

Tadeusz Pióro

Death and Heroism in the Work of Frank O'Hara and Andy Warhol

Heroism and Mechanical Reproduction

In the preface to *The Spirit of Romance*, published in 1910, Ezra Pound declares that “the study of literature is hero worship,” narrowing down what Emerson and Carlyle thought about the study of history to one its aesthetic aspects. We might paraphrase this as: “the study of Modernist literature is the study of hero worship and its discontents.” Yeats and Pound worshiped and hyperbolized, Conrad and Joyce and Ellison preferred to remain realistic, but each tried to make heroism the fulcrum of poetic or novelistic narrative, unlike the master some of them acknowledged—Gustave Flaubert. In his essay on Jackson Pollock, T. J. Clark takes Flaubert for his point of departure, and specifically the hopes he had for *Madame Bovary* as he was starting work on the novel. He confessed at the time (1852) that he wants to write “a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the internal strength of its style . . . a book which would have almost no subject, or at least where the subject would be almost invisible, if such a thing is possible” (Clark 299). Clark grants that such a project for a novel, rather than a sestina or set of haikus, “has its own pathos,” but, more importantly, he sets this early ambition against its end result, *Madame Bovary*: “no book has ever been fuller of the everything external which *is* the bourgeois world . . . fuller in its substance; in the weight it gives to words themselves” (Clark 299–300). The difference between nothing and “the everything external which *is* the bourgeois world” might just as well be taken for sameness, at least symbolically, but Clark’s point is to show a parallel between Flaubert’s realistically representational plenitude and the materials Pollock used (in the case of *Sea Change* and *Full Fathom Five*—mostly garbage, “the debris of daily life”) to create an abstractly metaphysical one. It is within and between these two types of transformation or transmutation that I would like to situate Andy Warhol and Frank O’Hara’s evolving appreciation of his work.

Initially, O’Hara was critical, even dismissive, of Warhol’s work, although he admired Claes Oldenburg’s from the start: he did not condemn Pop Art across

the board, but Warhol's experiments caused him unease. In his biography, Brad Gooch gives a number of reasons for this, of which the most relevant, in my opinion, is also the least tangible. The following passage comes from a 1989 interview with the painter Wynn Chamberlain:

In his love of objects in his poetry and in his association with Larry Rivers he certainly wasn't antirealist. On the other hand he was very much anti-Death, which is what Warhol signified to him I think. And to all of us at that point. He was the prophet of doom. There was a complete division between the Warhol-Geldzahler camp and the O'Hara-Rivers-de Kooning camp (Gooch 396)

Gooch also mentions a party at Larry Rivers's in the late 1960s at which de Kooning screamed at Warhol: "You're a killer of art, you're a killer of beauty, and you're even a killer of laughter. I can't bear your work!" (393). Beyond simple matters of popularity, sales and prestige, Warhol's threat to the Abstract Expressionist establishment might have been something more fundamental, a revealing of what they tried to conceal or overcome in their art. This revealing might be seen as celebratory, thus calling into question the irony Warhol's paintings seem to exude. As Peter Burger puts it, "the painting of 100 Campbell soup cans contains resistance to the commodity society only for the person who wants to see it there" (61).

Death has several meanings in this context, beginning with the replacement of the brushstroke and the human presence it manifests by silkscreening, a method of mechanical reproduction. No less important is Warhol's choice of subjects: in O'Hara's lifetime, art galleries and museums showed his cartoon character canvases, as well as paintings of Coca Cola bottles, Campbell soup cans, electric chairs, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Jacqueline Kennedy and Elizabeth Taylor, but also race riots and the *Death and Disaster* series. None of these betray the slightest emotion, and it is not surprising that the reactions of lyrical painters and poets were versions of Peter Walsh's words in *Mrs. Dalloway*: "the death of the soul." They may have stemmed as well from a premonition of what Jean Baudrillard would later call the interchangeability of art and industrial production, made possible by infinite multiplication: a feeling that there can be no redemption in, nor for, the culture of capitalism (Baudrillard 147).¹ To recognize this in a serious work of art must have been chilling, and the commercial success of Warhol's art may have made such recognitions all the more painful and dispiriting.

¹ For a more extensive discussion of the connection between Baudrillard, Warhol and O'Hara, see Ward 139–140.

Warhol's "heroes," all of whom were media-created celebrities, have the same status as the lifeless consumer goods he depicts: reproduced images, utterly flat, they negate the very notion of heroism, as Warhol himself did by implicitly equating it with the fifteen minutes of fame in store for everyone. Modernist hero worship could not have been ridiculed more effectively and mercilessly. His suave and seemingly non-agonistic ignoring of Modernist verities makes even the most strident outbursts of anti-traditional rhetoric—for instance, Marinetti's—look like a boy scouts' game. (I have singled out Marinetti because his first manifesto relies on the presence of tradition as a figure of death). The new life of art and civilization some Modernists projected seems to have been a moot point for Warhol, who, to use Peter Burger's criteria, was an avant-garde artist thanks to his understanding of art's proximity to everyday life, and a viciously anti-avant-garde one for the very same reason: "the everything external which *is* the bourgeois world" needs no justification, nor can it be explained any better than death.

In 1959, when O'Hara wrote "Rhapsody," Warhol had yet to make his name as a painter, so there can be no question of direct response or influence in this case. Yet the poem's ending—"as I historically belong / to the enormous bliss of American death"—could point to shared opinions or recognitions. I shall discuss "Rhapsody" at length, because I think that, confused and confusing as the poem seems to be, it signals O'Hara's anxiety about the continued relevance of the High Modernist aesthetic, and perhaps anticipates his eventual admiration for Warhol's revisions of heroism as well as realism. I quote the poem in full.

515 Madison Avenue
 door to heaven? portal
 stopped realities and eternal licentiousness
 or at least the jungle of impossible eagerness
 your marble is bronze and your lianas elevator cables
 swinging from the myth of ascending
 I would join
 or declining the challenge of racial attractions
 they zing on (into the lynch, dear friends)
 while everywhere love is breathing draftily
 like a doorway linking 53rd with 54th
 the east-bound with the west-bound traffic by 8,000,000s
 o midtown tunnels and the tunnels, too, of Holland

where is the summit where all aims are clear
 the pin-point light upon a fear of lust
 as agony's needlework grows up around the unicorn

and fences him for milk-and-yoghurt work
 when I see Gianni I know he's thinking of John Ericson
 playing the Rachmaninoff 2nd or Elizabeth Taylor
 taking sleeping pills and Jane thinks of Manderley
 and Irkutsk while I cough lightly in the smog of desire
 and my eyes water achingly imitating the true blue

a sight of Manahatta in the towering needle
 multi-faceted insight of the fly in the stringless labyrinth
 Canada plans a higher place than the Empire State Building
 I am getting into a cab at 9th Street and 1st Avenue
 and the Negro driver tells me about a \$120 apartment
 'where you can't walk across the floor after 10 at night
 not even to pee, because it keeps them awake downstairs'
 no, I don't like that 'well, I didn't take it'
 perfect in this hot humid morning on my way to work
 a little supper-club conversation for the mill of the gods

you were there always and you know all about these things
 as indifferent as an encyclopedia with your calm brown eyes
 it isn't enough to smile when you run the gauntlet
 you've got to spit like Niagara Falls on everybody or
 Victoria Falls or at least the beautiful urban fountains of Madrid
 as the Niger joins the Gulf of Guinea near the Menemsha Bar
 that is what you learn in the early morning passing Madison Avenue
 where you've never spent any time and the stores eat up light

I have always wanted to be near it
 though the day is long (and I don't mean Madison Avenue)
 lying in a hammock on St. Mark's Place sorting my poems
 in the rancid nourishment of this mountainous island
 they are coming and we holy ones must go
 is Tibet historically a part of China? as I historically
 belong to the enormous bliss of American death.
 (*Collected Poems* 325)

Rhapsody is the title of a film which O'Hara, Joe LeSueur and Gianni Bates watched together in 1954, five years before the poem was written and to which its third section explicitly refers. In his book of reminiscences about O'Hara, LeSueur recalls that he did not like its "old-fashioned M-G-M gloss," and that the others teased him for being a "stick-in-the-mud" (205). He was surprised by O'Hara's mentioning *Rhapsody* so long after they had seen it, and surprised

again, after O'Hara's death, to hear from Bates that they had had "an affair." This is the substance of his "digression," somewhat disappointing since many of the references in the poem seem to be both circumstantial and structurally meaningful—"Rhapsody" discourages close readings, so every snippet of background information might be helpful, and LeSueur's disclosures do not help us much in this case.

The poem opens with a quasi-apostrophe: 515 Madison Avenue, the street address of the Dumont Building, is not preceded by "O," nor followed by an exclamation mark, but the final line of this section of the poem contains the apostrophic "o," and in spite of the lack of a concluding "!" completes the initial one's ironically celebratory gesture. Topographically, and in many other respects, the distance between the Dumont Building and the Holland Tunnel is notable, but "Rhapsody" radically shortens it. The Madison Avenue address is synonymous with advertising, since many firms in that line had their headquarters there, so the production of desire understandably comes to mind as the poet walks or drives by 515 on his way to work. "Stopped realities and eternal licentiousness" suggest both the business of advertising and the gay poet's sense of potential pleasures to be had in this building, were he to enter it in search of acquiescent strangers, and, possibly, be late for work at the Museum of Modern Art as a result. "The jungle of impossible eagerness" suggests the "jungle" ethos of the corporate world, yet the identification of elevator cables with lianas goes beyond this cliché, since it is not the elevator cables that are lianas, but the other way round. The most primitive or elemental forms of desire have been subjected to a technological process of sublimation, and what would have naturally remained a liana is now part of a machine used for "ascending." "Your marble is bronze" inverts the chronological order of the liana/cable identification, but serves the same purpose: marble interiors merely conceal the ignoble bronze that the industry relies on, the desires it is meant to arouse and its own desire to profit by this arousal. Neither in this nor any other section of the poem is desire satisfied, nor is it represented as overpowering: instead, a melancholy sense of the necessity to defer satisfaction comes through, culminating in the switch from the phenomenal world to the textual in the "scene of writing," as O'Hara sorts through his poems "in tranquility," and substitutes for "the bliss of solitude" Wordsworth identifies with "the inner eye" the "enormous bliss of American death." This might to some extent account for the presence of multiple "o's" in the final lines of the section, orgasmic and blissful exclamations that make no sense at all if we consider them as reactions to a literal passage through the Midtown or Holland Tunnels, but add up, in the crudest sense, if we juxtapose a tunnel with a skyscraper, and take this for a figure of impossibility.

Thus the opening quasi-invocation anticipates frustration, failure and melancholy, first apparent in the impossibility of “eagerness,” and next in the lianas/cables, “swinging from the myth of ascending / I would join / or declining the challenge of racial attractions.” The sexual desire associated with “swinging” is immediately presented as unsatisfied, since “I would join” means “I haven’t joined (yet),” while the raced “attractions” “zing on into the lynch.” It is not much farther from “swing” to “zing” than from S to Z, but bringing in Roland Barthes here would be merely tiresome, while the distance between “lynch” and “lurch” is more relevant, precisely because of its racial implications. An elevator attendant, almost invariably black, could be an imagined object of desire in this cluster of images, which would explain the substitution of “lynch” for “lurch” and its implied equation of the risks blacks take when they engage in interracial relationships or encounters with the risks taken by gays in general in their pursuit of pleasure—hence the “dear friends,” possibly gay and/or black, at the end of the line. And since “lurch” lurks in “lynch,” the tall building, its precipitous elevator shaft, and the fall from whatever grace one hopes for, corporate, sexual or aesthetic, come together in a minor play on words. Yet the “challenge” is denied, risk and satisfaction get deferred, the putative object of desire becomes multiplied, and eight million such objects pass through a doorway, east-bound and west-bound, as love breathes “draftily,” rather than “heavily,” on account of the doorway, earlier called a “door” but immediately corrected to the grander “portal.” The portal leads to “heaven,” or paradise, where permanence or eternity obviate desire, which is precisely what advertising promises. Meanwhile, this parody of paradise, opulently marble-clad, may at any moment become the scene of a lynching—a punishment for having desires.

The second section opens with a somewhat cryptic question, although the repetition of “where” brings to mind an “*ubi sunt*” motif and the nostalgia or sadness it is usually meant to emphasize. The “summit where all aims are clear” might be a mountain as well as a state of mind: “the pin-point light upon a fear of lust” suggests the latter, but the appearance of Tibet in the final section makes the natural image of a mountain equally relevant. “Fear of lust” can be seen or experienced only at a considerable remove from Madison Avenue and everything it stands for, and so seems to be unattainable to O’Hara, and therefore desirable. The image of “agony’s needlework” which “grows up around the unicorn / and fences him for milk-and-yoghurt work” defies understanding, unless more or less distant associations replace referential certainty. Since the “towering needle” in the next section refers to the Empire State Building, an American dream of impossible grandeur come true architecturally, “needlework” suggests attempts at fulfilling less exalted wishes, for instance landing a contract for advertising dairy

products. "Agony," which is often followed by death, fuses the desire for profit with sexual urges, implied by the phallic and ejaculatory imagery. The unicorn may be seen as a figure for a building like the Empire State or the Dumont, but also literally, as in the tapestries "needlework" suggests, on display at the Cloisters Museum uptown, where the historical impossibility of unicorns consorting with maidens becomes iconic reality. And since it is up to capitalism to prove what may or may not be physically or historically possible, this last connotation seems the most relevant to the poem as a whole, as well as the most fanciful. Still, the opposition between "fear of lust" and "agony" holds strong: anticipated by "lynch" in the previous section, it is pivotal for the entire poem.

The sudden change of focus to Gianni Bates and what or whom he is thinking about seems to be little more than a detour, a way of arriving at the scene from *Rhapsody* that matters most in O'Hara's "Rhapsody." A *chagrin d'amour* prompts the character played by Elizabeth Taylor to attempt suicide, and the method she chooses—sleeping pills—may have a symbolic meaning here, since advertising brings about the somnolence or death of our critical faculties: it eliminates our "fear of lust." It might also eliminate the fear of "dust," or obscure the "fear in a handful of dust" one of the voices of *The Waste Land* offers to show us: the principal consonance at the beginning of this section is clear/fear. At its end, we see O'Hara coughing in "the smog of desire," coughing "lightly." Throughout the rest of the poem, his longing for light and clarity, and the elevation that makes them possible, reappear in changing contexts. Immediately after he coughs, his eyes "water achingly" and he catches "a sight of Manahatta in the towering needle / multi-faceted insight of the fly in the stringless labyrinth." There is no Ariadne's thread to lead him out of the maze, and even all the eyes a fly has at its disposal allow only "insight," rather than panoramic views: instead of seeing Manhattan from the Empire State Building, he sees "Manahatta" in its "towering needle." This inversion might suggest that "insight" is limited to the recognition and acknowledgment of desire, especially the kind prefabricated and institutionally imposed, which becomes elevated through human subjectivity, but is as random and futile as a fly's.

The image leads to the micro-narrative of the cab driver, which could be seen as strictly topical and circumstantial, a racially-specific comment on rental prices, were it not for the section's final line: "a little supper-club conversation for the mill of the gods." "The mill of God grinds slow but sure," as George Herbert paraphrases the Greek proverb about destiny and divine justice, but it is hard to tell what this might imply for "Rhapsody," unless we assume that what the mill of the gods produces is Frank O'Hara's poems. The steep price of the apartment makes the constraint on individual liberty (not being able to walk around in it at

night) into a parodic downsizing of the constraints on desire intimated in earlier sections of the poem. This may be why O'Hara thinks the chat with the driver is "perfect" poetic material. It also indirectly introduces the notion of destiny, which comes to the fore in subsequent sections.

In her reading of "Rhapsody," Marjorie Perloff observes that "by shifting address regularly, (the 'you' is alternately '515 Madison Avenue' and the 'you who were there always,' the 'you [who] know(s) all about these things'), O'Hara distances his emotions, thus avoiding 'disgusting self-pity'" (29). It is quite another matter *who* was "there always": Madison Avenue? The gods? Desire, death, agony or fear of lust? The opening of the poem's fourth section presents a case of radical indeterminacy, made even more radically frustrating by the next line: "as indifferent as an encyclopedia with your calm brown eyes." There is no way out of this conundrum, but that's the point, and the geographical impossibility that follows—the Niger joining the Gulf of Guinea near the Memsha Bar (in Manhattan)—ties in with the referential one. Furthermore, if we assume that the "you" of the first two lines is Frank O'Hara, or any other human, his being "there always" additionally brings in temporal impossibility. Still, there are four more "yous" in this section, which begins with an image of permanence and moves from encyclopedic knowledge to the empiricism dramatized by Madison Avenue. It seems to be an attempt to embrace, encompass or subsume the whole world in space and time, an attempt made by the engines of consumerism as well as by the poet, but for wholly different reasons. It is, in other words, an attempt to represent the sublime in a specific, historical moment. And, just as specifically, on Madison Avenue, "where the stores eat up light."

Stores, however, do not "eat up" light, even on Madison Avenue, where skyscrapers might obscure sunlight, but ground-level stores emit plenty of man-made substitutes for it. To "eat up" means to consume, and stores do not consume, but enable consumption. Like the "sight of Manahatta in the towering needle," the image of stores eating up light inverts the normal order of things to suggest what the *real* order of things may be. As we looked the other way, consumerism ate up reality, the normal order of things, the aesthetic ideals of High Modernism, the meaning of life, and so on: since this is a *fait accompli*, should we keep looking for heroism, or for the sublime, in all the familiar places? Would this, in and of itself, be a heroic pursuit, or merely a trivial one, as opposed to a brave and noble acknowledgment of historical necessity, if only in the shape of a new aesthetic paradigm? I suspect that O'Hara struggled with this question in the last years of his life, and that "Rhapsody" marks the beginning of this struggle. The poem's final section opens with a confession: "I have always

wanted to be near it," and since Madison Avenue as a reference of "it" is ruled out in the next line, the most likely one is death. Alan Feldman sees in this confession a desire

to achieve a state of transcendent knowledge and bliss. But the 'holy' landscape in which he can experience such enlightenment is New York, not Tibet. O'Hara needs the 'rancid nourishment' of Manhattan to feed his poetry, because in the city's continual process of creation and destruction 'the enormous bliss of American death' finds its most dazzling expression. (39)

Manhattan is primarily, if not exclusively, literal in this reading of "Rhapsody." But being "near it" in Manhattan means, first of all, being far removed from nature, and thus from settings conventionally required for experiences of the sublime, such as mountains. To account for this removal, Manhattan is called "mountainous," and Tibet brought in for obvious contrast. Yet it is precisely in Manhattan that O'Hara wants to experience the sublime, to be as near death as Taylor's character in *Rhapsody* must have been after overdosing sleeping pills. Removing the sublime from its natural setting is equivalent to making it historically specific, just as calling death "American" makes its "bliss" representable and, therefore, negotiable. This is the bliss to which he belongs: a Hollywood film is more likely to inspire an experience of the sublime than any mountain-top in Tibet. Even so, the question: "is Tibet historically a part of China" insists on the historical specificity of that country and leads to other questions, thus far glossed over by critics. Again, pronominal obscurity turns interpretation into guess-work, and again, the poem's meanings rely on uncertainty: "they are coming and we holy ones must go" immediately precedes the question about Tibet. Tibet was invaded by China several times, first in 1876, when Britain swapped it for Burma, and most recently in 1949—O'Hara certainly would have been aware of this last annexation, so his question seems to be merely rhetorical. "They"—quite possibly the Chinese army invading the retreats of Tibetan monks—should have an equivalent in the world with which O'Hara is most directly concerned in "Rhapsody," as should the "holy ones" forced to "go." And since it is "we" who are the "holy ones," "our" exodus signifies a melancholy surrender to the profane masses and their aesthetics. By declaring that he "belongs" to the "bliss of American death," which is "enormous," O'Hara revises the sublime. The poem's closure is meant to sound like a revelation, but in fact is a reasoned and grudging admission of the inevitable: even if "we holy ones" depart, we still "belong" to this bliss, in which the role traditionally played by nature in sublime experiences has been annexed by mass culture, just as determined as nature, but threatening the construct of

individual freedom which makes such experiences meaningful. The “summit where all aims are clear,” nowhere to be found, marks the division between remembrance and oblivion, revelation and repetition. And so, finally, O’Hara’s belonging to the “enormous bliss of American death” is neither willed nor forced, but taxonomic, part of the order of things against which he can struggle heroically, if such is his mood, or accept, in recognition of a new kind of heroism, hitherto unthinkable in America, but soon to be made manifest in the work of Andy Warhol.

Boredom Revisited

“Rhapsody” is dated July 30, thirteen days after “The Day Lady Died,” and some of the earlier poem’s impetus gets carried over to it, although the elegy’s single-minded clarity obviously could not be repeated. Yet the structure of the poems is similar: the “debris of daily life” pile up until a dazzling, downbeat finale makes them come together like the parts of a musical composition. Semantically, however, “Rhapsody” is much more diffuse, and its patterns of imagery harder to subsume under such clear-cut categories as in “The Day Lady Died,” where scenes of more or less conspicuous consumption make for most of the build-up to the climax. Referential uncertainty, flights of fancy and frequent shifts of focus may seem to serve the same purpose as the unified, pre-climactic narrative of the elegy to Billie Holiday, but the emotional enunciation of the last line of “Rhapsody” is not quite as incisive as “everyone and I stopped breathing.” In the elegy, the only image that resists interpretation is O’Hara’s “practically going to sleep with quandariness” as he chooses gifts in the Golden Griffin. In “Rhapsody” there are several such images, and while some of them can be subject to gleefully speculative readings, one especially stands out as purposeless. The conversation with the cab driver is too trite even to be campy, but O’Hara calls it “perfect,” and in the same breath compares it to “supper-club conversation,” the utterly mundane chit-chat of the middle class, made hilarious in Ashbery and Schuyler’s *Nest of Ninnies*, but lacking any satirical or parodic intent in “Rhapsody.” If we take this passage for a figure of boredom, however, its presence in the poem becomes less puzzling, and much more insidious, for, somewhat like “quandariness” in “The Day Lady Died,” it links boredom with death, not in a literal sense, but that intended by Warhol’s anxious or exasperated critics.

Mutlu Konuk Blasing finds a way of integrating the conversation into what she sees as the poem’s main political concern:

The black cabbie literally provides O'Hara with raw material for his poem; the episode is grist for his 'mill.' While the poet may live on the other side of the tracks from Madison Avenue, then, he is really not that far from it. Thus this passage loses much of its critical impact, because it depends on the same economy of exploiting certain classes and races as the system it would critique. . . . O'Hara belongs to the class of workers who ride uptown in cabs driven by 'Negro' drivers, whose very physiological needs—to 'pee,' for example—are in danger of being curtailed. Riding in the cab and listening to that story, he is himself one of the 'gods,' and not just a 'poet.' He partakes of the empire's power, ironic though he may be about his position, since from a slightly different perspective he is an outsider, too. (52)

Although Blasing's point is well taken, I still find the passage surprisingly flat in comparison to the other sections of the poem: while there is nothing objectionable about the passage itself, it breaks up the sequence of highly imaginative, visionary fragments by bringing in untransformed, mundane reality. To be sure, exploitation and injustice are part of that reality, but this does not make it any less banal and seemingly out of place. One of the reasons for its incongruousness lies in its clear and unified narrative structure: since we have to (re)construct several narratives to interpret the other sections of the poem, having a narrative handed us on a plate, so to speak, may come off as quite jarring. The impression it creates, at least on me, is of a narrative without narrative, a story that potentially contains depth and significance, but on the surface remains as pointless as "supper-club conversation." Seemingly pointless narratives of consumer desire and satisfaction take up almost all of "The Day Lady Died" and "A Step Away from Them," but their function becomes clear by the poems' end. Not so in "Rhapsody," where such assimilation is hardly possible, and quite likely was not intended, unless to make for a contrast between fantasy and the real world, and thereby expose its boredom, or, in other words, to stage fantasy's death—not the fantasy of consumerism, of course, but of Modernist art "as we know it."

Whereas in "Rhapsody" the episode with the cab driver is an interlude, later poems, especially those written after O'Hara's break-up with Vincent Warren, frequently rely on apparently straightforward representation that withholds any larger meanings, although it is possible that there are simply none to be withheld. Two poems in their entirety are made up of grammatically unconnected words ("F.O.I" and "Polovtsoi"), while quite a few others contain passages in which cohesion disappears, along with coherence. Most of these poems belong to the "F.Y.I" sequence, written for (and sometimes with the participation of) Bill Berkson, and it is uncertain whether the ones unpublished in O'Hara's lifetime

anything himself, it is unrecognizable as such. The broad comedy saves the poem from being merely dull, and in its closing lines O'Hara may have alluded to the quasi-erotic relationship he had with Cremer. But in all likelihood this is just a collection of found linguistic objects, arranged into a "narrative" that would more or less fit into a comic strip. The "narrative," however, begins where the putative transcript ends, thus calling into question its functionality—and vice versa, unless we assume that the boring television chatter is a necessary introduction to the action-packed finale. Yet the whole point of the poem, I believe, is to do away with such distinctions. There is no qualitative difference between the discussion about legalizing abortion and what follows it. In other words, the poem eliminates the distinction between background and foreground which enables narrative, even though it consists of narrative fragments. These may be made to develop into larger entities in readers' minds, thanks to their suggestiveness, as is the case with celebrated Romantic "fragments," yet the ones present in O'Hara's poem would limit such exfoliation to identifying the quotations, a parody of the hermeneutic procedures required by many High Modernist texts: a television debate, comic strips or B movies are all that a scholarly enquiry might turn up. "All," of course, may mean "everything relevant," but relevance itself is at issue here: the text's relation to its referential background, or origins, would not change significantly if its voices were identified, dated and otherwise ordered, precisely because history as narrative consciousness has been replaced by icons, and "the debris of daily life" no longer commemorate anything but themselves.

In his letter to Cremer, O'Hara comments on the attached poems: "for some reason a lot of the poems refer to cowboys, Western outlaw heroes (Wyatt Earp), etc." Brad Gooch puts this in context:

The poems were filled with cowboys because O'Hara, now owning a small black-and-white television set, was writing these days while watching his favorite TV shows. 'We were watching a Western on T.V.,' Joe Brainard has remembered of the composition of one of the Cremer poems, 'and he got up as tho to answer the telephone or to get a drink but instead he went over to the typewriter, leaned over it a bit, and typed for four or five minutes standing up. Then he pulled the piece of paper out of the typewriter and handed it to me to read. Then he lay back down to watch more T.V. I don't remember the poem except that it had some cowboy dialect in it.' (410)

The scene of writing is not at all like the one in "Rhapsody," and the poem produced was forgettable, at least for Brainard, as if it did not in any meaningful way go beyond a transcription of movie dialogue. Around that time, Brainard was collaborating with O'Hara on a series of cartoons, most notably *Red Rydler and*

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