"Love, Frank"
Epistolary Intersections in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara

No publication goes with the Hopwood award, alas, and both Alfred Knopf and Herbert Weinstock of the same 'firm' told me it was next to impossible to publish poetry in our time. I think of this with absolute delight when I think how embarrassing my letters will be for my relatives when they have to dig my poems out of them if I ever do get published. Anyway you could fit the people I write for into your john, all at the same time without raising an eyebrow.

-A letter from Frank O'Hara to Jane Freilicher,
January 6, 1951

Introduction

Frank O'Hara's life was his poetry; or rather, the stuff of Frank O'Hara's life – the parties, and the people, art, action painting, drinking, organizing exhibitions, walking on Broadway, encouraging his friends – this was his poetry. But poetry was not precisely his life, in the way that one might think of poet as profession. O'Hara was a curator in the Painting and Sculpture Department at the Museum of Modern Art, but moreover, he was a fixture of New York's artistic scene in the 1950s and 60s, before his death in 1966, at the age of 40. (He was hit by a dune buggy on Fire Island, New York.) During his lifetime, O'Hara was published mostly in the small literary journals of New York and Cambridge, making some appearances in collected works, like the anthology *New American Poetry,* edited by his friend Donald Allen. He released just two non-collaborative books during his lifetime, *Lunch Poems* and *Meditations in an Emergency*; these were only completed after much time and more haranguing by his editor friends. (He did release several books in collaboration with visual artists – there was *Odes* with Michael Goldberg, and *Second Avenue* with Larry Rivers, among others.)

That's not to say O'Hara was disinterested in having his work published, but that his concerns were different from some other poets of his time. He would read at parties and galleries

with friends, examine and encourage their works, and write letters to editors defending their art. In this same way, O'Hara's friends advocated for the importance of his poetry. But O'Hara was more comfortable, and more inspired, by the visual art of the time – Abstract Expressionism, or the new figurative portraits coming from Pop artists. He – and some of his fellow poets – saw the "world of letters" as it was established to be the overly conservative, academic, contrived. Indeed, O'Hara is known for the mythic way in which he would create: typing up a poem in his lunch hour, or while visiting with friends, and then tucking it away in a desk drawer, or sending it off in a letter to Kenneth Koch or James Schuyler or V.R. Lang, without keeping a copy for his records. There's the impression that he would generate a poem – fully formed, with a title – in minutes, with little need, or desire, for editing.

The gossip of his life has created O'Hara the cult figure, loved as much for his biography as the work he produced. His ubiquitous magnetism and his relationships, with Joe LeSueur, painter Larry Rivers, dancer Vincent Warren, and others, are the stuff of legend. It is a legend, however, that is significantly true; O'Hara was a supremely magnetic figure. As Rivers famously said at his funeral, "Frank O'Hara was my best friend. There are at least sixty people in New York who thought Frank O'Hara was their best friend" (*Homage*, 138). (And he may be underestimating.) But it is thanks to his extensive circle of friends – the artists, writers, and others who collected much of his work posthumously- that more of his artistic legacy is now preserved.

The colloquial and casual nature of O'Hara's poems, his sardonic resistance to academic criticism, and, to some degree, his lack of systematic archiving, have led to fewer critical analyses than those bestowed on some of his contemporaries, like Allen Ginsberg or John Ashbery. Most scholarship on the poet has disputed his status as a "minor" poet of the group with which he is associated, that is, the New York Poets.

Edward Mendelson offered a re-visioning of O'Hara's work in his 2008 *New York Review of Books* essay, "What We Love, Not Are," suggesting that his poems are at once personal, campy, and unpretentiously avant-garde, that is, they maintain the attributes for which his work is popular; but they are also influenced by the classics, subtly informed by Milton as well as neoclassical writers. As Mendelson says in a supplementary podcast interview with Sasha Weiss for that publication, there is a "very tight structure underneath the verbal texture," a structure suggestive of these classical underpinnings. Allen Ginsberg noted this too, writing that "[O'Hara] was at the center of an extraordinary poetic era…which gives his poetry its sense of historic monumentality. And he integrated purely personal life into the high art of composition, marking the return of all authority back to the person" (*Homage*, 139).

This personal nature of O'Hara's poetry – in which he uses his contemporaries' names, and small and glamorous narratives from his life- is wrapped up in this "high art of composition," this "very tight structure." The personal nature of these poems, though, gives way to a sense that O'Hara is speaking to us - an intimate friend. Indeed, his work is often analogous to a letter – though one made public, for our own viewing. In the essay "Personism: A Manifesto," he irreverently implies that his work could just as easily be communicated over the telephone as through the lines of a poem. Underlying this statement, however, is the fact that he *did* compose these thoughts in a poem. There is a necessary dialogue between the personal nature of his poetry, and its formal differentiation from phone calls – or letters – or other types of communication; parsing O'Hara's letters and letter-like-works will illuminate the underpinnings of his work, and contribute to a discussion of the poet's work as more significant than often given credit. In distinguishing between these modes, this paper will attempt to illuminate why Frank O'Hara is known not principally as a painter's friend or playwright, as a curator or critic, but as a poet.

PART I
Critical Discourse, Coterie, and "A Letter to Bunny"

Much of the recent academic criticism surrounding Frank O'Hara's work has focused on friendship and community in the poet's works and biography; the conversation serves as an apt starting place to closely read O'Hara's epistolary writings. Lytle Shaw's influential *Poetics of Coterie*, published in 2006, departed from Marjorie Perloff's seminal 1977 *Poet Among Painters* when he argued that O'Hara's status as a "coterie" poet was, in fact, not a temporary, negative condition, but key to O'Hara's continued popularity.

Of course, at the publication of Shaw's examination, nearly thirty years had passed since the first edition of Perloff's book. *Poet Among Painters* was the first major academic analysis of O'Hara's work, and the first to argue for his inclusion into the canon of "major" poets. Only a decade after the poet's death, it was necessary to argue against the idea of "coterie" – that O'Hara wrote for a small, insular audience, and was appreciated by a small, insular audience – as it too closely aligned with his status as a minor poet. Today, largely thanks to Perloff's examination, editor Donald Allen's *Selected Poems*, *Poems Retrieved* and *Collected Poems*, and Brad Gooch's biography, *City Poet*, O'Hara's star, though perhaps a small one, has been mostly cemented in the American literary tradition. His work continues to attract more followers, and while he may not yet be a "major" poet, critical analyses are now able to more surely broach "coterie" without risk to the poet's legacy.

O'Hara's friendships and artistic interests, both of the past and of his present, are littered throughout his poetry in the form of proper names. They are obscure French philosophers, B-movie stars, and Russian politicians; the bridges of Manhattan, third-world countries, and small Italian cities; they are also the poets, playwrights, and painters of mid-20th century New York,

that is, his best friends, and his lovers, both necessary parts of his poetic inspiration. "Vincent and I Inaugurate a Movie Theatre" serves as a concentrated example of this collecting of proper names, though the technique is employed to some degree in many of his other works:

> Now that the Charles Theatre has opened
> it looks like we're going to have some wonderful times
> Allen and Peter, why are you going away
> our country's black and white past spread out
> before us is not time to spread over India
> like last night in the busy balcony I see
> your smoky images before the smoky screen
> everyone smoking, Bogart, Bacall and her advanced sister
> and Hepburn too tense to smoke but MacMurray rich enough
> relaxed and ugly, poor Alice Adams so in-pushed and out […] (1-10)

It is no longer 1955, and O'Hara's readers may no longer know what the Charles Theater is (an independent cinema on Avenue B, closed in 1975 and demolished in 2012), who Allen or Peter or Vincent are (the poets, Ginsberg, and Orlovsky, respectively, and Vincent Warren, dancer and O'Hara's boyfriend), or can recall the face of MacMurray (Fred, the actor) to see whether he really *was* ugly, and relaxed, or not. O'Hara's poetry, coupled with the prominence of his biography, could be subject to a warped version of the criticism wrought upon T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound: does one need footnotes – no less, footnotes of his own daily minutiae and at times obscure reading list - to enter O'Hara's poetry? It was this type of criticism that caused Perloff to argue against those who saw O'Hara as simply an "aesthetic courtier," a sort of artistic-dabbler and social, stylistic name-dropper (Perloff 2).[1]

But as people continue to be interested in O'Hara both in mainstream culture and in academic work, our relationship to his proper names, and his recent historical era, is resituated.

[1] A term first used by critic Herbert Leibowitz in the review of O'Hara's *Collected Poems* in the *New York Times Book Review* on November 28, 1971, noted by Perloff in her Introduction to *Poet Among Painters*.

His work is surviving the test of recent passing time; the changing landscape of critical reception towards his work suggests not only that he was ahead of his time in poetics, but also ahead of his time in the socialistic implications of his work. For instance, queer theory and community have flourished in post-O'Hara cultural production.[2] Therefore Shaw revisions "coterie," a typically pejorative term, as something who's implication is two-pronged. Coterie at once encompasses biographical fascination, and likely breeds our ongoing interest in O'Hara the cult figure. It also, however, is an act of restructuring: we relate to his proper names and other modes of specificity in our recognition of them as non-hierarchical and familiar. We can glean the nature of relationships from within O'Hara's specific poems and from a growing familiarity with his oeuvre.

O'Hara's letters and letter-like poetry are then a vital part of this ongoing discussion. On an ontological level, letters subscribe to definitions of "coterie," that is "a small group of people with shared interests or tastes, especially one that is exclusive of other people" as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary ("Coterie"). Epistolary writing is an exchange of private, and generally personal, documents, ones "exclusive of other people;" furthermore letter-writing was one of the ways that O'Hara cultivated relationships with other artists, sharing his "interests and tastes." Not only did O'Hara contain poems in his correspondence, his oeuvre encompasses numerous examples of letter-*like* works. There are poems that begin with "Dear," and sign off with "Frank." There are poems that mention epistolary writing:

> and bourbon with Joe he says
> did you see a letter from Larry
> in the mailbox what a shame I didn't
> I wonder what it says ("Post the Lake Poet's Ballad," 5-8)

[2] See José Esteban Muñoz's "Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity" for an insightful analysis of O'Hara's work in conversation with current discussions in queer theory.

And there are poems that are titled as such, like "A Letter to Bunny" or "An 18th Century Letter." The excerpt from the letter to Jane Frielicher then takes on more significant weight given ideas of coterie and letter-writing: if O'Hara was unsure as to his work's ability to be published, and only wrote for those who could fit into Frielicher's "john" without "raising an eyebrow" then we must ask the question: how big *was* Jane Frielecher's bathroom in the summer of 1951? How many people was he writing for? Or, perhaps, *whom* did O'Hara write for? Epistolary works are in their tradition between two people – looking at these works from a reader's perspective, then, we can pose the more realistic question: how does one engage with poems ostensibly written for closed, personal quarters? Epistolary works offer an *ad contrarium* lens perfectly suited for O'Hara's poetry; how we engage with these epistolary works tells about the larger legacy of the poet. A close reading of "Letter to Bunny" will first serve this purpose.[3]

"Bunny" refers to O'Hara's close friend and fellow poet and playwright, V.R., or "Bunny," Lang. She's mentioned frequently in poems, during her life and also after her death in 1956. This "Letter," written in 1951, though, is not a "letter;" by all traditional markers it seems to be a poem, divided into four roughly equal stanzas, that visually look like slightly smaller, or slightly larger riffs on sonnet size. (The poem is in fact composed of 70 lines, the equivalent of five sonnets.) Letters come to be defined not only by their particularity between sender and recipient, but also by three general components: a greeting, body, and close.

Despite the poetic structure of the work, components of epistolary writing are inscribed superficially onto the poem. The title notably declares the work as "Letter;" an obvious detail, but one that should be noted in its clarity. Many of O'Hara's other works are titled "Poem,"

[3] The poem is included in its entirety following Works Cited.

defining themselves both ambiguously and simply, while others are left untitled, known by their opening lines. “Letter to Bunny” then is a purposeful opening, overtly displaying itself as private document. The last line, too, takes on the guise of epistolary form, as he signs off “Love, Frank” (70).

The poem is bookended by devices defining privacy, markers that, in typical letters, might attempt to rebuff the unaddressed spectator from reading on. Privacy is not just put forth at the outset and closing: the work’s address to solely Bunny is highlighted by contrasting punctuation and rhythm within the first stanza:

> […] All day long at the theatre
> would flash in my mind this thing
> and that thing too, but usually
> that heavy cave where there were
> no flames bothered me And I
> could not tell you, Bunny, then:
> there was always my spiral
> staircase and the diamond pattern
> of the well, the eerie sound of
> a quiet house, le Boeuf sur le Toit
> and friends who would fight and
> would not kill anyone silently. (4-15)

The long sentences tumble over enjambment and lack commas where they seem they should rest – perhaps after “bothered me” or “this thing.” The poem at first slips by easily without interruption; and then we arrive at “you, Bunny, then.” Offset by commas, the sentence halts three times around the recipient of this poem; indeed, the entire long sentence hinges around her name, with roughly the same amount of words on either side of it. The proper name then acts as an axis, on which this abstract memory of the “incinerator” that he “once before [tried] to tell” revolves. Is this insistence on the proper name simply a message to someone other than the addressed receiver, a sort of NO TRESPASSING sign to anyone that is not “you, Bunny?”

Likely not; instead I would argue that the grammatical insistence on the proper name and superficial epistolary qualities provide a structural means for working through the emotional distress presented in the first stanza, that of a "heavy cave," the "quiet house," of a mind seemingly active, but where no bright fire can prompt action, cleansing or otherwise. Indeed the first stanza is marked by silences and the inability to speak. The first time O'Hara has been able to articulate this problem is in this "Letter."

Of course, this is not an actual letter to Bunny. It begs no response, no "write back soon!" or "sorry I didn't get back sooner;" it contains no date or indication of where it was written. The second stanza develops the emotional problems of the first, but also more fully realizes the fact that Bunny is not truly receiving this as true correspondence. Typical correspondence looks forward to the acts of *receiving* and *responding*, and questions in real correspondence offer starting points for the next person's letter. An example from a letter to Kenneth Koch sent on December 4, 1956, serves as a good example:

> Has the rain stopped yet in Florence? My how prurient that sounds! And isn't it profound of Glazunov to start his seasons with winter? which enables him to really build into something prototypically Russianly full, sad and elusive? I think I've been rather unhappy lately, but there's no point in looking around and finding out.
>
> Are you pleased that Clare Boothe Luce has resigned? […]
>
> (Koch and O'Hara, 27)

This is the last letter in the collected correspondence between the two poets, but one can imagine Koch's responses, on rain, Russian art, and Luce's resignation, would be included in the next letter. The questions posed to Bunny in "Letter to Bunny," though, are not of the same stripe. O'Hara asks questions that he answers himself:

> […] Do
> you wonder it's bothered me? you
> don't, we troupers in private know
> all about carnival gestures. (24-27)

Or he asks questions, like in the third stanza, that beg no specific and timely response, questions much too large to answer within the typical space of a letter; questions that are, in their philosophical nature, not very answerable.

> Is this how beauty accompanies
> fear so it can escape us? Do you think these
> flowers could be auctioned tintypes or souls
> outside hell? Is blue what they mean by
> "shun posterity" and "the price of fame" and
> "fear of death"? Have I learned it wrong? (50-55)

Bunny will not respond to this "Letter" in a letter. This absence of the real "recipient," then, matters both not at all and very much. By making a poem in epistolary form, O'Hara writes a sympathetic recipient *into* the work. Imagining the poem as an address to Bunny allows O'Hara to work through the problem presented in the first stanza and developed throughout the poem.

What is this problem, exactly? Notably, our understanding of it develops over the four stanzas. It begins in this silence of the first, in unarticulated emptiness. In the second, the depths of the "warm cave" and this uninspired "incinerator" are connected with aesthetic frustration: O'Hara expresses anxiety of groping after poetic clichés and ambiguities. They are merely:

> collections of sentiment
> that make a poem another burner full of
> junk. (30-32)

The third stanza furthers the probing of the problem. O'Hara breaks past psychological barriers and arrives at a metaphor that encompasses the problem, that is, the dream-like symbol of "blue flowers."

> But I still fear to mention the blue
> flowers. They scared me most and I
> prolong other talk. (35-37)

The flower is an archetypal symbol of beauty, but, for O'Hara, all beauty and importance is lost in the flower's endless repetition. The only *meaning* these flowers can contain in their repetition is ironically their "meaninglessness," a realization that prompts O'Hara's own fear "for their identity" (46). Relating to the second stanza, the flowers are made into metaphors for art and artistic production, compared to "tintypes," plates that allow a photographic to be endlessly reproduced. Abstractly, O'Hara meditates on what Walter Benjamin would call the loss of "aura" in his "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (214-218).

More concretely, and more interestingly, though, O'Hara contemplates and predates the artistic legacy of Andy Warhol by way of his "blue flower" anxiety. In 1967, Warhol began producing his *Flowers* series, which would grow to encompass over one hundred large silkscreen works on canvas, mostly identical in their basic black articulations of four flowers. They differed in the colors laid on top of the original silk screen, the color that would fill up the flowers petals and the white space of the canvas. The colors varied, but the series contains several examples of blue *Flowers*; they come to be perfectly emblematic, indeed an illustration, of the artistic and personal implications of the "blue flowers" in "Letter to Bunny."

Andy Warhol, *Flowers,* 1978. Acrylic and silkscreen inks on canvas, 22 x 22 in. Private Collection.

The silkscreened works of Warhol departed from the work O'Hara stridently advocated for, that of Abstract Expressionist painting. This form was based in the brushstroke, marks that were personal, original, and most of all, humanistic (Gooch, 396). Indeed, within the poem, O'Hara, art critic that he was, tries to interpret the image of these formulaic blue flowers for himself. He sees them as part of the dialogue of what it means to be an artist:

> Is blue what they mean by
> "shun posterity" and "the price of fame" and
> "fear of death"? Have I learned it wrong? (55-57)

O'Hara's fearful flowers, wrapped up in a questioned identity, run counter to the personal, epistolary nature of the poem. Bunny, the sympathetic, imagined recipient acts as a linchpin in this regard. Her imagined presence keeps the poem moored syntactically, and the poet moored emotionally. Not only does the initial articulation of the O'Hara's problem hinge on her name in the first stanza, but the repetition of pronouns like "you" "we" and "us" seem to be a constant reassurance to O'Hara that someone is listening to this message, understanding his despondency.

> When anyone reads this but you it begins
> to be lost. My voice is sucked into a thousand
> ears and I don't know whether I'm weakened. (58-60)

A specific listener thus counteracts identity lost in unknown repetition. The notion is developed and articulated in other O'Hara works, like in "Personal Poem." O'Hara writes of carrying around "charms" in his pocket, objects that remind him of people, be it "an old Roman coin" from Mike Kanemitsu, or:

> a bolt-head that broke off a packing case
> when I was in Madrid […] (3-4)

that ostensibly recalls the reason for Madrid being his favorite place in Europe. As Brad Gooch recounts in "City Poet," his biography of O'Hara, Madrid was defined for the poet by the personal, not aesthetic connections, as O'Hara fell in love with his translator for a whirlwind five-day romance (347). This thinking *of* people is inverted in the closing lines of the poem, where O'Hara wonders if just one person thinks of *him* on a bustling New York afternoon:

> I wonder if one person out of the 8,000,000 is
> thinking of me as I shake hands with LeRoi
> and buy a strap for my wristwatch and go
> back to work happy at the thought possibly so (31-34)

One person, for O'Hara, would be enough: 8,000,000 are not what he needs, nor wants.

O'Hara's existential crisis in "Letter to Bunny" is then resolved in the fourth stanza because of the imagined recipient, that is, thanks to Bunny. Shored up by her imagined presence, O'Hara recalls the memory of their reunion during the summer. O'Hara "ran to her," and "upset them both;" he attributes it to the feelings recounted in the previous three stanzas. Her presence in this poem, though, has allowed him to articulate what that "incinerator" was, and he again finds his identity. They are close again, emotionally, in the way that matters, despite their physical distance.

[…] See?
I'm away now, but I'm here. (63-64)

Letters broach distances that are physical, carried by the post from one place to another; but this "Letter" can be defined as such because it was able to broach something more difficult, that is, an emotional void. Again, we return to the final line. Symbols that were ruined, empty, ubiquitous, meaningless – like flowers – once again regain beauty when attached to a specific, loved, listening person. It is here too, that, while signing off this "Letter," O'Hara asserts his own, specific identity by writing his own name, connected in love, to a specific person.

Be always my heroine and flower. Love, Frank. (70)

"Letter to Bunny" is important as an epistolary form in two central ways. The form allows O'Hara to first articulate, and then work through, an emotional problem because of its inclusion of a recipient. Furthermore, the recipient does not have to actually have to physically receive this letter, nor answer the questions posed in it. This imagining inherent in "Letter to Bunny" relates back to discussions of coterie. In a poem as overtly "closed" as this, how should one relate to figures that O'Hara monumentalizes, like Bunny? (Indeed, John Ashbery once expressed a half-feigned jealousy over these characters: "Oh Frank! Do you think someone will write letters like this to me someday?" (Gooch, 162)) I would argue that O'Hara himself may set the precedent. Writing a letter, for O'Hara, involves an overt act of imagining. We are then likewise granted the ability to imagine into the work, despite its address to Bunny. Lytle Shaw makes a similar observation in his discussion of coterie, when he states that "[the] fluidity with which proper names undergo [transformation] mirrors the readerly processes which the poems undergo after they leave their initial context" ("On Coterie").

Indeed, it seems O'Hara treated the letter as a flexible, interpretive form; its imaginative potential stretched beyond simply envisioning a recipient, as one could also "dress up" in the

voice of an imagined sender. In his correspondence with Kenneth Koch, O'Hara writes two humorous letters from imagined senders – one from T.S. Eliot, and one from the editor of *Poetry* magazine, Henry Rago - accompanied by one in his own voice (Koch and O'Hara, 25-27). Likewise, his poem titled "18th Century Letter" takes on a highfalutin voice to probe the artifice of allegory, and the emptiness of a work when it puts up style and metrics before subject and emotion (*Collected Poems,* 16). O'Hara takes up the epistolary form because it emphasizes the personal, but also because it offers a fertile starting place for one's imagination.

PART II
"Try! Try!" and Shifting Epistolary Forms

O'Hara's "Try! Try!" is a short, three-person poem-play originally produced during the same period as "Letter to Bunny," that is, while O'Hara was getting his master's degree at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. (During this period, he alternated between Ann Arbor, Cambridge, where he completed his undergraduate studies at Harvard, and New York.) The play inaugurated the Poet's Theater in Cambridge along with three other short works, one by Ashbery, the others by Richard Eberhart and Lyon Phelps (Gooch, 180). Bunny Lang not only founded the theater, but also directed and acted in O'Hara's play. O'Hara's privileging of the epistolary form continues in this work, as the simple plot involves a letter, which is hidden, read, misread, and extrapolated upon by the three characters. If "Letter to Bunny" used epistolary language to bridge emotional distance, "Try! Try!" is an absurdist meditation on what it means when language – particularly in a letter – fails (*Selected Poems*, 35-54).

"Try! Try!" opens with two lovers – John, and Violet – talking in the living room of the home that they share. Violet is a married woman, and she and John await the return of her husband, Jack, who has been abroad fighting during the war. Upon John and Violet's first

embrace during the play, she mutters "Dear John," verbalizing the opening to a letter; at this moment, like magic, John discovers a letter from Jack tucked into her bosom. All affection that John and Violet expressed before quickly dissipates.

> John: Hey. What's this nasty piece of wood stuck
> In your boobs?
>
> Violet: Uh oh.
>
> John: Well?
>
> Violet: It's a letter, a letter from Jack.
>
> John: Well what are you carrying it around for?
> Haven't you read it yet?
>
> Violet: Uh! *(She slaps him.)*
>
> John: How come you never showed me this?
>
> Violet: You were never married to him. (40)

The letter is a symbolic, sentimental object that Violet clings to; it could be seen as one of O'Hara's "charms," one that keeps Violet grounded and reminds her that she is, or was, loved. The document, unread by John and therefore the audience, retains its emotional power and also mimics the growing anxiety of the play. Symbolizing the real person, the unrevealed letter is like the yet-unrevealed Jack, expected to arrive home at any time. This privacy is vested with emotional potential, and is therefore argued over by the new lovers. Violet does not want to let the letter go – it is "her favorite," after all – and does not want it to be read in public, by John. John eventually convinces her, and we find it is a love poem in a letter, poorly worded and made up of absurdist clichés:

> Don't ever expect me to forget that moment of
> brilliance when your blue eyes lit the train station
> like a camera shutter. Your smile was like pink
> crinoline going through a ringer. Seventeen trains

> seemed to arrive and to bruisingly depart before I
> caught my breath sufficiently to ask you for a match.
> And then your perfume hit me like Niagara Falls. (42)

Using a modified Alexandrine, language acts as a reliquary for former sentiment. The reading quickly shatters any notions John, or the audience, had of Violet and Jack's romantic love; we hope for language that could supersede the brash way that John and Violet interact, but it cannot do so. The revealing of the letter – the private being made public – is at once a sad and humorous realization that the form of a love letter does not necessarily mean redeeming romance. (John indeed conjectures after its reading that she was hiding it not for her inner comfort, but simply because his writing style was embarrassing) (43).

The failures of established artistic forms to accurately express a situation are developed throughout the play. When the letter is yanked from Violet to be read publicly, the stage directions read for Violet to "[break] away from him and [go] to the sculpture. During the letter reading she drapes herself on it as if it represented the absent Jack to her" (41). Symbolic emotion is continually vested in alternate forms during Jack's absence. But when Jack returns to his former home, the move from private and romantically imagined to public and brutally displayed is humorously complete. Jack uses a similar verbosity to his letter when he launches into a description of his time at war, but the campiness pervades a gruesome scene:

> I sat my mount prettily and hacked
> babies and old women with a song
> on my breast – I even let my eyebrows
> grow! […] (46)

In the middle of Jack's continued speech, Violet realizes the discontinuity between these emotionally invested forms she sentimentalized and the man who is actually back in her home. She states:

> I'm beginning to think I'm the one who's

been away all along. (47)

Violet's mounting disappointment with Jack hinges on her own misreading of the forms of love letters rather than the content within it.

Violet: All those letters, so beautiful…

Jack: I've been away,
that's all, I've just been away.

Violet: … designed to upset
me sufficiently that I wouldn't be able to stop
whining about your absence until I heard the hoot
of the steamer bringing you back. (50-51)

The letters' former beauty is now viewed as "designed to upset." The language contained within them fails to sustain love into the reality of the plot's *new* design: that is, John's presence in Violet's life instead of Jack's. The semiotics of "Try! Try!" thus revolve around this epistolary form. The cultural "signifiers" that are vested within these aesthetic forms do not hold up in O'Hara's absurdist plot; they no longer signify what they were supposed to, or perhaps once did. A statue does not mean there is a war hero that it accurately represents, and a love letter does not mean the embodiment of eternal romance. In the end, Jack departs without much fanfare; John and Violet end up together. The end itself plays with ideas of form. This is some semblance of a happy ending, with two lovers ending up literally in each other's arms as the curtain goes down (54). Their love, though, is wildly unsatisfactory, and amusingly absurd: the play, to the end, belies its romantic form.

We can then view "Try! Try!" in conjunction with "Letter to Bunny." Just as O'Hara expresses anxiety over the "blue flowers" and their symbolic, signifying power, asking whether he has "learned them wrong," O'Hara questions the signifying power of aesthetic forms within the play. We might think to Gertrude Stein's famous line: "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose,"

from her 1913 poem "Sacred Emily," in which the symbolic weight of the rose is questioned. The symbol of the rose, filled up with the weight of representation to the point of exhaustion and emptiness, is reinvigorated by Stein's analysis. It prompts a redefining, a cleansing of its symbolic burden. O'Hara attempts a similar feat through the characters' misinterpretation of aesthetic forms in "Try! Try!". Indeed, he does this in "Letter to Bunny" as well, even contemplating the rose, as Stein did:

> […] And even if the
> rose has been ruined for all of us by religion
> we don't accept these blue flowers. (64-66)

How does O'Hara come to redefine form then, to resuscitate it from its non-meaningful symbols? How does he bring it back to a significant reality? It is done through the personal; symbol is given meaning again when it is linked to someone you love, like when O'Hara re-writes a flower in relation to Bunny Lang: "Be always my heroine and flower" (70).

This redefinition aligns with O'Hara's tongue-in-cheek "Personism: A Manifesto," published in 1959. As he writes:

> [Personism] puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages. (*Selected Poems*, 247)

The personal anchors the poem and enlightens the work of art: it is "gratified," finally, defined by people and not the form it takes within a book's pages. The epistolary form is then frequent and significant for O'Hara, especially in his early writing, because it allows the personal in. More importantly, though, letters are a *form* that can at once be imagined into, and therefore do not have to stick to rigid, cloistering forms. Imbued with an embrace of the personal as well as formal flexibility, they are prime territory for O'Harian works.

Conclusion

Throughout O'Hara's oeuvre, he situates letters within a variety of other forms. It occurs in "Letter to Bunny," where a poem becomes a letter, or in "Try! Try!" where a poem becomes a letter situated within a play. It happens in prose, like in his "Statement for Patterson Society," in which O'Hara writes:

> It is very difficult for me to write a statement for Patterson, much as I would find it agreeable to do so if I could. So perhaps it could take the form of a letter? and not be a real statement. Because if I did write a statement it would probably be so non-pertinent to anything you might want to know in connection with my actual poems. (*Selected Poems*, 250)

The couching of epistolary forms within other forms speaks to a greater theme within O'Hara's work and within the study of his works. With this, I'd like to return to Edward Mendelson's contemplation of structure in O'Hara's works in his essay "What We Love, Not Are." An investigation of form and structure in the poet's oeuvre is sometimes relegated to the background, in favor of discussions of broader cultural legacy, of coterie, of the personal aspects that define his work. Epistolary writings, though, bridge this divide, incorporating the personal *in their* form.

The fact that most of O'Hara's meditations on letters are written in his earlier years, as he was getting his Master's Degree and soon after, speaks to the epistolary form's importance as a formative document. His predilection for their personal nature predates his articulation of "Personism," and the letter's ability for imaginative formation is a testament to O'Hara's interest in the modification of structure. I'd like to argue that O'Hara becomes more confident in both structure and content because of epistolary works; the letter's ability to connect people, and to break aesthetic tradition, is deeply involved with Frank O'Hara's legacy.

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A LETTER TO BUNNY

1
Once before I tried to tell you
about the incinerator. Last summer
while I was living in the hot
city. All day long at the theatre
would flash in my mind this thing
and that thing too, but usually
that heavy cave where there were
no flames bothered me And I
could not tell you, Bunny, then:
there was always my spiral
staircase and the diamond pattern
of the well, the eerie sound of
a quiet house, le Boeuf sur le Toit
and friends who would fight and
would not kill anyone silently.

2
Now, as if this had bothered me ever
since, I find the words are at the
front of my mind. The incinerator
is clearly horrible, soundless, cold.
I went there too often with those things
dear to us both: the tinsels and the
velvets of the stage, the broken sets
and used drapes and tattered scrims,
and they were not consigned to
any glorious or at least bright
immolation. Just a clean dump. Do
you wonder it's bothered me? you
don't, we troupers in private know
all about carnival gestures. Before,
I wrote, "it's grey and monstrous" which
is false, and fumbled after "hints of
mysticism" or "death's shrewdnesses,"
all notions, all collections of sentiment
that make a poem another burner full of
junk. You enable me, by your least
remark, to unclutter myself, and my
nerves thank you for not always laughing.

3
But I still fear to mention the blue
flowers. They scared me most and I

prolong other talk. There were fields of
them around the place, all blue, all
innocent. The artificial is always innocent.
They looked hand-made, fast-dyed, paper.
They nodded ominously in the sun, right
up to the edge of the concrete ramp, a
million killing abstractions, a romantic
absence of meaning, a distorted prettiness
so thorough that my own eyes rolled up
in fear for their identity and I involuntarily
cried at the thought of tiny mirrors where
the object is lost irretrievably in its own
repetition. Is this how beauty accompanies
fear so it can escape us? Do you think these
flowers could be auctioned tintypes or souls
outside hell? Is blue what they mean by
"shun posterity" and "the price of fame" and
"fear of death"? Have I learned it wrong?

4
When anyone reads this but you it begins
to be lost. My voice is sucked into a thousand
ears and I don't know whether I'm weakened.
Bunny, when I ran to you in the summer
night and upset us both it was mostly this,
though you thought I was going away. See?
I'm away now, but I'm here. And even if the
rose has been ruined for all of us by religion
we don't accept these blue flowers. The sun
and the rain glue things together that are not
at all similar, and we are not taken in
by the nearness, the losses, or the cold.
Be always my heroine and flower. Love, Frank.