Bean Spasms,” and “Tambourine Life.”

YS: Of his longer, strangely laid out poems, the one that I’ve considered is *Train Ride*. I like how, in that [book length] poem, the compartments of the train feel mapped onto the page.

RP: *Train Ride* is episodic. If you walk through the compartments of a train as it’s moving along, there are different stories going on in each car.

YS: But I noticed that Berrigan’s sons²⁸⁸ and Alice Notley write a lot about “Tambourine Life.”

RP: In their *Selected Poems* introduction?

²⁸⁸ Anselm and Edmund Berrigan edited *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan* alongside Alice Notley.

YS: Yes. In both the *Selected* that's just come out, and in the previous *Selected Poems*, "Tambourine Life" gets a lot of attention. Maybe I'm not giving it enough attention, or maybe it was written when Anselm and Edmund were kids and so they remember it well.

RP: For some reason I think of a line from *Volpone*, Ben Johnson's play. The quote is "infinite riches, in a little room": the idea that you can have so much in a little space...

YS: Yes, it sounds so much like John Donne's line: "We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms."

RP: *Train Ride* was written in response to a prose work by Joe Brainard.

YS: Wasn't it written in response to a porn magazine?

RP: No. Joe wrote a work also called "Train Ride," an account of taking the train from New York City to the Hamptons. He gave it to Ted, and Ted wrote a response—a sort of conversation with Joe. So in a sense there were two people in that compartment while Ted was writing.

YS: Yes, the "you" of that poem is very specific.

RP: It's dedicated to Joe.

YS: Yes, and the poem ends with lines that say "Thank you for being with me on this train."

RP: A very nice work of Ted's, and a nice edition. Ted got Joe to do the cover image, and it worked out well.

YS: Do you miss those kinds of productions? Those kinds of tactile publications?

RP: Actually, there weren't that many. Most of the underground book productions in the early sixties were rather rough and ready, mimeograph editions, like *The Sonnets* in 1964 and my first book *In Advance of the Broken Arm*.

YS: *Great Balls of Fire*²⁸⁹ wasn't your first book?

RP: No, it was my first Book book (1969), that is, with a big publisher. *In Advance of the Broken Arm* was published in 1965. We didn't get into better production values until later. Come to think of it, the 1967 Grove Press edition of *The Sonnets* was not a great production. Saddle-stapled, with minimal attention to design. *Train Ride* was published eleven years later, and it was a nicely designed and printed book. I like good production values, but I don't like fussy ones, where the book exists just to give a book designer a chance to show off.

YS: Well something I liked about looking at the original publication of *The Sonnets*²⁹⁰ (rather than looking at them in the recently published *Collected Poems*), was that there is one sonnet per page, smack in the middle of each page. So you really get the sense of

²⁸⁹ *Great Balls of Fire* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1969).

²⁹⁰ Originally published in 1964 in mimeograph form.

these block compositions, shaped by the page. When you see them trailing one after another, they don't come at you the same way.

RP: Yes, they don't. Ted liked the space around them. He was extremely conscious of the way poems look on the page.

YS: Are you?

RP: Yes, I think it's very important, but you can't always control it. For instance, when you compose something, and go to print it out, it's coming out on what is usually a letter-sized piece of paper. And if it's published by a print magazine, they have different fonts and different trim sizes. You can't control it much. And it's just as bad online.

YS: What about collaborations?

RP: What about them?

YS: How does the composition play out there? Like yours with George Schneeman?

RP: There it's super-important.

YS: How are those created? I'm thinking about the poem with the block illustrations and then the narrative commentary / poetry underneath the blocks and cartoons.

RP: George and I worked a lot of different ways. In terms of the materials, we had collaborative drawings and collages, and canvases, and mixed media pieces, silkscreens, ceramics...

YS: Where did you get the feeling that that was possible?

RP: I think I was inspired by the working relationships of the Dada and Surrealist painters and poets, and the fact that Picabia was both a poet and a painter. But the first collaboration I ever saw in person was Frank O'Hara and Larry Rivers' series of lithographs, called "Stones." I'd already seen some poem-paintings by Kenneth Patchen in his books. Also Joe Brainard and I had done a collaboration in high school, before I knew about the history of collaboration.

YS: He was with you in kindergarten, right?

RP: Maybe kindergarten, but I don't remember. I have a picture of him and me in first grade together.

So anyway George and I used not only different media, but also different working methods. Sometimes when we were working we were living hundreds or even thousands of miles away from each other, so we'd mail things back and forth. He was in Italy once and I was in Vermont and we collaborated on colored-pencil drawings. It's called "The Story of Ezra Pound," and it's a wonderful piece. But it's never been published, so don't go looking for it.

YS: Why hasn't it been published?

RP: I don't know. It would take a fine production, because it's in colored pencil—very subtle, and only seven pages long. But it's really terrific. Both George and I were surprised by how it came out. But often we worked directly in the same room, on the same surface at the same time. In fact, in later years, that's how we did most of our work together.

YS: Together in a room?

RP: Yes. For example, at one point we were doing charcoal and egg tempera works on large pieces of paper, five or six works at the same time, moving around the room, back and forth.

YS: Which works are these? Are they published?

RP: They've been exhibited. In fact one just came back from a museum. But they're large—they're hard to publish.

YS: So they are spatial pieces?

RP: One is almost as wide and tall as that wall over there. A pretty good size. The Center for Book Arts did a show last spring of poets and painters and the show then traveled down to the Museum of Printing History in Houston. Anyway, George and I worked directly, simultaneously, sometimes at the same time on the same piece of paper. There was a lot of variety in our work overall.

YS: There's no poetic persona there, though, right? It's not an I to a you—I was thinking about this, because a lot of collaboration throughout all of this “New York School” poetry challenges the energy of one-to-ones. When it's two artists to one audience, I don't know if it's a fractured voice that emerges, or a less understandable one, but I find that the collaborative poems are a lot more difficult to read.

RP: They can be more fractured, but they also tend to be more light-hearted, more “fun,” because we had a good time writing them.

YS: Do you think that there is an absence of persona in a lot of the poetry that went around St. Mark's Church?

RP: You mean in collaborative poems?

YS: In even the single-authored poems, is the “I” the poet?

RP: I think it's dubious to assume the “I” in a poem is the poet. Most poets know that they're performing. Johnny Carson doing *The Tonight Show* is not exactly Johnny Carson. You see what I'm saying? And certainly the collaborative pieces are showing the persona of each poet, or artist—but then in the process, a third persona gets treated, their shared persona.

YS: So it's a dangerous trap to fall into—thinking anything more of the “I.”

RP: Yes. But of course there are a lot of people who, when they write poetry, think that when they say “I” they mean themselves exclusively.

YS: Ted Berrigan says that.

RP: He says what?

YS: He says that the “‘T” is not “Prufrock” in my poems, it’s Ted Berrigan.”²⁹¹ (*Talking in Tranquility*).

RP: Obviously Prufrock is not Eliot. I would bet that there’s always some percentage of the “T” that is not the poet, but is the “T” of the poem. Making art is not the same as talking to your psychoanalyst.

YS: Like your poem “Little Dutch Diary.”

RP: That’s not a poem, it’s a diary.

YS: So that “T” is you.

RP: Pretty much.

YS: And that can happen because of the title?

²⁹¹ Berrigan explains this in *Talking in Tranquility Talking in Tranquility: Interviews with Ted Berrigan*. eds. Stephen Ratcliffe and Leslie Scalpino (Bolinas, CA: Avenue B; and Oakland, CA: O Books, 1991) 95.

RP: Yes, it's a diary of a real trip. And I was trying to just write down what happened. But even there I'm aware that I'm writing. I'm not writing a diary just to keep a diary. I'm a writer. And did I know that I was going to publish it? No. Was I aware to some degree that it might turn out to be a work that I would publish? Yes. When you're a writer and you've published a lot, you are always aware of the possibility of publication. But I try my best to forget that.

YS: Were you teaching alongside all this writing?

RP: Some of it.

RP: As soon as I graduated Columbia with a BA, I swore I would never set foot in a classroom as long as I lived. Kenneth Koch wanted me to go to graduate school and get a degree so I could teach at Columbia. And I told him I appreciated it, but I just don't want to do that. He was nice about it. He even helped me get a Fulbright a year later. But on the Fulbright I didn't even go to classes.

So I got out of college in 1964, and 64-65 I was around New York, my wife was working in an office, and I had gotten a grant of \$1500, which was enough to live on for a year. We were living in an apartment on West 88th Street, and the rent was \$90 a month. And then my wife and I went to Paris for 1965-66, and when we came back to America she was pregnant, so we went to Tulsa to have the baby. We had no money, no apartment, no job.

YS: So that's why you went to Tulsa?

RP: Yes. Kenneth got me an emergency grant of \$500 to have the baby. We got the poverty rate at the hospital clinic. Having the baby cost \$100.

YS: What do you mean “it cost \$100?”

RP: I had to pay the hospital \$100. They wouldn’t let us leave with the baby if I didn’t pay. And then we moved back here to New York with what was left of that grant. I got a number of freelance jobs: proofreading, writing jacket copy, and doing some readings. Our apartment was only \$53 a month, and generally it was very cheap to live in those days, if you didn’t mind scrimping a bit. Then I started teaching poetry writing to children because Kenneth Koch tricked me into doing it. I did that on and off for about nine years, a lot of it, here in New York and around the country. So yes, I found myself back in the classroom, especially the elementary school classroom.

YS: I read Koch’s *Rose, Where Did You Get Your Red?* And you get the sense of a joy in teaching kids that age.

RP: He and I were doing it simultaneously at certain points at the same school, and he was really a great mentor. After nine years I did begin to burn out. But I’d also taught a writing workshop at the St. Mark’s Poetry Project.

YS: And you ran it?

RP: Later I was the director of the Poetry Project for two and a half years. I also did some teacher training workshops all over the country. And then the next teaching was at Columbia—the undergraduate level. I taught a course called “Imaginative Writing,”

subbing for Kenneth. He was going on sabbatical and he wanted the course to continue, so Columbia hired me to teach that course for a number of years. And then Brooklyn College invited me to teach for a year, actually two semesters spread over two years, in their MFA poetry program. But that's been about it.

YS: Has teaching influenced your writing?

RP: I think that teaching little kids probably did. I don't think teaching at the university level influenced my writing at all. But I enjoyed it.

YS: Do you think the poverty of those earlier years influenced your writing? I was thinking about Ron Silliman's blog posts, where he talks about third and fourth generation New York Schools. And I look at the schools he outlines and think that they can't be the same school because the economics of the scene changed so much.

RP: It's not economically feasible to be a poet in New York these days, unless you have a trust fund or if you're willing to share a place in Bushwick with three other people. When I was the director of the Poetry Project, in 1979 and 80, I wrote a letter to one of our city officials to complain about the fact that this neighbourhood, that we're in now, where the Poetry Project started—a lot of poets lived here—this neighbourhood was getting gentrified. It was starting to be called "The East Village."

YS: What was it called before?

RP: The Lower East Side.

YS: So adding the “village” to it was a way of gentrifying it?

RP: Yes. The “village” was really the West Village (Greenwich Village), a neighbourhood that formally had been full of artists and writers. But the Lower East Side had old-world ghetto associations. The real estate agents cleverly changed the name, and suddenly the rents went up.

YS: Like Haagen-Daz?

RP: Exactly. I’d like to find out who their consultant was on that, because it was a smart person. But it ruined the neighbourhood for people looking for cheap rent. So I wrote a letter to the city officials, saying that a lot of the young poets who want to come to New York are now not able to, or they’re forced to live in Brooklyn, which at the time was considered like living on Mars.

YS: I’m reading Patti Smith’s *Just Kids* right now, and she mentions that sense of it being far away.

RP: Almost no one wanted to live in Brooklyn. It seemed so distant, and so dead.

YS: So it was forcing this kind of exodus?

RP: Yes, it was a kind of forced exodus. And I got a response from the city official saying that this kind of exodus is going to be wonderful because it’s going to revive and energize the outer boroughs. And I thought—that’s an interesting idea: let’s just send everybody to Siberia. The outer boroughs were not Siberia of course, I exaggerated. But

it turns out that Williamsburg *has* gotten energized. And Greenpoint and some other places. But it took thirty-five years. Hello.

YS: It has happened quite slowly.

RP: It was no fun for people who were forced to leave Manhattan, or who just gave up and went back to Wichita, or who never came at all. I feel sorry for them, because when I came here it was so much cheaper to live. Of course you had to put up with a lot... This neighbourhood was occasionally not that pleasant to be in: muggings, burglaries, drug addiction, shootings, and just general ratty-ness. That part was not so much fun.

YS: But you wonder how that seeps into the poetry, or how it colors it. How does that kind of disconnect between your generation and later generations emerge? When I read what they are calling Fourth Generation New York School poetry against Second Generation New York School poetry, there's a real difference. The newer poetry seems a lot more formed.

RP: It seems to me that a lot of younger poets are more overtly intellectual. They're coming from university situations, and they're smart. But sometimes it's not working in their favour.

YS: What kind of poetry are you reading now?

RP: I'm not on any jag right now, but I am going to take part in a group reading for Tim Dlugos. which is happening next month, so I had to decide which poem I was supposed to read. He was a very interesting poet who died some years ago. He was part

of this community. So I was reading his work this morning. Every once in awhile I'll go on a reading jag—in summer especially. A couple of summers ago—four or five ago—I reread all of Andrew Marvell, the English poems, that is.

YS: Is that while you were writing the poem, “How to Be Perfect”?

RP: No. I wrote “How to Be Perfect” in 1988.

YS: Oh really?

RP: The title poem, yes. The book with that title came out much later. But the poem was written in '88.²⁹²

YS: I love that poem. It's a lot like O'Hara's “Lines from a Fortune Cookie.”

RP: It was fun to write. So I'll go on reading jags like that, picking some poet and reading him or her intensely over a period of months. One summer it was George Herbert. Also I get books in the mail, especially from younger poets. So I try to at least glance at them to see what's up. And there are friends of mine who won't stop writing, so I have to read all of their new books, which fortunately are usually pretty good.

YS: Do you see your poetry changing?

²⁹² *How to be Perfect* (Minneapolis: Coffee House, 2007).

RP: I hope so. My publisher, Coffee House Press, said they wanted to publish my collected poems. So I went back over all my work and thought: What would this book really look like? Yes, the works certainly changes, but I was taken aback by how similar some of the pieces are. I rediscovered a poem that I wrote many years ago that's *amazingly* like a poem I wrote two years ago.

YS: Consistency of character maybe?

RP: Well, I don't know. I can't claim to have any character at all. I was really surprised that this poem existed. It was almost like I had predicted what I was going to be writing later.

YS: It sounds like something that needed to come out; needed to make sure it came out.

RP: It wasn't so much *what* I was saying—it was the mode. It was a poem in which I was having a conversation with something very big and diffuse. The first one was about having a conversation with the city of Tulsa. The second one was about having a conversation with a cloud. So it was like Frank O'Hara's poem, "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island," which may have been the unconscious connection behind my two poems.

YS: Yes, and the sun says "You must always embrace things freely with an appropriate sense of space."

RP: Isn't it beautiful?

YS: Yes, that line to me is the connection between all of this kind of poetry.

RP: Guarding it from mess and message. I may have misquoted that, but there's a similarity there—a fine line between being too open and too closed.

YS: He really seems to straddle that line. On that line, can I ask you how you thought beatnik poetry might have gotten interwoven into your work?

RP: Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* was the first book I ever read that really excited me about poetry. I was about 15, and I was astounded by it. For me, it came at the right time.

YS: I have to ask you if you've seen the recent movie?

RP: I have not seen the movie. I would hope to some day. I heard that the actor is a very nice guy.

YS: Well the reason I ask is that they animated the poem.

RP: Usually movies about writers don't work very well. Some of them really stink. But there have been a couple of okay ones. Certainly movies about the Beat Generation have tended to be awful. But Ginsberg was the big inspiration for me. I had just discovered Whitman, but he of course was dead. I couldn't believe that this guy Ginsberg was alive and writing like that. And then of course there was Gregory Corso. And that all led quickly to discovering LeRoi Jones, Robert Creeley, Charles Olson, Paul Blackburn, Frank O'Hara, and others. Early on, in high school, I wrote blatant

imitations of free-wheeling Beatnik poems; jazz poems too. I'd listen to Miles Davis and write poems inspired by his music. Anyway, the Beats were a big turn-on for me. They opened a door.

YS: They may have made it possible to think that just being exciting was enough.

RP: They were filled with excitement about the universe, like a mystic or an adolescent. And I thought Corso's poems were quite funny, witty in a strange way.

YS: "Marriage"?

RP: "Marriage" came a little later. I was thinking about *Gasoline*, his first book. But yes, I loved "Marriage." I thought it was terrific and very funny.

YS: And simultaneously tender.

RP: Yes, in an odd way. Allen's diction opened me enough to be receptive to Frank O'Hara, and even to Kenneth Koch a little bit—although that came slightly later—because I had a sense of humor but I didn't know that I could use it in poetry. When I was in high school most of my poems were very serious, Black Mountainesque. I got opened up further, though, when I came to New York and started studying with Kenneth, and reading the great books of the western world in his class. Seeing him talk about them made me realize that wit was something that was quite wonderful to have in your writing. Not the only thing to have, of course. And I don't mean jokes or humor. I owed a great debt to Allen, and to Ferlinghetti. In high school I read *Pictures of the Gone World* and *Coney Island of the Mind*, and I was quite inspired by them. I've never given

Ferlinghetti enough credit, but I have always known I owed Allen a lot, not only for his poetry.

YS: From what I've read, he was a very motivating spirit.

RP: I wrote him a letter when I was in high school and said, "I'm starting a little magazine, would you send me some poems?" And he sent me his poem "My Sad Self," dedicated to Frank O'Hara. He was so nice. I told him I was going to go to Mexico, and he said Yes go to Mexico! Dig the streets! Dig the whores!

YS: Did you dig it?

RP: Well, no, I did not dig the whores of Mexico City. I was sixteen, terrified of even the idea of talking to a prostitute! But the general "dig the streets" idea, yes.

YS: But you did go to Mexico then.

RP: Yes, several times. And he was wonderful when I told him I was coming to New York to go to Columbia. He said, "Call me when you get here." Virtually the only people I knew in New York were Allen Ginsberg, Joel Oppenheimer, LeRoi Jones, Fielding Dawson, and Paul Blackburn.

YS: Not a bad crowd you had!

RP: All these people—I was pen-pals with them. So I called Allen when I got here. I was up at Columbia and he said, "Come down and visit!" So I got on the subway and

came down. I went to East 2nd Street and knocked on his door, and he was very kind to me. He lent me some books; he gave me advice. He was very nice to me my entire life. His singing was a little bit hard to take, but I never stopped admiring him. I was very aware of what a generous spirit he was, both with his time and with helping people. And he lived around the corner from my apartment, so I used to see him at the fruit stand at night. And we worked on different things together here and there. We weren't close and continuous friends, but I knew I could always call on him. We even wrote two poems together, one of which wasn't too bad. But I really admired him. Do I like all his poems? No. I don't like all of anybody's anything. But the good ones are really good. And the people who cartoon him as more of a media figure—I don't know about that.

YS: They're just jealous.

RP: Absolutely. Anyway, I owe him a lot. Kerouac's *On the Road*, too, was a huge turn-on for me, and not just because of the lifestyle it describes. His writing has tremendous energy, and at his best he was a very good stylist—*Dr. Sax*, “Old Angel Midnight,” and “October in the Railroad Earth” are all wonderful. The poems in his *Mexico City Blues*, I could “dig” them but I never quite got into them the way other people did. *The Dharma Bums*—I loved that book. But Kerouac got mad at me because after I printed a poem of his in my little magazine, he sent me more poems, and I printed some but rejected others, so he got mad at me, after which I was afraid to meet him.

YS: How did you start that magazine?

RP: I'd seen to LeRoi Jones's magazine *Yugen* and thought "This is not that complicated." So I went to a printer in Tulsa and found out it wasn't that expensive, either. Then I and my buddy Dick Gallup—who lived across the street and was one year older than me—along with Joe Brainard, who was our art editor—we just wrote to writers we liked, asking them for work, to Kerouac, and Ginsberg, and even ee cummings. It was amazing how many replied. We were only 16 or 17 years old.

YS: Did they know that?

RP: Yes, we told them up front—I think it was our only selling point. It hooked them into reading our letters. The other day I was in the library at Harvard where I saw two of the correspondences I had with cummings. God was I arrogant! I was shocked by my teenage arrogance. Boy oh boy.

YS: And you spend the rest of your life being "never so arrogant again."

RP: You could call it *chutzpah* if you wanted, but I'm not Jewish so it doesn't work very well. Let's say I was bold.

YS: Are you working on anything right now, is that why you were looking at the ee cummings papers?

RP: Ashbery and I were doing an evening on Frank O'Hara at Harvard, so I thought I might as well go see these documents. It was shocking, but it was fun.

YS: Well this has been fun. Thank you.

Conclusion

*We were tenderness, as small community
and more than any way we fucked up
God knows there's so little "So little
tenderness in American poetry"...*

-Alice Notley²⁹³

*So, in conclusion, may I say
that this is what life is like here
you drink some coffee, you get some sleep
everything is up in the air*

especially us ...

-Ted Berrigan²⁹⁴

²⁹³ *Mysteries of Small Houses* 69.

²⁹⁴ *The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan* 147-148.

Conclusion

The indeterminacies of The New York School are resolved by formal analysis that examines parallels between poetic constructions, spaces and places. Yet this kind of analysis must be done with an eye focused acutely on form—holding fixedly to the changing shapes of these poems, because New York School poetry, as discussed, is relentlessly evasive. In their title, poems and characters, The New York Schools are no doubt elusive. In seeking form, commonalities, and straight answers, a reader of these schools gets, instead, that O’Hara-ian response: “Grace to be born and live as variously as possible.” While the line promises that this poetry is in pursuit life, it also suggests that this poetry will, in apprehending disparate energies, become a manifestation of that disconnectedness. So the critical eye is warned, through imagery and formal antics, that its view will be deliberately obscured. In “Biotherm (for Bill Berkson)” (*CP* 439-449), O’Hara seems to explain:

... seeing thinking feeling
 the breeze rustles through the mountain gently trusts me
 I am guarding it from mess and measure
 (*CP* 444)

O’Hara and his followers create poetry that clearly “sees” “thinks” and “feels,” but what this “seeing thinking feeling” leads to is similar, in syntactical obscurity, to the line that follows above: “the breeze rustles through the mountain gently trust me.” The reader is led to seek the clarity of a comma, but gets, instead a lulling defense: “I am guarding it from mess and measure.” The “it” of the above lines is ambiguous, as usual—but “poetry,” “myself,” “yourself” “seeing thinking feeling” might all stand in its place.

Yet even here, an attempt to learn about the “message” through the shape of the “mess” proves productive. The ambiguity of the above lines is imparted through

syntactical manipulations, line breaks, punctuation choices, and, in the greater scope of the poem, line length (the poem's subsequent stanza is indented and consists of two-three words per line (*CP* 444). Cleanth Brooks' credo holds: "That form is meaning."²⁹⁵ It receives, though, the New York School alteration: their forms reflects abounding senses of formlessness, and in its reflection it holds meaning.

In their poetry and commentary, the poets that have been considered enforce this suggested alteration. Berrigan explains "I want to make my poems have shape; be shapely" and writes poems that call upon, create, and subvert found shapes ("Is there room in the room that you room in" (*CP* 28). Notley writes an entire collection devoted to "something so finite / so petite and shallow" but with "an infinite center" she "senses there" (*Mysteries of Small Houses* 136), and when asked about the way that "center" is shaped by outward center, she protects it through sidestepping: "You can't—I can't pin it down. Everybody tries to pin everything down right now... I can't do that. I can't get anything pinned down. I only have about two ideas, but then I have a lot of ideas, like too many, and I'm always between those two places."²⁹⁶ Padgett titles many of his poems with references to senses of space ("The Absolute Huge and Incredible Injustice of the World," "How Long," "Strawberries in Mexico," "The Coat Hanger," "My Room," "Crazy Compositions," "What are You On," and "Ladies and Gentleman of Outerspace"—for examples), but when asked about how places and their spaces inform his poetry, Padgett slips away: "I'm sure I'm influenced by the room I'm in, just like you're influenced by what you had for breakfast." After he initially turns away from the notion of rooms shaping, he returns to contemplate the many inner-spaces he's written from, and the rooms his peers wrote from, throughout the following

²⁹⁵ Cleanth Brooks, "My Credo," *The Kenyon Review* 13.1 (Winter 1951).

²⁹⁶ These are the last lines of the Interview with Alice Notley, in Chapter IV.

hour, to eventually return to contemplate how “Walking across the beautiful marble inlaid floors in the Duomo in Siena is different from walking across the spruce-board floors of my house in Vermont,” and ask “What does that do to the feeling about being where you are? Our responses can be somewhat subtle and even subliminal, but they’re interesting to think about.”²⁹⁷ While his comments seem to affirm that spaces inflect the shapes of poetry, Padgett also veers away from offering the solidity of a firm reply—answering, here, for example, in question form. In this way, he continues in the New York School tradition of internalizing forms while projecting a sense of hiding and seeking.

These poets agree that they write out of a tradition which O’Hara set into motion, and O’Hara is best at offering “ideas” that “are obscure.” These ideas become even more obscure when forced to account for consistency and order. In his “My Heart” he prevaricates: “And if / some aficionado of my mess should say ‘That’s / not like Frank!’ all to the good!” (*CP* 231); and in his earlier discussed “Statement for *The New American Poetry*,” he spends a paragraph half-explaining, and half pretending-to-explain his “formal stance”: “What is clear to me in my work is probably obscure to others, and vice-versa. My formal ‘stance’ is found at the crossroads where what I know and can’t get meets what is left of that I know and can bear without hatred” (500). Even in his quotation of the word “stance,” O’Hara stands away from firmly having one. The above lines make little “clear,” because O’Hara’s poetry affirms that “everything” (other than this kind of poetry) “is too comprehensible.”

And this general sense of incomprehensibility is expounded upon throughout Second Generation New York School Poetry—as becomes evident through the two interviews included in this study. While both Notley and Padgett generously offer their

²⁹⁷ The Interview with Ron Padgett of Chapter IV is here being referenced.

time, trust and vivacity to the conversations of Chapter IV, they also repeatedly slip away from answering anything affirmatively (Making this case is the fact that the word “No” appears more than the word “Yes,” and that even when the word “Yes” appears, the poets follow it with the conditional “but”). While their continuation of the O’Haraian trend of being elusive makes it difficult to ascertain form’s function in their poems, their elusiveness discloses as much as it disguises. While these poets are eager to move away from questions regarding form, they so guard their forms. Moreover, their interviews offer narratives, making the continuum of the story of New York School Poetry more apprehensible.

The preceding examinations of New York School Poetry show poets who strive to be “various,” “sentimental,” “demented,” “clear,” “messy,” “red,” “orange,” “purple,” “blue,” “smoky” “drunk,” “tender” and, almost protectively, “kind.”²⁹⁸ Creating space for these sentiments in their poetry, these poets offer generally accommodating other—inherently “inner” spaces. Throughout their commentary and poetry, O’Hara, Berrigan, Padgett and Notley all expose a tendency to interpret “place” to mean “space.” This, then, translates into poetry that internalizes places repeatedly, to offer senses of inner space. Aware of the potential for so many forms of constructed, defined and known life to “slip,” “dement,” “vanish,” and be “various,” the New York Schools of Poetry offer “somewhere more comfortable” than the “outerspaces” of the

²⁹⁸ These are terms borrowed from O’Hara (*CP* 256; 467; 268;); Berrigan (*CP* 32; 380; 739; 516); Notley (*Mysteries of Small Houses* 68; 112) and Padgett (*How Long* 51). The word “tender” comes from a stanza in Notley’s poem “Gladly Though I Lost It and Knew I Would” (*Mysteries of Small Houses* 68-69), which also points to a “kind” inner space being created.

“outerworld.”²⁹⁹ Within their poems, the impermeability of outward forms is reckoned with, and internally registered in the shapes, forces, and vitalities of flexible forms. What Padgett calls the “nuts and bolts” of poetry is what is more traditionally known as form. But even this metaphor allows a freedom of thought, permitting the notion of form to be more universally applicable. Padgett offers a metaphor for form that is located in a concrete, domestically usable image—“nuts and bolts”—translatable into and out of poetry; permeable. The translatability, formal usability, imagistic flexibility, mono-syllabic simplicity, and general universality of a phrase like “nuts and bolts” is precisely the New York School point. When confronted with the “wrecking ball” of daily city life, firm, fixed structures might be stricken down. It is the existence but looseness of the “nuts and bolts” in New York School poetry that allows a swaying “from bar to shining bar,” resulting in poetry that sustains the particularly malleable dimensions, or “kindness,” of inner space.

²⁹⁹ Padgett’s speaker offers a solution to “worrying” about “anything” in his “How Long”: “So why don’t you lift your head off the table / and go lie down somewhere more comfortable / and not worry about anything” (*How Long* 51).

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