Why They Are Not Painters: Ekphrasis and Art Criticism in the Twentieth Century

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This study of twentieth-century poetry proposes a re-examination of how we interpret ekphrasis, or poems that address existing works of visual art, by tracing a historical trajectory of these poems as responses to the art and critical climate of their time. Though much scholarship has elaborated the stakes of ekphrasis as a confrontation between the “sister arts,” between narrative time and visual stasis, and between desiring self and its enigmatic other, many modern iterations of the genre suggest its hybridity as a work of art and of criticism that poets use to consider the value and function of images in their world. The representative poets in this study - Marianne Moore, W. H. Auden, William Carlos Williams and Frank O’Hara - were not only adapting strategies gleaned from their encounters with Cubist, Surrealist, Dadaist, Abstract Expressionist, Neo-Dadaist, and Pop art and artists, but were also actively involved in critical debates about how this art was being interpreted, at times in their prose essays, but more frequently in their ekphrastic poems. These poets were especially interested in, and often suspicious of, the critical trend of formalism, which became increasingly orthodox in its interpretation of modern art in the postwar period. The intervention of this study is to demonstrate how these ekphrastic poems function as an alternative discourse to formalism, challenging not only the orthodoxy of its
increasingly rigid tenets, but also its underlying preoccupation with values of order, purity and unity. These poetic appraisals of art exploit the resources of their medium, such as Moore’s literary and archeological allusions to jars, which critique Roger Fry’s separation of form from function, Auden’s parody of the art critic that suggests the dangerous allure of art divorced from political life, Williams’ resistance to interpretation through pastiche and O’Hara’s blending of ekphrasis and elegy to expose the emotional repression inherent in Clement Greenberg’s authoritarian rhetoric. These poets suggest that writing about visual art often reveals as much about the observer as it does about the art, and thus they turn to ekphrasis for its potential to multiply the lenses through which to do that seeing.
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Introduction

Though academic disciplines in the liberal arts are premised on a basic division between the creation of art and the production of criticism, most artists and scholars would agree that in practice this division is at times nominal. Paul de Man goes so far as to assert that “[p]oetic writing is the most advanced and refined mode of deconstruction; it may differ from critical or discursive writing in the economy of its articulation, but not in kind” (17). This assertion is particularly true of ekphrasis, or poems that take works of visual art as their subjects. Though many scholars have emphasized the isolated nature of this poetic encounter with a work of art, the poems themselves often expose their author’s active engagement with wider cultural and scholarly contexts. The poets in this study - Marianne Moore, W. H. Auden, William Carlos Williams and Frank O’Hara - wrote ekphrastic poems that straddle the boundary between art and criticism, often using the genre to respond to the same issues that their contemporaneous art critics debated in prose. These poets were especially interested in, and often suspicious of, the critical trend of formalism, which became increasingly orthodox in its interpretation of modern art in the postwar period. Taken together, their poems present an evolving response to what would become the most rigid tenets of this formalism. The critiques suggested of these tenets function by disrupting the assumption that stable, consistent meaning is inherent in any artwork and by appreciating the capacity of art for escaping the frameworks we invent to circumscribe its meanings.

The responses of Moore, Auden, Williams and O’Hara to formalist art criticism anticipate many subsequent critiques of the theory in the postmodern period. Some of this theory and criticism evaluates the content of formalist theories, but much of it implicitly reacts to the rhetorical conventions that formalism typified, departing from the impersonal tone, the measured pace, the linear structure and the carefully contextualized analysis that remains the institutional standard for scholarly articles, books and indeed, doctoral theses. Over the past thirty years, many critics from different disciplines have increasingly been drawn to value and even to emulate the stylistic break with these conventions epitomized by the writing of critics such as Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes. Rosalind E. Krauss and others have called this type of postmodern writing “paraliterature,” suggesting that it differs from traditional forms of criticism in its function as
“the space of debate, quotation, partisanship, betrayal, reconciliation; but it is not the space of
unity, coherence, or resolution that we think of as constituting the work of literature”
(“Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary” 292). As de Man’s comment above indicates, this
distinction between literature and “paraliterature” is often much less stable than Krauss suggests,
particularly insofar as it concerns the poetry of Moore, Auden, Williams and O’Hara. The ideal
of “unity, coherence [and] resolution” that Krauss cites for literature is, however, a very useful
point of departure for discussing the evolution of ekphrasis from a rhetorical trope to the more
narrowly defined poetic genre used by the twentieth-century poets in this study.

Ekphrasis, derived from the Greek words ek (“out”) and phrazein (“to speak”), referred in the
ancient era to an especially evocative speech on any subject (Loizeaux 12), though gradually
this range of subjects narrowed to just that of visual art objects. During the twentieth century,
ekphrasis underwent another transition, from a mode embedded within longer works (such as the
description of Achilles’ shield in Homer’s Iliad and that of a painting depicting the fall of Troy
in Shakespeare’s The Rape of Lucrece) to a distinct genre associated with short lyrics. Earlier
forms of ekphrasis often depict imagined works of visual art, as opposed to their twentieth-
century counterparts, which refer more to existing works of visual art; John Hollander has
usefully named these respective types of ekphrasis “notional” and “actual” (4). The prevalence of
actual ekphrasis following the nineteenth century is perhaps due to the emergence of museums as
institutions that present individual artworks for “scrutiny” (3), as Barbara K. Fischer argues, and
to what W. J. T. Mitchell has defined as “the pictorial turn” (Picture Theory 11) in the human
sciences and public culture during the twentieth century. Though many scholars of ekphrasis
have conceived of the genre, both notional and actual, in ahistoricized terms, as an attempt to
recreate or represent the art object in an imagined, self-contained realm of aesthetics, this study
will propose that it is a hybrid genre between art and criticism that poets use to interrogate the
value and function of images in their respective contexts.

Moore, Auden, Williams and O’Hara were, to varying extents, not only careful observers of
Cubist, Surrealist, Dadaist, Abstract Expressionist, Neo-Dadaist and Pop art innovations, often
experimenting with strategies to translate these formal and stylistic effects across media, but they

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1For a comprehensive account of the rhetorical theory and practice of ekphrasis, see Ruth Webb’s important book,
Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice.
and many others were also actively involved in critical debates about how this visual art was being interpreted. A number of poets, notably Moore and O’Hara in this study, also wrote art criticism in prose, some of which was openly ridiculed or even denied publication for many of the same qualities that align it with the paraliterature Krauss discusses. Rather than construct holistic arguments from the encompassing perspective of the impersonal scholar, these poets, in both their essays and poetry, pursue multiple threads of inquiry and association, pose questions that they cannot always answer, relate anecdotal stories and find meaning through unorthodox methods and contexts. These writings were not conceived of in an aesthetic vacuum, but were in direct and indirect conversation with the art criticism of their day. Together they represent an evolving response to the trend of American formalist art criticism between the 1920s and 1960s.

In opposition to the art-historical methodology that emphasized contextual associations, formalist critics advocated for the primacy of compositional elements (including colour, line, shape, texture and space) that were characteristic to each medium. Though its founder, Roger Fry, was English, formalism soon became associated with American art criticism as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried became its respective champions in the 1940s through its heyday in the 1960s. Many critics have pointed out that formalist theory, and the detachment it advocates for art from political contexts, gained momentum following the Second World War.² As the locus of the avant-garde art scene moved from Paris to New York City at this time, art formalism became increasingly influential for its cultural role of touting the superiority of American abstract art.³

Through their keen but sceptical interest in formalism, the poets in this study gesture toward unacknowledged gaps and inconsistencies inherent in the theory, at times anticipating many of the problems that later art critics, especially Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, T.J. Clark and Benjamin

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² It is also very likely that formalism in art criticism was influenced by the success of the New Critics, who defined one of the central debates in literary criticism between formalist and non-formalist methods of interpretation (Lentricchia and DuBois 1). Writing in 1965, Fried suggests the correspondence between formalism in literary and art criticism when he laments that modernist visual art was failed by its contemporaneous critics: “The new poetry, however, found the criticism it deserved relatively soon, in the work of men like R.P. Blackmur, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and others” (Art and Objecthood 213).

Buchloh, have productively elaborated about formalism in its strictest iterations.⁴ Admittedly, the present study looks at art formalism through a somewhat narrowed lens, taking the most polemical essays of its major scholars (Fry, Greenberg and Fried, primarily) as statements of the larger movement.⁵ The reason for this is not only that these writings were very influential during their time, but also that the dynamic rhetoric highlights most explicitly the limitations of formalism that the ekphrastic poems by Moore, Auden, Williams and O’Hara suggest. This study will trace these responses to formalism, from Moore’s dissatisfaction with the separation of form from function in Fry’s early writings to O’Hara’s critique of Greenberg’s evasion of emotional response in his authoritarian rhetoric. Wherever relevant it will also consider the poets’ responses to other critics, such as Henry McBride, Nicolas Calas and Harold Rosenberg, who addressed or resisted formalist orthodoxy in their writings. Though Fry, Greenberg and others were invested in the formalist project of constructing a broad, holistic theory to account for the complexities of modernist visual art, the poets in this study were more interested in how ekphrasis could challenge the principles and assumptions of this emerging criticism, as a way to perpetuate a fuller response to the art they admired. By questioning the dichotomies formalism posited between form and meaning and between the work of art and of criticism, these poets constituted an alternative approach to the emerging discipline of art criticism.

The spatial metaphors typically used to discuss poetic form have made ekphrasis a particularly compelling archetype of the lyric poem since Leo Spitzer defined the genre in 1955.⁶ In perhaps the most influential essay about ekphrasis, “The Ekphrastic Principle and the Still Movement of Poetry; or Laokoön Revisited,” Murray Krieger posits that “[c]entral to a poem’s becoming successfully poetic… is the poem’s achieving a formal and linguistic self-sufficiency… in a specially frozen sort of aesthetic time” (88). Ekphrasis is the genre that has “institutionalized this tactic” (90), and thus Krieger sees ekphrasis as a “general principle of poetics, asserted by every poem in the assertion of its integrity” (105). Most of the major critics of ekphrasis during the

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⁴ See Krauss’ chapter on Greenberg in *The Optical Unconscious*, Bois’ essay “Whose Formalism?,” Clark’s “Clement Greenberg’s Theory of Art” and Buchloh’s *Neo-Avant Garde and Culture Industry*.

⁵ In “Whose Formalism?,” Bois argues that the work of a handful of critics, but primarily Greenberg, overdetermined how formalism came to be understood. Bois attempts to recuperate the practice of formalism by divorcing it from the “charge that formalism equals a- or antihistory” (9).

⁶ Spitzer defined ekphrasis as “the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art” (207).
twentieth century, notably Grant Scott, James Heffernan and Stephen Cheeke, follow Krieger in theorizing the genre outside of the artist’s historical context, excepting that of literature. The interpretation of ekphrasis as meta-poem likely has its roots in the formalist work of the New Critics. These critics favoured ekphrastic poems for their explicit focus on aesthetics in both subject (the art object depicted) and in theme (often the more abstract meanings, like beauty and truth, which art forms can evoke). In fact, a number of well-known New Critical essays take Keats’ ekphrastic ode as their subject. In one such reading, Cleanth Brooks claims, “It is the urn itself as a formed thing, as an autonomous world, to which the poet addresses [the] last words [of the poem]” (68). The wholeness of this “autonomous world” is brought about by the poem’s complex rhetorical structure, especially its “general paradox” of “silent speech” (64). Krieger’s emphasis on the “still movement” of the ekphrastic poem echoes Brooks’ paradox, establishing the premise that ekphrasis necessitates the unity of (or at least, the negotiation between) dichotomous states - speech and silence, narrative movement and visual stillness, self and other - that in subsequent interpretations of ekphrasis become somewhat overdetermined. The readings, like Krieger’s, that emphasize the accomplishment of paradox in ekphrastic poems such as Keats’ ode, Wallace Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar” and Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts,” follow the New Critics in adopting a formalist definition of the successful work of art, which is “organic” (70) and “autonomous” (in Brooks’ terms), and which demonstrates “unity, coherence [and] resolution” (in Krauss’).

Much critical thought has been devoted to the task of interpreting the stakes of ekphrasis. Though the major studies that identify it as a recognizable genre date only to the mid-twentieth century, most of these have followed Krieger in alluding to the distinction that Gotthold Ephraim Lessing makes between the visual and verbal arts in “Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry,” in which he distinguishes “figures and colors in space” from “articulated sounds in time” (78). Seminal precursor studies of ekphrasis, Jean Hagstrum’s The Sister Arts and Wendy Steiner’s The Colors of Rhetoric, draw on Lessing’s dichotomy between the inherent temporality of poetry and spatiality of painting in their respective examinations of eighteenth-century “pictorialism” (Hagstrum xxi) and “interartistic comparisons” (Steiner 18) in the modern

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7 See Cleanth Brooks’ “Keats’s Sylvan Historian: History without Footnotes” (from The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry) and Kenneth Burke’s “Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats.”
period. Hagstrum writes that “the pictorial in a verbal medium necessarily involves the reduction of motion to stasis” (xxii) and Steiner argues, “the arts approach each other by appropriating a crucial feature from the other that it lacks – visuality in poetry, motion in painting” (12).

Fried, who elaborated Greenberg’s formalism to its strictest iteration, credits Lessing with the “invention of the modern concept of an artistic medium” (Lessing viii). Lessing’s influence has percolated through the literary treatment of ekphrasis, which has been dominated by theories premised on various forms of dichotomy. Krieger and Steiner portray ekphrasis as literature’s most successful attempt at overcoming its narrative properties to adopt the static quality of the visual arts. In reaction to these critics, Heffernan claims that ekphrasis is “dynamic and obstetric; it typically delivers from the pregnant moment of visual art its embryonically narrative impulse, and thus makes explicit the story that visual art tells only by implication” (Museum of Words 5).

Other critics have emphasized this dichotomized relationship in phenomenological terms, as the encounter between the chatty, frenetic poem and its ultimate “other” - the silent, static work of art. Mitchell, Scott and Katy Aisenberg highlight the ambiguity that permeates this encounter: “Ekphrastic poetry is the genre in which texts encounter their own semiotic ‘others,’ those alien modes of representation called the visual, graphic, plastic or ‘spatial’ arts” (Picture Theory 156). Mitchell further suggests that this framework can function to analogize many other relations of difference, including gender and race, which evoke “our ambivalence about other people” (163).

In The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, and the Visual Arts, Scott extrapolates how the terms of this otherness in Keats’ poetry are related to gendered constructs of power. In Keats’ poems, the “special psychology of ekphrastic encounter and the anxieties generated by the writer’s confrontation with the provocative immediacy of the image” (xii) are readily apparent, as the “objet d’art” is viewed through the lens of the aesthetic, epistemological and sexual desire of the male gazer. This art is “an oracle to which the speaker comes demanding information, seeking knowledge” (119-20) and the speaker’s “demands” establish the “gender system” of ekphrasis, in which “the male poet always envoices and enables the silent female artwork” (145). Scott’s assertion of the “central metaphor” of “sexual pursuit and ravishment” (120) in Keats’ ekphrasis is adopted and generalized by Aisenberg, who shows that a “dominating act of mastery” that reveals a “masculine construct of power and gender” (1) is readily apparent in other variations of the genre. In response to these scholars who see the reproduction of heteronormative structures of power in the ekphrasis of (usually) male writers, a number of critics, many of whose essays
are compiled in the collection *In the Frame: Women’s Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler*, have complicated this trope by examining how women writers negotiate the paradigm. Together, the critics referenced above convincingly demonstrate how ekphrasis (especially notional ekphrasis) can function to interrogate forms of difference that elucidate certain historically contingent axes of power. This approach, however, could be productively elaborated by considering alternate ways that poets have responded to the model elaborated by Lessing, including examinations of the debate in its originary context of art history and criticism.

The critics that discuss ekphrasis in terms of a struggle between dichotomized states (temporal and spatial, movement and stillness, domineering word and silent image, desiring male and desired female) follow Lessing in emphasizing an essential separation between the arts, though one that the writer often works to overcome. This rhetoric in ekphrastic criticism is reminiscent of that of the art formalism of Greenberg and Fried, which held medium specificity - the distinctions that separated painting, sculpture and other forms of visual, literary and musical arts - as an important tenet because they believed that the evolution of avant-garde art could only proceed through an exploration of the formal limits of each medium. A second key overlap between ekphrastic criticism and art formalism is that critics of both have explained that the larger stake of this self-reflexivity in art is ultimately that it facilitates the relationship between art and universal human values or truths. In his influential polemics, “An Essay in Aesthetics” and “Art and Life,” Fry claims that by emphasizing only its medium-specific characteristics, by situating itself only within the history of visual art and by detaching itself from social and political context, the artwork can gain an ethical function through the creation of critical distance from the world from which it emerges. Similarly, a number of studies of ekphrasis, such as those by Krieger, Steiner and Cheeke, display an interest in aesthetic and philosophical questions over that of specific historical contexts and interventions.

A useful way of conceptualizing the formalist isolation of the work of art within the aesthetic realm (a separation that also persists in many studies of ekphrasis) is Peter Bürger’s definition of “Aestheticism” in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Bürger argues that the avant-garde of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century reacted against the previous century’s “aestheticism,” a socially constructed notion that art exists as art only when it is divorced entirely from life-praxis, “when the contents...lose their political character, and art wants to be nothing other than art” (26-27). What he calls the “autonomy status” (26) of art led to increasing emphasis on the medium,
whereby “form becomes the preferred content of the works” (xiii). Aestheticism is ironically driven by highly political motives, according to Bürger, because it neutralizes the potentially subversive forces that could instigate desire for change in the social order by relegating this desire to the idealized sphere of art, perceived as detached from historical and social context: “All those needs that cannot be satisfied in everyday life... can find a home in art... Values such as humanity, joy, truth, solidarity are extruded from life as it were, and preserved in art” (50). These “needs” or “values” (perhaps one could also include Keats’ “beauty” alongside Bürger’s “truth”) are perceived as ideal and abstract rather than historically contingent states of being. Avant-garde art, according to Bürger, is an explicit reaction to the formalist bias of aestheticism, which it sees as an institution designed to hide its own status and motives as an institution, in order to protect the political status quo (22).

The similarity between Bürger’s definition of aestheticism and the way certain critics have conceptualized ekphrasis is apparent when examining the rhetoric of each. Bürger frequently uses the metaphor of a “sphere” (12, 50) to refer to the “autonomy of art” (46) that the aestheticist work aspires to. He also quotes Adorno’s description of “the rounded work” (55) as synonymous with his depiction of the “organic” and “unified” work of aestheticist art (56). The symbolic use of the circle, along with the diction “autonomy” and “organic,” to suggest formal and semantic cohesiveness is exactly the rhetoric used by the New Critics (or at least by Brooks, discussed above), and importantly by Krieger, who claims in his essay that the ekphrastic poem meditates on the art object to create a “sense of roundness” that converts the linear movement of language into a “circle” (88). Krieger supports this theory by citing Spitzer’s observation that many of the art objects in ekphrastic poems are circular and by presenting the urn specifically as the epitome of ekphrastic objects (92). He concludes that the urn “transcends” life and death, it “attains[s] the pure and permanent circularity of form and, in its frieze, has the forms of life eternally captured as, like Keats’s figures... they trace a still movement around it” (97). Steiner uses similar rhetoric, claiming that ekphrasis “aspires to the atemporal ‘eternity’ of the stopped-action painting, or laments its inability to achieve it” (Pictures of Romance 13-14). Michael Davidson has critiqued this rhetoric and its use of adjectives like “frozen,” “stilled” and “plastic,” which he argues “emerges out of a desire to remove all traces of human or historical contingency” (70). In keeping with Bürger’s definition of aestheticism, Krieger uses rhetoric to isolate ekphrasis in what he portrays as the self-contained and self-sufficient realm of the
aesthetic, purified of its connections to any political reality. This is perhaps also why Krieger favours notional ekphrasis in his essay (Homer’s shield, Pope’s china jar, Yeats’ golden bird, Keats’ urn). If avant-garde art is defined by its fundamental engagement with the praxis of life, then ekphrasis, as Krieger and others have defined it, typifies the aestheticist “other,” in Bürger’s terms. Indeed, the best-known examples of ekphrasis have rarely, if ever, been considered avant-garde, and the canon (of which I take Heffernan’s chronological survey as indicative) has largely favoured recognizably lyric poems. Williams’ poetry is especially intriguing in this regard, as his earlier ekphrastic experiments are excluded from most major surveys of ekphrasis, including Heffernan’s, while the more conventional lyrics in his later collection, Pictures from Brueghel, are often discussed. Similarly, Moore’s later ekphrastic poems that present more accessible narratives about canonical artworks, such as “Charity Overcoming Envy,” are more readily considered ekphrasis than those, such as “Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish,” that she wrote in her early career, when her verse exemplified more radical formal experimentation. The present study aims to supplement these omissions in previous studies by adhering to a more inclusive definition of the genre as it was actually practiced in American twentieth-century poetry, particularly one that acknowledges the different ways in which these poems were in conversation with the world from which they emerged.

The most frequently cited definition of ekphrasis is Heffernan’s, because of its brevity and the clear boundaries it establishes for the genre: “ekphrasis is the verbal representation of visual representation” (3). He distinguishes ekphrasis from “pictorialism” (descriptions that evoke a visual image, like Williams’ “The Red Wheelbarrow”) and from iconicity (literal poetic forms that create visual shapes, like Herbert’s “Easter Wings”). These exclusions emphasize the primary assumption of Heffernan’s definition, which is that the ekphrastic poem seeks to “represent,” through language, a singular work. This assumption, however, causes him to exclude many types of poems about visual art. All of the poems in his study take figurative paintings and sculptures as their subjects, and he does not mention any that refer to abstract works, such as Williams’ “The Rose” (about Juan Gris’ Cubist work of the same name) or O’Hara’s “Why I Am Not A Painter” (that treats Mike Goldberg’s Sardines). Heffernan’s definition also does not account for poems such as Jorie Graham’s “Pollock and Canvas” (discussed in the Coda of this study) that emphasize a painter’s style or method rather than a specific work, or meditations on the relationship between the verbal and visual arts in general.
It also does not encompass other types of poems that are not considered at length by this study, such as those that provide imagined or reconstructed accounts of an artist’s historical life (most of Derek Walcott’s *Tiepolo’s Hound*) or those that focus on the galleries, museums and historical sites that house art (Anne Carson’s “Canicula di Anna”).

The premise of Heffernan’s definition, that ekphrastic poems seek to “represent” works of visual art, has already been constructively challenged by a number of critics. Mitchell’s “polemical claim” (5) in *Picture Theory* is to question what underlies much criticism of ekphrasis, which Lessing’s work inaugurated: the premise of a dichotomy between the verbal and visual arts. Instead, Mitchell argues that “all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogenous; there are no ‘purely’ visual or verbal arts, though the impulse to purify media is one of the central utopian gestures of modernism” (Ibid). Extrapolating Mitchell’s claim, this study will present ekphrasis as a “heterogenous” work that not only destabilizes the boundary between the visual and verbal arts, but between these arts and criticism. These poems thus constitute an “other tradition,” to adopt John Ashbery’s turn of phrase, to the historical discipline of art history and criticism and its set of conventions and intellectualized approaches to response. When interpreted as an alternative to these approaches, the resistance in some ekphrastic poems, such as O’Hara’s “Why I Am Not a Painter,” to the ekphrastic imperative of representing or describing the work of art makes sense. Like Derrida and Michel Foucault, these poems suggest the impossibility of translating a visual medium or experience into language: “the relation of language to painting is an infinite relationship... Neither can be reduced to the other’s terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say” (Foucault 9). It is also true that more recent poets have resisted focused attention on the art object as a way to challenge the expectation that speakers of ekphrasis are “word painters,” replicating rather than critically contextualizing their objects of study. In “Why I Am Not a Painter,” O’Hara reveals more about his process of descriptive evasion than the painting he references:

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8In *Museum Mediations: Reframing Ekphrasis in Contemporary American Poetry*, Fischer examines ekphrastic works from the Romantic through the contemporary period that highlight how the museum space frames poetic encounters with art.

9Foucault’s argument functions to interrupt his attempt to write about Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656) in *The Order of Things*. In *Memoirs of the Blind*, Derrida makes a similar point, suggesting that all writing about any external object proceeds from a space of blindness: “Language is spoken, it speaks to itself, from / of the blindness that constitutes it” (4). For both Foucault and Derrida, the art object always remains inaccessible to the writing subject, or at least to the writing performed by that subject.
I am not a painter, I am a poet. Why? I think I would rather be a painter, but I am not. Well,

for instance, Mike Goldberg is starting a painting. I drop in. “Sit down and have a drink” he says. I drink; we drink. I look up. “You have SARDINES in it.” “Yes, it needed something there.” “Oh.” I go and the days go by and I drop in again. The painting is going on, and I go, and the days go by. I drop in. The painting is finished. “Where’s SARDINES?” All that’s left is just letters, “It was too much,” Mike says.

But me? One day I am thinking of a color: orange. I write a line about orange. Pretty soon it is a whole page of words, not lines. Then another page. There should be so much more, not of orange, of words, of how terrible orange is and life. Days go by. It is even in prose, I am a real poet. My poem is finished and I haven’t mentioned orange yet. It’s twelve poems, I call it ORANGES. And one day in a gallery I see Mike’s painting, called SARDINES. (261-62)

O’Hara avoids any substantive description of Goldberg’s painting Sardines, instead documenting his casual interactions with the painter during the process of the painting’s composition. When O’Hara initially comments, “You have SARDINES in it,” it is assumed that he means a visual depiction of sardines, but the capitalization reveals the joke that the image gets lost in the translation to the textual signifiers that constitute the poem. What is represented is not only the impossibility of rendering the painting’s visual presence in the written poem, but the “terrible” frustration that inevitably results from this expectation, since the poem is ultimately only able to defer to another text (O’Hara’s much earlier poem “ORANGES”). If the aim of the ekphrastic poem is not to “represent,” describe or evoke the appearance of the visual artwork, then O’Hara
suggests that it may instead have other functions, and thus that a more representative understanding of the genre is necessary.

Whereas Krieger’s early essay diffuses Heffernan’s definition by proposing that ekphrasis is contiguous with the aims of all poetry, other critics have avoided the tangled signifier altogether. Davidson, for example, uses the term “postmodern painter poem” (69) to refer to contemporary poems about the visual arts that he convincingly argues do not fit into the accepted critical definitions of the genre. Similarly, Charles Altieri refers to “painterly abstraction,” a method whereby modern poets find equivalents for the formal strategies used in abstract visual art as a way to access an alternative model of agency to the Romantic subject and its “dream of personal expressive power” (5). Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux’s comprehensive survey, *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, follows Mitchell in presenting ekphrasis as a genre that “opens out of lyric subjectivity into a social world” (5), but she broadens the “range of relations” accommodated by the ekphrastic encounter beyond that of rivalry, to familiarity, admiration, sympathy and friendship, among other forms of connection. Loizeaux offers a revised definition of the genre based on this understanding: “ekphrasis... is not itself a form, but a rhetorical situation and a set of practices and tropes that offer non-prescriptive possibilities for exploring that situation. Ekphrasis is, thus, not easily drafted into arguments pitting formalists against avant-gardists” (10). This study will follow Loizeaux in assuming that ekphrasis is a “rhetorical situation” involving both poetry and the visual arts, but with many different possibilities for rhetorical tropes and contextual associations, rather than a “prescriptive form” limited to poets who “represent” singular works of art. Further, it will proceed from the assumption, in contrast to Heffernan, that notional and actual ekphrastic poems not only “represent” visual art very differently, but that the latter’s relationship to the art object is triangulated by its relationship to the art criticism in prose that has already contextualized that object in a myriad of ways. That actual ekphrasis always involves the poet’s real or mediated interaction with an object of art, and that it is methodologically linked to an existing tradition of writing about visual art, fundamentally distinguishes it from notional ekphrasis and necessitates a critical approach more aware of these essential contexts.

A handful of scholars have established the precedent of reading ekphrastic poems alongside works of art criticism, such as Alexander Nemerov’s correlation between Auden’s ekphrasis and Fry’s commentary on a Bruegel exhibit, Christopher MacGowan’s tracing of the correspondence
between William Carlos Williams and Nicolas Calas, and Ellen Levy’s interest in the influence of Greenberg’s rhetoric of competition on the artists she discusses in Criminal Ingenuity: Moore, Cornell, Ashbery, and the Struggle Between the Arts. Heffernan’s article “Speaking for Pictures: The Rhetoric of Art Criticism” has even regarded the aims of the present study through its reverse lens, reading art criticism by Philostratus, Vasari, Diderot, Meyer Schapiro and Leo Steinberg as forms of ekphrasis to demonstrate how interpretation can masquerade as description. Drawing on the methods of the scholars above, the intervention of this study is systematically to situate actual ekphrasis, as it has been practiced in America over the past century, in its contemporaneous context, in order to demonstrate its dialogic relationship to art history and criticism. It will treat ekphrasis as a genre that encompasses both art and criticism by demonstrating how many American poems of the twentieth century arose through their engagement with the critics who developed art formalism. The scope of this research is limited to the emergence and decline of the formalist movement, book-ended by Fry’s early essays in Vision and Design (1920), interpreted through the lens of Moore’s ekphrasis, and the increasingly orthodox essays of Greenberg and later, Fried, responded to by Frank O’Hara in the 1960s and by Jorie Graham two decades later, as discussed in the Coda.

The four major poets in this study are among the most frequently named in the body of criticism about ekphrasis (or in the case of O’Hara, about poetry and the visual arts). They were chosen precisely because their poems, when contextualized as critical discourse, complicate in interesting ways how they have conventionally been understood. Moore and O’Hara also had careers as art critics, and Williams knew and corresponded with many visual artists throughout his lifetime, often adapting visual techniques for the written medium. Auden differs from these other poets in that he only wrote one poem about the visual arts in his lifetime, though this poem has become the most recognizable example of actual ekphrasis. Each of these poets wrote poems that made intersections in their respective art scenes, often to challenge the prevailing orthodoxy of particular art critical models, especially formalist ones, that they thought could obscure alternate ways of interpreting or appreciating art.

As the visual arts are one of her recurrent motifs, Moore is a logical choice for beginning a discussion of ekphrasis. The first section of this chapter reads her ekphrastic poems between the 1920s and 1940s, written during her editorship of The Dial, as responses to the commentary of the journal’s art critics, including McBride and Fry. These poems suggest that Moore was highly
sceptical of the desire of many critics to designate artistic movements, to form canons by effacing differences between individual works, and in Fry’s case, to insist that art’s ethical function is dependent on its dissociation from utility. The chapter then examines the stylistic shift apparent in Moore’s later ekphrastic poems written between 1940 and 1960, during a time when the theoretical scope of formalism was narrowed and its critics became increasingly hostile to alternative methodologies. The more narrative quality of these later poems facilitated Moore’s ability to challenge the theory, and especially the practice, of art formalism, particularly as it concerned the rhetorical posturing of Greenberg and Rosenberg during their public feud over the interpretation of Abstract Expressionism.

The survey of Moore’s extensive use of the visual arts in her poetry is juxtaposed in the second chapter by the analysis of Auden’s sole ekphrasis, “Musée des Beaux Arts.” Written on the eve of his emigration to America and what many have interpreted as his abdication of his earlier politically invested role, “Musée des Beaux Arts” is read as a meditation on the ethical complexities of the division Fry insists on between “art” (or form) and “life” (or subject matter) in his hugely influential essay, “Art and Life.” The ekphrasis encapsulates Auden’s decades-long quandary about the formalist proposition that art must be divorced from political life. Auden’s interest in the ethical implications of formalism is apparent by his adoption of the art critic as his speaker, who evades his proposed topic “about suffering” by deferring to the Bruegel paintings he discusses. William Carlos Williams’ numerous references to Bruegel in the years following the publication of “Musée des Beaux Arts” are then presented, in chapter three, as his evolving response to the precursor poem and the threat it represented for him to contemporary poetry, that of formal conservatism. A critical reassessment of the ekphrastic poems of “Pictures from Brueghel,” from Williams’ final and oft-criticized collection, is undertaken to suggest that his insistent but minimal description was employed deliberately for a deconstructive purpose. The chapter suggests that Williams was influenced by strategies popularized by the Neo-Dadaists of the late 1950s, particularly those strategies that functioned to resist interpretation. In “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,” Williams extends Auden’s parody by dissolving the interpretive frame of “Musée des Beaux Arts” to create a pastiche of the precursor poem, which implicitly deconstructs the binary between form and content that Auden’s poem, and formalist interpretations more generally, relied upon.
Like Moore, O'Hara references or alludes to his engagement with visual art, artists and criticism in most of the poems he wrote throughout his brief but prolific career. O’Hara’s role as a published art critic, his employment with the Museum of Modern Art and his mentorships and friendships with visual artists made him the ultimate insider in the exciting New York art scene of the 1950s and 1960s. Descriptions of art, in poetry or prose, were never neutral for O’Hara, often revealing (to borrow a phrase from Altieri) “exposed vulnerabilities” (2) about the writer and his motivations for interpreting art in particular ways. O’Hara’s critical prose and implicitly, his ekphrastic poems, came to represent an alternate school of “poetic” art criticism in opposition to the monoliths of Greenberg and Rosenberg particularly. The chapter presents his writings about Jackson Pollock as attempts to undercut the gendered bias and emotional repression inherent in Greenberg’s authoritarian rhetoric.

Certainly more work remains to be done to elucidate the many historical and critical contexts, functions and rhetorical forms that ekphrasis accommodates. Drawing on recent critical evaluations of Greenberg’s life and work, the Coda extends the argument of the fourth chapter by suggesting that the content and rhetoric of Greenberg’s formalism allowed him to create himself as a particular kind of subject, one who worked to create order, recognizable form and coherent meaning as a bastion against the threat of what Krauss and Bois have called the “formless,” which art has the potential to evoke or unleash. The Coda reads Jorie Graham’s “Pollock and Canvas” as a poem that emphasizes this anxiety of formalism by depicting the tension between form and the formless that Pollock’s drip method exposes. The formalist insistence on defining the successful work of art as an “autonomous world,” to use Brooks’ phrasing, can perhaps be read as the sublimated desire for an ideal model of subjectivity, an extreme individualism that is more accessibly conjured in expository writing than it is anywhere else. This tension is also dramatized in the five “Self-Portrait” poems in the collection, which suggest that individual identity is only composed through the continual negotiation between forces of order and disorder. The Coda links these poems to the larger trend of “Self Portrait” poems of the past fifty years, some of which refer to an actual work, such as Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” but many of which construct a notional subject. These poems arguably represent a new subgenre of ekphrasis that reacts to the expectation that the lyric poem will develop a consistent and critical subject that overlaps with that of the historical poet.
The present study has been motivated by a curiosity that surpasses its conclusion, a curiosity about how poets write about looking at art. Each chapter seeks to illuminate the challenges these poets pose to our usual ways of doing this looking. Moore, Auden, Williams, O’Hara and Graham share the conviction that poems can change us by reframing our view of the world. In the words of Moore, “poets ask us just what it // Is in them that we cannot subscribe to,” and then they ask that we re-evaluate our abstentions.\(^\text{10}\) The ekphrasis of these poets, like all of their poetry, calls on us to perceive the world differently and to court the recognition that art, when approached with an openness to possibility, can enable profound forms of learning. Foucault eloquently articulates the stakes of this essential task in *The Use of Pleasure*: “There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all” (8). The method of reflection in the following chapters has been to turn to the poets themselves for guidance about how to continue to do this looking at art.

\(^{10}\) The quotation is from Moore’s poem “We All Know It” (*The Poems of Marianne Moore* 74).
“Piercing Glances into the Life of Things”: Moore’s Art-Critical Ekphrases

1.1 Introduction: Moore and the Visual Arts

“Almost every poem [she] wrote involved a picture or art object at some stage of composition” (192), asserts Bonnie Costello, one of Marianne Moore’s most astute critics. Moore’s dominant sense was sight, Costello continues, and she “wrote from a world already represented” (6), often by visual artists. From this perspective, all of Moore’s poems can be considered ekphrastic to some degree. Much scholarship exists that explores her relationship to particular artworks, artists and artistic movements, by critics including Costello, Linda Leavell, Elizabeth Joyce, Ellen Levy and Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux. This study will draw on these critics, but will explore another frame through which Moore viewed the visual arts that is not emphasized by their studies: art criticism. Moore’s notebooks, correspondence and the poems themselves reveal that her experience with art objects was not unmediated, but that she looked to critical models to inform and to challenge her ideas about what it meant to write about art. Her own works of prose art criticism, both published and unpublished, treat theories and ideas on which she elaborates in her ekphrastic poems, with both types of writing about art in part deriving from her engagement with the art critics she knew and read, including Henry McBride, Roger Fry, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg.

Before discussing Moore’s engagement with art criticism, it is useful to establish briefly her relationship to the visual arts as seen in the full length studies on the topic, namely, Leavell’s *Marianne Moore and the Visual Arts: Prismatic Color* and Joyce’s *Cultural Critique and Abstraction: Marianne Moore and the Avant-Garde*. Both books focus on Moore’s career before 1940, and thus on the influence of Cubism, Dada and the American avant-garde painting and photography promoted by Alfred Steiglitz in the pre-war years. Both argue that the influence of avant-garde art on Moore is apparent in the formal innovations of her early poetry. Leavell’s chapters are divided by the respective “problems, or challenges” (3) that analytic Cubism, collage, Primitivism and American technology posed to Moore’s poetry. She convincingly shows that Moore’s stanzaic structures, sight rhymes and spatial patterning are answers to the aesthetic “problems” of Cubism, and that her frequent use of quotation imitates the juxtaposition of
“found” objects in Cubist collage. Joyce points to similar formal problems, but argues that Moore’s poetry was avant-garde because she used form to veil or disrupt her scathing critiques of aspects of her culture, including, for example, the normative, bourgeois institution of marriage in the poem by that name.

In contrast, those critics who discuss Moore specifically with reference to ekphrasis (in particular, John Hollander, Loizeaux and Elizabeth Wilson) tend to emphasize her late career in the 1950s and 1960s, when she published a number of poems about canonical art. This critical division is accounted for by the fact that there are few examples of obvious ekphrasis in the early poems. Instead, they engage with art in one of three ways: they either involve multiple sources for the represented art object (“An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish,” “No Swan So Fine”); they refer to canonical artists in a way that Costello argues is an attempt to capture their “aesthetic attitudes” (193), including the respective references to Dürer and El Greco in “The Steeple-Jack” and “The Hero”; or they discuss the visual arts in more general ways (“Qui S’Excuse, S’Accuse,” “When I Buy Pictures”). Leavell says that the only poems she knows of that respond to the work of contemporary visual artists are “In the Days of Prismatic Color” and “New York,” which she argues are “inspired” (37) by Moore’s artist friends William and Marguerite Zorach, though these poems are by no means direct representations or meditations on specific works.¹

Moore’s later ekphrastic poems, including “Leonardo da Vinci’s” (1959) and “Charity Overcoming Envy” (1963), focus instead on a single, obviously referenced and described art object, usually of Western canonical origin. Though Moore may not have been aware of the term “ekphrasis” (not made critically popular until later in the century), it is likely that she would have recognized the genre in Romantic and Victorian verse, such as Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and Robert Browning’s “My Last Duchess,” and in the work of her contemporaries, such as William Carlos Williams (for example, his ekphrases of Juan Gris’ Flowers in “The Rose” and of Charles Demuth’s Tuberoses in “The Pot of Flowers”) and W. H. Auden (“Musée des Beaux Arts” appeared in Another Time, which she reviewed in 1952). Many critics have pointed to what

¹ “In the Days of Prismatic Color” was influenced, Leavell argues, by the Adam and Eve motif used by both Marguerite and William Zorach in a number of their works (148). “New York” was influenced by Marguerite Zorach’s tapestry The City of New York (1920), which Moore described in her notebook as “a wool map of New York in minute stitches” (Leavell 120).
they see as the more complex formal logic of the early poems to justify claims that the late poems reflect a decline in Moore’s poetic abilities. Yet by reading the late poems as a reaction to her critical climate, that of Greenbergian formalism, her emphasis on narrative “content” can instead be seen as a way of critiquing dominant models that privileged form to the exclusion of content, while veiling this critique (characteristic of Moore, according to Joyce) in an accepted poetic genre whose purpose is expected to be the isolated act of representation. An integral thread that can be traced to Moore’s early poetry is her interest in the role of the critic and her concern about the byproducts of overarching theories about art: These exclusions and omissions became even more significant to Moore as she observed the increasingly rigid evolution of art formalism as it developed from Fry in the 1920s to Greenberg in the 1950s and 1960s.

Moore’s late ekphrases constantly swerve away from a descriptive imperative and toward her own critical one, as she engages with the ideas and theories of critics she read, in order to test them against the art objects she evokes in her poems. It is this engagement with art criticism that provides continuity between her early and late poems, while also demonstrating her formal development. The college-age Moore disliked the types of poems about “spiritual aspiration, love, meditation” favoured by the editor of the Bryn Mawr literary magazine. She preferred instead what she called “critical poetry, the informal Browning kind, picture-comment and music-analysis, etc” because she found it the “most impersonal and unforced” (qtd. in Leavell 17). Moore’s preference for “critical” poetry with an “impersonal” speaker over the more lyrical and Romantic-inspired type chosen by the Bryn Mawr editor is especially relevant given her approach to ekphrasis throughout her career. Her poems are not intended to “represent” works of art, as James Heffernan would have it, but to critique, “analy[ze]” and “comment” upon these works in a manner closer to the approach of prose art criticism than to that of traditional poetics.

The Marianne Moore archive at Philadelphia’s Rosenbach Museum and Library contains thirty-six exhibition catalogues, as well as hundreds of newspaper and journal clippings found tucked inside the catalogues about the artists and exhibits described therein. Some of these catalogues were given to Moore by her friend Monroe Wheeler, who was director of exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art. He also gave her a subscription to the MoMA Bulletin (Costello vii),
which she told him in a 1950 letter she enjoyed immensely (SL 482). She frequented the Metropolitan and the newly opened MoMA and Whitney, and perused various galleries when invited. Moore’s library at the Rosenbach contains a number of art historical texts, including those given to her by the Bollingen foundation: the two volume _The Tao of Painting_ (1956) by Mai-Mai Sze and Kenneth Clark’s _Looking at Pictures_ (1960). The library also contains a lesser-known tract by Fry analyzing English handwriting and an abridged edition of _The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci_ (1957). Moore’s correspondence is also evidence that she read many other works of art criticism, including Fry’s _Vision and Design_ (1923) and Kenneth Clark’s _Leonardo da Vinci: An Account of His Development as an Artist_ (1952).

Moore published art criticism on Alfeo Faggi in _The Dial_ in December 1922, and when she became editor in late July 1925, used her first two “Comment” sections to discuss Alfred Stieglitz’s “Seven American Artists” show and an exhibition of children’s art at the MoMA. After her editorship of _The Dial_, Moore published in various venues a number of short assessments of her artist friends: a piece on Steiglitz in 1947, a review of E. McKnight Kauffer’s illustrations in 1949, an article on Robert Andrew Parker’s paintings in 1958 and one on Malvina Hoffman in both 1964 and 1966. Moore also published on New England miniatures in 1957 and a review of William Kienbusch’s New York exhibition in 1963. In between this division of early and late art criticism are also a number of unpublished reviews and articles. Leavell notes that much of Moore’s more ambitious art criticism went unpublished, including a piece on the cartoonist F.G. Cooper, one on the painting of Arthur B. Davies, two versions of a review of the “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism” exhibition of 1936-1937 at the MoMA and a book review of Sze’s _The Tao of Painting_. Her correspondence with _Arts_ includes a rejection letter from 1956 for her submission of an article on the American artist Cheri [sic] Martinelli, whose work she says she was introduced to by Pound (“To Hilton Kramer”). Though Moore’s attempts to publish her art criticism met with varying success, her persistence in this genre between 1922-1966 suggests that the effort to interpret the purpose and value of visual art was something she considered an essential complement to her poetic career. Even before Moore wrote any art criticism, she was interrogating the figure of the critic in many of her early poems. After she began publishing in _The Dial_, the influence of its art critics, especially McBride and Fry,

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1 The abbreviations _SL_ and _CP_ will be used throughout this chapter to refer respectively to _The Selected Letters of Marianne Moore_ and _The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore_.

becomes apparent in both her published art criticism and in her ekphrastic poems, the latter of which I see as analogous to her critical inquiries in prose. Her speaker does not simply adopt specific qualities from McBride, Fry and later, from the American modernist art critics, but instead uses the rhetorical resources of verse to interrogate certain biases and preoccupations of the prevailing art critical approaches. Moore was particularly suspicious of the imperative for critics to create or to apply broad theoretical frameworks that could diminish individual accomplishments in the attempt to expose continuities between different artists, formal characteristics, aesthetic styles or historical periods.

1.2 A Connoisseur of Critics: Moore’s Early Poetry 1915-1932

Leavell designates the years 1915-1929 as the most fertile period of Moore’s engagement with the visual arts, beginning with her visit to Stieglitz’s 291 Gallery in New York City where she received her official introduction to modern art (Molesworth 126), though her interest in such art certainly predates this experience. (Leavell reports that Moore had already saved dozens of clippings about Cubism, Futurism, Synchromism and Fauvism, and about artists such as Rodin, Picasso and Duchamp, as well as several reviews of the seminal 1913 Armory Show.) Moore’s first explicit ekphrasis, never published in her lifetime, dates from this very early period. The four-line “Rodin’s Penseur” depicts the iconic sculpture as “The union of triple sorrow / Expressed in the face of one” (69). 3 Most of Moore’s published early poetry, however, does not focus on any single existing work of art, modern or historical, but does use references to artists and their reproduced works to engage with the function of art more generally.

Moore’s early poetry to 1920 is marked by a preoccupation not exactly with visual art, but with the role and purpose of the critic. She implicitly seeks an ideal critic figure in contrast to those she repeatedly desires to correct, as in her poems “To a Steam Roller” (1915), “Critics and Connoisseurs” (1916), “Pedantic Literalist” (1916), “Poetry” (1919), “Picking and Choosing” (1920) and “When I Buy Pictures” (1921). In another early poem, “Qui S’Excuse, S’Accuse,” published in the Bryn Mawr Lantern in 1910, she overtly expresses the suspicion of critics

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3 Unless otherwise indicated, all citations of Moore’s poems are from The Poems of Marianne Moore, edited by Grace Schulman.
apparent in much of her early work. I quote the poem in its entirety:

Art is exact perception;  
If the outcome is deception  
Then I think the fault must lie  
Partly with the critic’s eye,  
And no man who’s done his part  
Need apologize for art. (20)

In neat couplets and confident declaratives, the young Moore uses the logical “if…then” propositional strategy seen in other early poems\(^4\) to accuse those critics who misrepresent art. The rigid, rhymed dichotomy she establishes between the artist’s “perception” versus the critic’s “deception” suggests that for her, bad critics are those who approach art as a phenomenon to be defended (or attacked) using the preconceived ideas, theories or evaluative criteria they bring to an experience that Moore says is already “exact.” Any critic who believes his role is to “apologize” for art and who suggests that he and his additive language are essential to the experience of art, inadvertently accuses himself of “fault” and “deception.” The pun on “lie” in the third line furthers the pairing of excusing and accusing in the poem’s title. Though this is among Moore’s most damning depictions of critics, her condemnation is prefaced by the conditional “If” and tempered by the word “Partly,” leaving an implicit space open for a more responsible alternative. “To a Steam Roller” and “Pedantic Literalist” explore similar portraits of critics who destroy the nuances of art (or, in the latter, their unspecified subjects of study) by reducing and distorting broader meanings into oversimplified explanations. “To a Steam Roller” uses the machine metaphor to suggest the leveling effect of critics who remove themselves from any genuine response to individual artworks and who do violence to the objects they discuss by attempting to clump them into movements under general theories or “applications”:

You crush all the particles down  
into close conformity, and then walk back and forth on them.

Sparkling chips of rock  
are crushed down to the level of the parent block.  
Were not “impersonal judgment in aesthetic

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\(^4\) See, for example, “The Past is the Present” (1917).
matters, a metaphysical impossibility,” you might fairly achieve it. (92)

The critic’s reduction of the distinctions between individual works of art limits his ability to genuinely experience this art. His desire to create distance between himself and these individual works, perhaps by defining artistic movements or by promoting homogenizing theories, not only compromises his personal experience of art, but jeopardizes the soundness of his aesthetic “judgment[s].” Moore’s distaste for what she presents as this reductive approach to art was likely influenced by the many critics who were attempting to construct unified theories of the still emerging modernist works at this time, both in poetry and in the visual art of the Cubists and their successors.

Though Moore’s early interest in the role of the critic predates her exposure to The Dial, there is much evidence to suggest that the development of this theme was influenced by her reading of the magazine’s contributors. The art critics McBride and Thomas Craven frequently gave serious consideration to the critic’s role. In contrast to its earlier, more politically focused manifestation, The Dial bought by Scofield Thayer and James Sibley Watson in 1919 was devoted increasingly to aesthetic issues in the literary, musical and visual arts. Moore became a frequent dinner guest of Thayer’s, along with The Dial editors Lola Ridge and Alyse Gregory, during the early years of this new ownership. She began to contribute poetry as early as its April 1920 issue (“Picking and Choosing”) and continued to do so every few months thereafter, until she took over the editorship in June 1925 and declined to publish her own poems.

Many of The Dial reviews in its early years, particularly those by Craven and McBride, attempt to define (sometimes through condemnation, as in the earlier poems of Moore) what it means to be a good critic, by which they often mean someone who avoids the Scylla of an intellectual’s too-general theories and the Charybdis of a historian’s citation-cobbling. In his April 1920 review of Charles H. Woodbury’s Painting and the Personal Equation, for example, Craven

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5 Barbara Johnson locates Moore’s quotation in an article about the music of Leo Ornstein by Lawrence Gilman, in which the author “claims to have judged Orstein impartially ‘were not impersonal judgment in aesthetic matters a metaphysical impossibility’” (29).
condemns Woodbury’s rigid dichotomizing of academic and modern art. Woodbury’s fault is to privilege the “old-fashioned school of marine painters” and to offer only a “dignified dismissal of the new movements” in all modern art (501). In the previous issue, McBride slants his review of Martin Birnbaum’s *Painters, Sculptors, and Graphic Artists* to accuse the author of displaying not enough critical discernment and too much reverence toward modern art, “worship[ping] at the many-candled shrine of Aubrey Beardsley” (371). For McBride, the book’s “citations… became too incessant and the authorities parading through the pages scarcely give each other elbow room,” with the result that “[a]ll that is missing is the fun” (375), by which the reviewer seems to indicate the dearth of an engaging, critical voice. A proper critical stance toward modern art becomes important as a counterpoint to those critics either too dismissive of avant-garde movements, using blanket theories to obscure the nuances of individual works, or too open to these movements, treating the artworks with undiscerning reverence. Moore’s poems written and published during this time move away from the condemning portraits in her very early poems that parallel McBride’s and Craven’s negative reviews (perhaps doing so in response to this similarity, which Moore would probably have found unflattering). Instead, she attempts to provide more positive models of responsible criticism.

Establishing one’s preference for certain kinds of art is for Moore, as for McBride, of primary importance. In “Picking and Choosing,” Moore makes the crucial value of selection her subject. She states in the poem that “If he must give an opinion, it is permissible that the / critic must know what he likes” (138) and she explicitly names Gordon Craig and [Kenneth] Burke as ideal models in the poem. McBride was also a critic Moore greatly admired. 6 Throughout his columns, McBride frequently stated his “opinion,” often in definitive terms, as of Georgia O’Keeffe, for example: “I like her stuff quite well. Very well. I like her colour, her imagination, her decorative sense” (80: 437). Both Moore and McBride see the critic as having a responsibility to single out instances of art that have aesthetic or social meaning, but they diverge on the issue of how much influence a critic should wield. Despite her admiration for much of McBride’s criticism, Moore was hesitant to transition from establishing preference to crystallizing these preferences as products of superior taste. In his “Modern Art” column of August 1920, McBride laments the loss of the patronage system to art and argues that the resulting democratization of art stifles

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6 Moore evidently admired McBride’s style enough to collect his columns from the 1920s and deliver the homemade anthology to him in 1959 (*Selected Letters of Henry McBride* 338).
certain “geniuses” who no longer have the backing of powerful patrons to “sway the unwieldy public” (159), with the implicit suggestion that critics (especially himself in his own column) now must occupy this authoritative, social role. In contrast, Moore is less inclined to elevate art or herself to the ranks of the elite classes, as indicated by her preference in “Critics and Connoisseurs” for moments of “unconscious fastidiousness,” such as the “mere childish attempt to make an imperfectly ballasted animal stand up” as opposed to the high art of “Ming / products” (106).

A second issue that mitigated Moore’s otherwise positive estimation of McBride’s criticism was his portrayal of modern art in terms of national competition. During the nine years that McBride contributed his three-page “Modern Art” column to The Dial, he displays an increasing preoccupation with his role as a particularly American critic, one responsible for taking the artistic temperature of the nation. He often refers to a rivalry between American and French art (Picasso and Matisse are his touchstones), habitually positioning himself as the champion of O’Keeffe, Steiglitz, Demuth, John Marin and Charles Burchfield, whose work he collectively promotes as “my Americana” (80: 525). His monthly updates on the status of his favourite national rivalry are related with the verve of a sports enthusiast. He begins a 1924 column, for example, with the half-joking admission, “More than once I must have revealed in these pages hints of my never fully detailed scheme for American dominance in the arts” (76: 100). This preoccupation with the status of American art, especially in relation to European art, is also found among The Dial’s other American critics, including Craven, its music critic Paul Rosenfeld and its then-editor Thayer.

Moore did not publish any poetry while working as editor of The Dial, but the poems that she published just after her editorship ended display a marked interest in the issue of American art and scholarship, which was likely influenced by McBride’s columns. The second part of her 1932 poetic series Part of a Novel, Part of a Poem, Part of a Play, “The Student,” uses France as a counterpoint to America to elaborate a division between their respective approaches to education: “‘In America,’ began / the lecturer, ‘everyone must have a / degree. The French do not think that / all can have it’” (185). In contrast to the French, Americans believe that education should be universal, and the “school” is a national symbol associated with patriotic ideals: It is “both a tree of knowledge / and of liberty” (185). But Moore suggests that these values of equality have become corrupted in the belief that all “must” have a degree, and that
one’s education in America is now defined by a collection of degrees rather than the desire to pursue knowledge continuously throughout one’s life, as does the “student” she refers to a few lines later. Moore describes the “student” as “patience personified, / a variety of hero” who “studies voluntarily… he renders service when there is / no reward” (186). The figure of the student is undoubtedly idealized and he functions as an exaggerated corrective for the tendency to view objects of study through a lens of rivalry and “dominance,” as McBride does in his columns that pit American against French art. Moore’s “student” is (paradoxically) superior because he does not conceive of learning or artistic progress in terms of superiority.

The version of “The Student” published in Poetry is much longer than its later manifestations, and returns in its final lines to the earlier comparison with France:

we are

as a nation perhaps, undergraduates not students.
But anyone who studies will advance.
Are we to grow up or not? They are not all college boys in France. (418)

While pointing out that France’s system is classist in her opening lines, Moore suggests that its approach to education is preferable because it has the potential to produce “students” rather than degree-obsessed “undergraduates.” Yet her metaphor of youth to describe America’s intellectual climate suggests the possibility of change; her final question to her reader is also a challenge. In contrast to the flawed critics she condemns in her pre-Dial poetry, she instead provides a model of the ideal critic as a “student,” who understands criticism as writing that includes questions and suppositions, rather than as just a series of staunch declaratives. Her adoption of a distinctly national “we” makes it clear that she includes herself in the challenge she poses to American critics. This spirit of inquiry that characterizes the “student” overlaps with Sir Herbert Read’s characterization of “a state of openness” (qtd. in Costello 3) in Moore’s poems, which Costello glosses as her “sincerity” (3). Moore’s optimistic understanding of critics as “students” who are more interested in the pursuit than the mastery of knowledge implies her preference for the critical thought that could emerge from this openness to the differences that distinguish individual works, rather than the urge to group these works into larger aesthetic, stylistic or

7 In her edition of Moore’s poems, Schulman uses the shorter, later version of “The Student” published in The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore. She includes the earlier, longer version in her “Editor’s Notes”.

national categories.

In a much later article, “Subject, Predicate, Object” (1958), Moore further elaborates her understanding of good or responsible criticism. She states that she dislikes anything “mannered, dictatorial, disparaging, or calculated to reduce to the ranks what offends one,” and admits “I have been accused of substituting appreciation for criticism, and justly, since there is nothing I dislike more than the exposé or any kind of revenge” (CP 504). Unlike Craven (and at times McBride), for whom the disparaging review was the norm, and unlike her early poems with their vehemence about critics, Moore always focused her critical prose essays on the artists in whom and the works in which she found value. The closest she comes to a negative pronouncement is an ambiguous reference in her unpublished review of the 1936-37 MoMA exhibition, “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism”: “one is not always an admirer of every artist in the world. But talent is exciting, and one is deeply in debt to the Museum of Modern Art for the invitation to exploration which its exhibitions are” (4). This section is markedly different than the rest of her review, which refers with delight to specific works in almost every sentence. The jarring quality of the quick turn at “But” and the fact that no artist or artwork is mentioned in the rest of the paragraph suggest her discomfort with even this mild criticism. Moore’s propensity toward praise is pronounced across her body of criticism and it becomes extreme in her later works, many of which take as their subjects her artist friends - Malvina Hoffman, Robert Andrew Parker and E. McKnight Kauffer - whose art she greatly admired and whose careers she desired to aid.

Moore’s preference for “critical poetry” and her understanding of each poem as a process of discovery rather than as a finished product (Costello 4) already implies the fuzzy distinction she conceived between her poems and her critical prose. In response to a question about the “proper function of criticism” in a 1965 interview, Moore responded that “Criticism should stimulate an improved understanding of the subject discussed” (CP 593), and most of the critics she names in admiration are also poets, novelists or visual artists: Samuel Johnson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Ford Madox Ford and Wyndham Lewis. Her early poems about critics are explicit that criticism should not evaluate any work based on preconceived theories or judgments that would flatten or distort its individual effects. In his May 1925 “Modern Art” column - likely the impetus for Moore’s 1932 ekphrastic poem “No Swan So Fine”- McBride echoes Moore’s concern in his assertion that “[a]s a critic I have no desire to push individuals or movements. I shouldn’t in the least care to implant ideas in artists’ minds and see them work out my theories” (434). McBride’s
comment was perhaps a reaction to the increasing popularity of Fry’s formalist theory of modern art (oddly never mentioned in any of his columns). If so, this could account for his apparent defensiveness, as he often “push[ed] individual” artists and movements (his “Americana”), and it is possible that he recognized that these preferences could contribute to the larger “theories” he was concerned about. “No Swan So Fine” can be read as an extension of McBride’s warning about “theories” and those critics who would distort individual works to accommodate them. It also functions to highlight the disparity between principle and practice in McBride’s contemporaneous column on the same subject.

“No Swan So Fine,” published only a couple of months after “The Student” in 1932, is sometimes named in discussions of Moore’s ekphrastic poetry because the footnotes make explicit its reference to “a pair of Louis XV candelabra with Dresden figures of swans” (383) and to photographs of the fountains of Versailles from New York Magazine:

“No water so still as the dead fountains of Versailles.” No swan, with swart blind look askance and gondoliering legs, so fine as the chintz china one with fawn-brown eyes and toothed gold collar on to show whose bird it was.

Lodged in the Louis Fifteenth candelabrum-tree of cockcomb-tinted buttons, dahlias, sea-urchins, and everlastings, it perches on the branching foam of polished scultured flowers—at ease and tall. The king is dead. (189)

Most critics read this poem as a general comment on the use of art to create monuments to a distant past, but its depiction of French art and history suggests that it continues the preoccupation with the terms of national rivalry that Moore questions in “The Student.” Unlike many of her earlier poems, “No Swan So Fine” lacks a conversational and self-reflexive speaker, instead employing a more formal and deadpan tone, many instances of abrupt enjambment and ornate adjectives (“chintz china,” “toothed gold / collar,” “candelabrum-tree,” “polished scultured / flowers”) that connote the artifice and static quality of the swans decorating the
candelabra and fountains. Unlike her injunction in “When I Buy Pictures” that great art (and implicitly, the criticism of that art) must “be lit with piercing glances into the life of things” (144), her description of the swans seems self-consciously artificial and mannered - the latter word associated with criticism she explicitly dislikes. Stacey Hubbard Carson has claimed that despite Moore’s aversion to the term and what it connotes, she herself is a “literary mannerist” who uses “serpentine winding lines” to achieve an effect similar to mannerist painters, whose compositions were both “elegantly beautiful and often unbalanced or strained in their attention to detail and their elaboration of intricate curves and lines” (121). “No Swan So Fine” is one of the more extreme instances of this tendency, as its form expressly mirrors the highly wrought objects she describes. Its hyper-mannerist quality suggests Moore’s sidelong critique of elaborate stylistic formality. Unlike most of her other poems, which appear in multiple versions corrected extensively in pencil in the Rosenbach files, this poem has only one version, with a single correction in pencil to change the original adjective “ambidextrous” to the “gondoliering” legs of the published version. The specificity of the change to connote the ornately designed gondolas and the careful, polished strokes of Venetian gondoliers, added to the fact that Moore conceived this poem in its unusually short form, gestures to the idea that her critique is of a certain “mannered” type of writing about art.

The “Modern Art” column that I have suggested as an influence for Moore’s poem is mostly about McBride’s inability to “discover anything new in cubism lately” (434), that is, in French art. Matisse and Picasso have turned from Cubism into “new graces” (434), he says, and no new “movements” have appeared. Despondent about the potential of American art upon which the “fate of abstract art is not deeply dependent,” given that “the post-office address of the giants has always been in Paris” (435), McBride elaborates his dilemma using the metaphor of (French) monarchy: “In certain circles I am supposed to be so exclusively wrapped up in cubism that even to note a cessation in the excitements of the movement may be confounded with preparations for the obsequies; which is absurdly premature. ‘The king is dead’ and ‘Long live the king’ are shouted with one breath” (434-435). Moore’s definitive pronouncement in the final line of “No Swan So Fine” - “The king is dead” - quotes McBride and validates his suggestion that to be “exclusively wrapped up” in any movement is a critical liability. Yet Moore’s poem also points to the contradiction inherent in this column, as she echoes and gently mocks McBride’s dramatized disappointment that there is nothing new or valuable in the art of the present. The swan in Moore’s poem is “so fine” not because of its individual integrity as a beautifully crafted
object, but because it belongs (by virtue of its “toothed gold / collar on to show whose bird it was”) to an important historical period and figure, perhaps analogous to an artistic movement. The swan in the first stanza becomes progressively static, as the suggestion of movement in its “look askance” and “gondoliering legs” stiffens and stills into the final image, where “it perches on the branching foam / of polished sculptured / flowers.” She exaggerates the static quality of this represented art to show that criticism portraying certain art or movements as “dead” (what McBride suggests of American art) is actually responsible for stifling an active, engaged response to individual works. The unnecessary drama McBride creates through the construction of a national rivalry and the pressure to create or reinvigorate new “movements” (critical constructions in the first place) violates the sense of openness to new experience that Moore portrays as a virtue in “The Student.”

1.3 A Variable “Science of Assortment”: Miscellany in Moore’s Unpublished Works

Moore’s primary method of learning about any topic involved a process of collection that is apparent in the composition of many of her poems and works of prose criticism. Many critics have read Moore’s poetry as miscellany, including Levy, who likens Moore’s process of quotation to that of Cubist, and later, Joseph Cornell’s, collage. Costello refers to Moore’s “democracy of subject matter” (211) and her “collage technique” (212) in mixing not only subjects and categories, but in literally scavenging language from magazines, newspapers and overheard conversations. Moore’s miscellany style is also manifest in her lists or inventories and in her use of juxtaposition, as she brings together different subjects to privilege a plurality of information, ideas and perspectives rather than a singularly focused narrative. One outcome of this approach is that the critiques in her poems are often submerged, arising only through the reader’s interpretation of the divergent streams of attention. During her editorship of The Dial,
Moore’s two page “Comment” sections also reflect this spirit of miscellany. In a covert meta-commentary, she addresses such an approach in her May 1927 column:

Academic feeling, or prejudice possibly, in favor of continuity and completeness is opposed to miscellany – to music programs, composite picture exhibitions, newspapers, magazines, and anthologies. Any zoo, aquarium, library, garden, or volume of letters, however, is an anthology and certain of these selected findings are highly satisfactory. The science of assorting and the art of vesting an assortment with dignity are obviously not being neglected, as is manifest in “exhibitions and sales of artistic property,” and in that sometimes disparaged, most powerful phase of the anthology, the museum (CP 182).

In this “Comment” column, Moore privileges “miscellany” as a “science of assorting” that values the appropriation and reconfiguration of existing elements into a non-synchronous whole. She uses this style in her writing about art, both prose and verse, with varying success.

Though Moore’s miscellany style resulted in the formal innovations praised in much of her early poetry, there is some evidence that this style existed in tension with her desire to challenge existing discourses. An illuminating example of Moore’s miscellany style gone awry is her unpublished poem “Museums,” likely written circa 1919. In both versions of the poem her title is drawn into her first line, “are good things, never wholly barren, superficial, ignorant.” She begins with a positive value judgment pitted against a list of negative adjectives from an implied critique of museums. Her rhetorical approach in this poem is similar to that in “Poetry,” which begins by stating her “dislike” of her subject. Like poetry, the museum is not “wholly” good or bad, Moore says, but is of value because it provides a collection of potentially meaningful parts that the viewer must evaluate. The museum literalizes the miscellany style she privileges in her writing:

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8 Her topics range from a review of children’s art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Sept. 1925), to the importance of “literary fastidiousness” for all forms of writing (May 1926), to art and commerce (June 1926), to the issue of “originals” in relation to a book on English autographs (April 1927), to the relationship of book reviewing to criticism (Nov. 1927), to Dürer and da Vinci (July 1928), to the designation of “geniuses” (Oct. 1928) and finally to Kenneth Burke’s aesthetic theories (Jan. 1929).

9 One of the two manuscript copies at the Rosenbach is written on the back of a letter dated Nov. 4, 1919; the other is undated. I quote from what appears to be the second, condensed version of the first.
In her customary way, she uses an inventory method to catalogue “The collection of armour,” “human cock-spurs,” “these harnesses,” “The faience / shroud” and “The eternity ape.” Unlike
the unwavering focus on a single object that critics of ekphrasis emphasize in most poems about art, “Museums” is indicative of Moore’s pluralistic approach in terms of the sources for her ekphrastic poems and the number of objects depicted.

The poem also reflects her actual approach to viewing art in museums, which Monroe Wheeler describes: “She was always darting about from one thing to another, making her own discoveries. We would go to see a certain exhibition, but she would always find something else she liked better” (qtd. in Loizeaux 88). What makes the museum valuable for Moore is not the unquestioned greatness of each of its objects, but its facilitation of the process of selection, of choosing which objects are “cause for burning speculation.” Her choice of objects to list is idiosyncratic both in terms of their historical relationships (or lack thereof) and in terms of the way she describes them (not by title and location, as she will do more clearly in her later ekphrastic poems). The poem makes it clear that museums are only valuable for those who engage in this critical process of selection and aesthetic engagement. Yet there is a strange disjunction in this poem: On the one hand, it implies that museums can widen “the mental horizon” and produce an engaged response to art that lasts beyond the moment of encounter; on the other, it suggests in the last stanza that museums can confirm the static conception of “what one has always valued.” On what appears to be the second draft of this poem in the Rosenbach file, Moore has written at the top “not published and not finished,” indicating her dissatisfaction with it. Moore’s positive conception of museums as miscellanies in her Dial “Comment” is in keeping with the earlier statements and list of objects in this poem; however, her language is unusually didactic, especially in contrast to her praise for the mentally expansive potential of museums. The lines Moore crossed out betray this discrepancy most obviously, chastising those who “drag” themselves through their visits in “museum-tourist fashion” and deny the museum’s potential to “widen” their “mental horizon[s].”

Moore’s final lines seem to caution against what McBride calls in one column the “mummified” effect of museums (72: 109). She differs, though, in suggesting that this stagnant quality is not intrinsic to the objects but due to our repeated, preconceived responses to them, which isolate the experience of art within the museum’s walls. In the third stanza, the speaker admits her preference for the “eternity ape” over the animal it represents in “ac-/tuality,” the sharp enjambment cuing the reader’s scepticism of the same preference for artifice over reality that Moore parodically portrays in “No Swan So Fine.” Instead, the “museum-tourist’s” critical
openness to new forms of learning and response becomes locked in a paradoxical “refresh[ing]” of returning “values,” aligning her with the canonical narratives she opposes in her comment about museums as miscellany in *The Dial*. Moore’s portrayal of the predetermined repetition of “one follows a stream, / every turning of which is a foregone conclusion” implies her concern that one’s critical response can become stunted if one looks to art only to confirm “the appearance of what one has always valued.” These lines caution against the prolonged or repetitive focus on an art object as a way to reify its meaning, which reflects her concern about ekphrasis as well as the formation of aesthetic canons through art criticism. Yet these final lines are also ambiguous if the meaning is extended beyond aesthetic preference to beliefs and ethical values, which for Moore were permanent. The contradiction may have also contributed to her decision to not finish the poem or pursue its publication. Though she may have abandoned this poem because of its pitfalls, the manuscript suggests that her intention was to caution against a gaze that becomes too exclusively internalized, sealing off the response to the object from new influences and associations.

Though theoretically unified under the title “Modern Art,” McBride’s column in practice was very much a miscellany, incorporating multiple subjects, anecdotes and meta-criticism in each of its manifestations. Though he frequently returns to his favourite American artists - Demuth, Marin, O’Keeffe, Stieglitz, Hartley and Duchamp - and to the European “giants” he measures them against - Picasso, Matisse and Van Gogh - he nevertheless covers such a diverse range of topics that his column never reads as a polished essay; rather than asking his reader to digest a developed argument, he instead scatters multiple and sometimes disconnected tidbits of information throughout.  

In his introduction to McBride’s selected criticism, Daniel Catton Rich says that the “form in which McBride succeeded best was the short essay or trenchant paragraph. He was first and last a journalist” and when he attempted “a longer, conventional appraisal… [like] his little book on Matisse, published in 1930, he was less successful” (24-25). McBride

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10 In his July 1920 column, for example, he anecdotally narrates his visit to Walter Arensberg’s studio, makes fun of the “bourgeois” response to Duchamp’s art and then discusses a recent exhibit of Kahlil Gibran’s work. In his Aug. 1920 column he reviews exhibitions by Elie Nadelman, Gaston Lachaise, Charles Burchfield and an “Independents” show, and elaborates his defence of the patron system and the problem of “New Moralists” in America (61). He quotes authorities from Plato (Sept. 1920) to Emerson (Nov. 1920), and artists from Mozart (Oct. 1920) to Charlie Chaplin (Apr. 1921). He describes hobnobbing with Gertrude Stein and Pascin in Paris while taking in a Ballet Russe performance (Nov. 1923) and constructs a scathing portrait of actress turned politician Effie Cherry for her views on educational reform (Dec. 1925).
also wrote for The New York Sun from 1913-1950 and his columns were similarly varied under the umbrella of modern art, for a time appearing under the casual, gossipy title, “What is Happening in the World of Art” (The Flow of Art 23). Since his columns in The Dial average only three pages, this miscellany style suits their format.

Moore’s preference for a miscellany style in verse likely influenced her to look for prose models that incorporated a similar approach when she began to write art criticism in the early 1920s; indeed, many similarities can be seen between her editorial “Comments” and art reviews, and McBride’s columns. Whereas the problem with Moore’s miscellany style in “Museums” is that it only allows her to elucidate her concern about canonical narratives indirectly, through a process of sampling that could be misconstrued as endorsing these narratives, in the long review format her adoption of McBride’s preference for multiple subjects, quick transitions and lack of overarching arguments denies her the possibility of developing any larger, coherent critical framework. Her unpublished review, “Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism,” of the MoMA’s 1936-1937 exhibition of the same name, ambiguously links too-abstract or overly general commentary to a large number of specific artworks, none of which is focused on for more than a sentence or two. She names or alludes to thirty-seven different works in the exhibition, bookended by introductory and concluding paragraphs that praise the museum and its publications in general terms. The following paragraph illustrates the quick transitions, the quantity of objects discussed and the lack of contextual information regarding the artists or works that are characteristic of Moore’s style in this review:

In largeness there is danger of surfeit, but here the multitude of specimens has not been able to keep certain work from standing out in the mind... One notes the absence of anarchy in Man Ray’s Portable woman, built like the Michelin Tire mascot, ring upon ring, but with an Archipenko-Botticelli attitude of mannikin willowiness. In The Jungle by Benjamin Kopman, the sombre-brilliant color and blunted animals lying out of plane like bodies on a celestial map, have the incorruptible queerness of the true poet for conscience’ [sic] sake… In each of the Miro compositions, - the a-e-i-o-u crayon and water-color, the Personage throwing a stone at a bird, and the stuffed parrot-artificial-leg-and-small-objects, one admires the fitted-together-pattern aspect of subject matter and space. (2)

The compounded effect of these types of paragraphs makes Moore’s review difficult to follow. Her compelling description through comparison - “like the Michelin Tire mascot, ring upon ring”
and “the sombre-brilliant color and blunted animals lying out of plane like bodies on a celestial map” - unbalance the strange, disconnected and often awkwardly phrased statements about the function or significance of these works. It is unclear what she means by “the incorruptible queerness of the true poet for conscience’ sake” (much less how Kopman’s work depicts this), nor is it apparent what the significance of the “fitted-together-pattern aspect of subject matter and space” is to Miró’s compositions or to the Dada and Surrealist movements she ostensibly discusses.

Reviews are generally expected to provide an account of individual works within a larger context of precursor artists or movements, an expectation that Moore defies in her article. In her shorter “Comments,” the fusion of highly detailed descriptions with extremely abstract conclusions is not so disjunctive as in the MoMA review, because of the former’s more condensed (two-page) format and casual tone. The review of the MoMA show, however, is overwhelmed by numerous sources and descriptions of works at the expense of the coherent critical voice she develops in much of her art criticism. The majority of the works Moore mentions in her review appeared in the large Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism catalog she owned, which she stuffed with dozens of newspaper and magazine clippings about the exhibition, Surrealism, Dada, various affiliated artists and the MoMA itself. It is apparent that she read extensively about this exhibition before writing this unsolicited review.¹¹ The exclusion of a discussion of Surrealism and Dada as movements in her review is unusual, with Moore remarking, almost defensively, “That certain artists working alone, have been claimed by this or that movement, is indicative of an inconveniently obdurate principle. We see that individuality cannot be disguised by media, or broken into by altering intentions of period” (2). Moore’s unwillingness to make unifying statements about the art she reviews can perhaps be attributed to a desire for her criticism to reflect the heterogeneity of Dada and Surrealism as “movement[s]” that actively resisted these kinds of critical summations. Nonetheless, her focus on individual works and her distaste for theories that would force similarities for the sake of an overarching narrative of a movement resulted in a disjunctive and hyperactive account of the exhibition that failed as a publishable

¹¹ A Rosenbach clipping of a New York Times letter to the editor from a woman (“Gertrude D.”) claiming that she could not find the MoMA’s apparently obscure location explains Moore’s otherwise odd mention of “[a] resident of Pittsfield [who] complains in a letter to the Times that the building is hard to find, but [who] is also aware of the advice about a gift-horse.”
Roger Fry’s Formalism: Anecdotes and Antidotes

I have suggested that Moore’s inclusion of multiple sources and objects of art in her reviews and “Comment” columns was influenced by the miscellany style of McBride’s “Modern Art” column. There is also evidence that her criticism of individual artists and her poetry about art were influenced by another prominent art critic - Fry - who began writing for *The Dial* in 1922 and continued to do so throughout Moore’s editorship. Moore admired Fry’s work, recommending his seminal *Vision and Design* to Bryher in a 1921 letter, perhaps having read it on the recommendation of Craven’s (rare) raving review in *The Dial’s* July 1921 issue, which she surely read since two of her poems appeared in it.

Moore may also have admired Fry because he possessed the spirit of openness to new experience that she privileges in “The Student.” In *Roger Fry and the Beginnings of Formalist Art Criticism*, Jacqueline V. Falkenheim suggests that it was primarily his receptiveness to the new French art of Gauguin, Van Gogh, Cézanne and later, of Matisse and Picasso, that positioned him to become one of the most influential art critics of his time. She points out that he was the “only critic to have acknowledged favorably the Cézannes seen at the New Gallery in 1906” (9) and that he was “almost alone in being aware at all of what contemporary French artists were trying to do” during the first of the seminal Grafton Gallery exhibitions he organized in 1910 (18). As a scholar of fifteenth-century Italian landscape painting before he turned to modern art, who published essays on Giotto, Dürer, El Greco and Claude, Fry may have been seen by Moore as an antidote to the tendency of *The Dial* critics to privilege new art over old, a tendency especially epitomized by the disparaging of “academicized” discourse and individuals by Craven and McBride.

Falkenheim points out that Fry was careful to distinguish between “respectable academicism”

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12 Leavell reports that Moore attempted to publish it at least twice (54). The Rosenbach files show that this review exists in two forms and was submitted to *Transitions* and the *Globe*; a letter to Elizabeth Bishop states that it was also submitted to *The Southern Review* (SL 382).

13 “When I Buy Pictures” and “A Grave.”
and “Royal Academicism”:

The former he would define as the respect for the use of the conventional vocabulary of art which has been developing and becoming entrenched since antiquity. The latter is the stultifying, snobbish and uncritical reverence for these conventions and for the old masters who practiced them by artists who themselves have no sincere motivation. (81)

Fry’s emphasis on continuity in the formal “vocabulary” of art resonates with Moore’s qualified assertion in her December 1926 “Comment”: “But hostile though specific theories may be and riotous as the artist may sometimes seem in his attitude toward the existing body of art, in so far as a thing is really a work of art it confirms other works of art” (CP 176). Moore’s admiration for Fry was probably also due to the similarity in their aesthetic criteria for good art, which for Fry must portray “sincere motivation” and for Moore, “the genuine.” For both, these terms and their synonyms were linked to the spiritual, though neither ventures to elaborate on this effect beyond stating its existence. In his article on M. Jean Marchand in the October 1922 issue of The Dial, Fry refers to the artist as one who does not paint “vulgarly poetical picture[s]… M. Marchand is much too serious and too genuine a painter for that” (72: 389). In her biography of Fry, Virginia Woolf adopts his term when she describes his “instant response to whatever he found genuine, his resentment of what seemed to him false” (148). Moore’s “Poetry,” published in 1919, begins and ends with the search for art that can provide a “place for the genuine” (135). Though Moore wrote “Poetry” before she recorded her encounter with Fry’s theories, her conception of “the genuine” was likely inflected by his frequent use of the term and its synonyms throughout his early criticism, particularly because the other Dial critics largely avoided discussing the more abstract, affective qualities of art that both Fry and Moore refer to as spiritual.

When this connection between art and the spiritual is referred to (rarely) by the other critics of

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14 This comment also echoes T.S. Eliot in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919): “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone… [W]hat happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them” (Selected Prose 38).

15 Moore later shortened the poem to its first three lines in The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore (1967), emphasizing further this ambiguous description of “the genuine” as its last word.
The Dial, its context is often classist. McBride, for example, dramatically laments that “Toulouse-Lautrec, Félicien Rops, Constantin Guys could not have lived in this country” because of its large middle class, the “pedants and strict moralists” who are “deaf to the language of painting and [have] no clue to the emotion it awakens” (74: 322) and who pose a grave danger because “there are so many of them and they present such a stolid, immovable front against the things of the spirit” (321-322). In his “Retrospect” essay, Fry discusses the cold reception of the “cultured public,” who became the “most inveterate and exasperated enemies of the new movement” for which he was seen as spokesperson (192). He suggests that this reaction was not to his aesthetic theories per se, but to his understanding that “to admire a Matisse required only a certain sensibility” that even “one’s maid” could possess (192-193). Whereas both McBride and Fry depict a public resistant to the new art, McBride imposes a class system based on an implicit, naturalized notion of aesthetic sensibility; Fry instead infuriates England’s elite ranks by suggesting that such a sensibility is fundamentally democratic. For Fry, and especially for Moore, this democratic depiction of the beholder of art was essential to the understanding that art could touch on the spiritual, which for both is a universal conception. Moore equated the act of seeing itself with spiritual possibilities in art. Indeed, Costello argues that “visual sources” frequently facilitated her “search for the genuine” because “she found her closest kinships among those who actually looked for it” (10) - artists, yes, but also their critics. The reader she addresses in her poems as “you” is someone, she assumes, who also looks for the genuine in art, and who knows that objects of art “are important not because a / high-sounding interpretation can be put upon them but because they are / useful,” as she states in “Poetry” (135). Moore’s enjambment further underscores the surprisingly basic designation of important art as “useful.” The function she suggests for art, not only in this poem but also in her criticism, is to facilitate a fuller life of the spirit, which she presents as a fundamental necessity of human existence.

Like Moore’s approach to art in “Museums,” “Poetry” and “When I Buy Pictures,” Fry’s ideal viewer throughout Vision and Design is someone who approaches art without preconceived judgments or theoretical frameworks. Fry also insists that this viewer must take the time to focus on the object in isolation from any relation to function (on this latter point Moore differs from Fry, as will be discussed later). In “Art and Life” Fry claims that these two spheres must remain separate in order to enact this process of “really see[ing]” (16), which opens the viewer to his own spiritual capacities. The last lines of his essay “Retrospect” reflect on the “value of the aesthetic emotion,” about which “[o]ne can only say that those who experience it feel it to have a
peculiar quality of ‘reality’ which makes it a matter of infinite importance in their lives. Any attempt I might make to explain this would probably land me in the depths of mysticism. On the edge of that gulf I stop” (199). In her essay “Is the Real the Actual?,” written the year after she recommended Vision and Design to Bryher as “both excellent and sumptuous” (SL 166), Moore too uses the vocabulary of “mysticism,” with an explicitness perhaps meant to subtly chide Fry for his evasion of the topic: “A reverence for mystery is not a vague, invertebrate thing. The realm of the spirit is the only realm in which experience is able to corroborate the fact that the real can also be the actual” (CP 74). The spiritual quality of Faggi’s work is the overt subject of her article. Moore praises Faggi with vocabulary similar to that Fry used to praise Marchand in The Dial’s October 1922 issue, two months before Moore’s essay appeared. Fry presents Marchand’s work as “genuine” because “There is no confectionary, no fabrications of agreeable pigment; the quality comes directly out of the necessities of expression” (391). Moore begins her review practically paraphrasing Fry, noting Faggi’s ability “to derive feeling from the subject rather than to have to bring feeling to it as in the theme which is palpable and easily comprehensible” (CP 73). Fry’s emphasis on formal unity, the major factor of successful design throughout Vision and Design, also leads him to see how in Marchand’s Maternity (1921), the artist “has woven these complex movements into a single whole of almost sculptural completeness and coherence” (390). This emphasis is echoed by Moore; she notes that in Faggi’s works “there is a creative unity; complementary curves and repeated motive of lines or angles in hands or drapery” (73-74).

Moore diverges from Fry in her more emphatic elaboration of the importance of subjective response, which for her transcends formal or material aspects to suggest a truth above appearances. Moore praises Faggi’s work because it presents “a complete contrast to the fifty-fathom deep materialism of the hour. Spiritual imagination as is apparent, is especially potent in interpreting subjects which are spiritual” (73). Moore’s dichotomy between “materialism” and the “spiritual” is reminiscent of one of the earliest explanations of abstract art, Wassily Kandinsky’s Concerning the Spiritual in Art (1910).16 Kandinsky understood art as an “attempt

16 Moore was likely familiar with Kandinsky’s ideas, at least in a cursory way. The 1912 German anthology of the latest movements in French, Russian and German painting, Der Blaue Reiter (1912), of which Moore owned a well-perused copy, contains Kandinsky’s essay “Über die Formfrage” that elaborates many of the ideas in Concerning the Spiritual in Art. Though Moore was not a fluent reader of German, the condition of her copy of the anthology and
to penetrate beneath the epidermis of appearances to the ultimate or ‘inner’ reality,” which he defined as “the spirit” (Selz 128, 129). Though Fry had in his earliest essays gestured toward Kandinsky’s ideas about the spiritual quality of art, at the time he and Moore wrote concurrently for *The Dial* he had largely abandoned these ideas to privilege instead what Kandinsky saw as the “unimportant” (Selz 130) aspect of form.¹⁷ Moore, like Kandinsky, was more interested in the spiritual possibilities of responses to art: “[One] feel[s] in Mr. Faggi’s *Ka*,” she says, “as in all his work, the controlled emotion, the mental poise which suggests the Absolute - a superiority to fetishism and triviality, a transcendence, an inscrutable dignity” (74). What makes Faggi’s art valuable for Moore is its function to “suggest” the “Absolute” or spiritual to its viewer, to open up subjective response to universal ideals. For Moore, as for Kandinsky and the early Fry, great art is great because it transcends its own “materialism” by facilitating its viewer’s connection with a universal or spiritual realm beyond her isolated self. Both Moore and Fry understood this capacity of great art as an ethical imperative for serious or “genuine” artists. In Moore’s excessive emphasis on “subjects which are spiritual” in her work on Faggi, one ascertains a response to the disjunction between Fry’s early emphasis on the spirit in art and his later focus on form alone, since never again is the topic so forefronted in her criticism.

Moore’s dichotomy of the “actual” and the “real” in the title of her article refers to the distinction she makes throughout between one’s pragmatic or “material” reality and what she calls the “spiritual imagination” (73). This distinction is identical to Fry’s depiction of the human possibility of a “double life” (12) in “An Essay in Aesthetics” - there is “actual life” and “imaginative life” (12). The difference for Fry is that the imaginative or spiritual life allows one to separate oneself from the functional relation to objects and events that actual life necessitates, permitting that the “whole consciousness may be focussed upon the perceptive and the emotional aspects of the experience” to enable a “different set of values, and a different kind of perception” (12). Art is the primary way we access the imaginative life, says Fry, and he defends this

¹⁷ Greenberg would follow his predecessor’s lead, asserting, “[a]s far as I can make out, Kandinsky’s ‘spiritual’ means simply intensity and seriousness and has no religious connotations” (2: 16).
experience in terms of spirituality. Like religion, which is an “affair of the imaginative life,” art corresponds to “certain spiritual capacities of human nature… And so, too, I think the artist might if he chooses to take a mystical attitude, and declare that the fullness and completeness of the imaginative life he leads may correspond to an existence more real and more important than any that we know in mortal life” (15). Charles Reeve argues that Fry’s separation of life from art (or the actual from the spiritual) is not, as many later critics of formalism allege, an effort to remove art entirely from real-world political contexts in order to evade the ethical responsibility these contexts entail; this separation is instead necessary to enable a truer critique of the world from which the work emerges and as such, “his formalism is a humanism” (108). Because the imaginary is, for Fry, a “realm of integrity and wholeness… in which mind and soul operate at their highest levels” (Reeve 116), this separation enables one to think in a way that subverts the dominant orders and ideologies of actual life. Thus, for Fry, art’s ethical function is premised on the viewer perceiving the total absence of any connection between everyday, “actual” life and the spiritual experience of perceiving the art object, which is isolated in the self-referential, self-contained realm of the aesthetic.

Moore diverges from Fry at the point where he insists on the separation of art from “actual” life and limits art’s function to that of a facilitator of universal, spiritual or humanistic values. Moore’s suspicion of this limitation for art is evident in poems such as “ Critics and Connoisseurs” and “When I Buy Pictures.” Her conclusion in her article on Faggi’s sculpture attempts to fuse the categories of “actual” life and “imaginative” or spiritual life that Fry kept so distinct. When she states that “[t]he realm of the spirit is the only realm in which experience is able to corroborate the fact that the real can also be the actual” (74), she suggests that the spiritual actually contains both sides of Fry’s dichotomy. Moore’s praise of Vision and Design and the formal logic of her early verse show that she understood formal complexity as a defining component of an object’s status as art, but she was also quite willing to acknowledge this complexity in ordinary and everyday objects in a way that Fry was not. “ An Essay in Aesthetics” posits that an “object of art…must in the first place be adapted to that disinterested intensity of contemplation, which we have found to be the result of cutting off the responsive action” (19);

Thanks to Professors Elizabeth Legge and Charles Reeve for their insights and guidance on the topic of Fry’s formalism as an ethical position.

Fry’s emphasis here also seems redolent of Immanuel Kant in The Critique of Judgment.
his “Art and Life” makes the same argument on the macrocosmic scale, arguing that the “usual assumption of a direct and decisive connection between life and art is by no means correct” (6). Moore’s suspicion of the total separation of art from life, form from function, is suggested by her ekphrastic poem “Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish,” which responds to another modern ekphrasis that adopts Fry’s premise.

Wallace Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar” is most commonly read as a poem that interrogates the relationship between art (symbolized by the “jar”) and the world (symbolized by a hill in Tennessee). Many critics have read the jar as representative of the human drive for power through art. In all cases, this power of the jar is premised on a separation that is hierarchical - the jar “upon a hill” is elevated - but it is also based on the jar’s self-sufficient preclusion from the world: “It did not give of bird or bush / Like nothing else in Tennessee” (76). The negated verb “give” disconnects the jar from everything “else in Tennessee” by emphasizing the unidirectional nature of its relationship with the outside world. The jar demands specific reactions from its surroundings - “It made the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill” - and exhibits power over them: “It took dominion everywhere” (76; my emphasis). Unlike everything else in its environment, the jar does not “give,” or make any tangible contribution to its environment; the jar is not functional as a jar. Despite its apparently uniform appearance, this jar demands the prestige of art, likening itself to the overtly aesthetic “urn” of Keats’ ode, as Helen Vendler has convincingly argued (Wallace Stevens 45-46). The jar’s difference from everything “else in Tennessee” is that its status as an object to be used is denied from the start, and the poem suggests instead that the jar becomes an aesthetic object precisely because it has been divorced from its usual function. Stevens’ poem could be read as an “anecdote” of Fry’s formalism, suggesting that art’s power and our reverence for it is based only on this arbitrary elevation of art over the contextual and functional associations other objects have in their everyday existence.

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20 Frank Lentricchia refers to the jar as an “aural imperialist” (11), Donald Gutierrez argues that it represents “human centralization” that “civilizes ‘wilderness’” (54) and Pat Righelato regards it as having “the possessive power of the eye” (82).

21 The jar’s lack of functionality is especially ironic considering Roy Harvey Pearce’s assertion of the pun on “dominion,” suggesting that Stevens had in mind “a specific fruit jar, the ‘Dominion Wide Mouth Special’” (65).

22 See also Glen MacLeod’s interpretation of the jar as a “readymade” (20-22). Duchamp’s *Fountain* of 1917 was thrown out of the Society of Independent Artists exhibition just two years before Stevens’ poem was first published.
Moore’s “Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish” responds rather overtly to the formalist denial of art as functional that is exhibited in Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar.” Moore’s poem existed in an alternate form as early as 1915 under the title “In Einar Jonsson’s [sic] Cow.” Initially an ekphrastic fusion of two mythological sculptures by the eponymous Icelandic artist - one, “The Wave of the Ages,” featuring a wave personified as a woman, and the other, “Ymir and Audhumla,” captioned “the giant Ymir suckles the cow Audhumla” (Costello 200) - the poem was drastically altered by Moore in the early 1920s, with the revised version published for the first time in her Observations of 1924. The latter version of the poem changes the title to make explicit its status as ekphrasis, highlighting the glass bottle she copied from an article about an archaeological excavation of Egypt’s Tell El-Amarna in Illustrated London News in August of 1921 (Molesworth 173). She also rewrote the second stanza to fuse the “polish[ed]” artifice of the bottle with the moving image of a fish, to evoke implicitly the water the bottle initially held. I quote the 1924 version in its entirety:

Here we have thirst
And patience, from the first,
And art, as in a wave held up for us to see
In its essential perpendicularity;

Not brittle but
Intense—the spectrum, that
Spectacular and nimble animal the fish,
Whose scales turn aside the sun’s sword by their polish. (173)

The single copy of this poem in the Rosenbach files is undated, but it had to have been written between August 1921, when she copied the image, and 1924, when it was published. Moore may have read Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar” when it first appeared in Poetry in 1919 (her first five poems were published in Poetry in 1915 and her letters suggest it was a publication she read

23 The first stanza is the same as the 1924 version; this is the second stanza:

Not chilly but
Intense. The spectrum’s cut
Out of the body of the world, laid on its back
And made subordinate. We recognize no lack. (qtd. in Leavell 413)
regularly\(^{24}\). It seems more likely, however, that this poem was written around November 1923, when she completed a review of Stevens’ *Harmonium*. The poem appeared in *The Dial*’s January 1924 issue. Her highly appreciative review praises a staggering thirty poems by name, but notably omits any mention of “Anecdote of the Jar.” Her praise in the review flags only slightly when she states, “[o]ne feels, however, an achieved remoteness as in Tu Mah’s lyric criticism: ‘Powerful is the painting… and high is it hung on the spotless wall in the lofty hall of your mansion’” (*CP* 91). The elevation, bareness of the wall and “lofty” atmosphere resonate with Stevens’ portrayal of the “jar,” though Moore does not attach her remark to any specific title. Her notable exclusion of the poem from those she praises, as well as the many similarities between it and her poem, suggest that she may have conceived “Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish” as a continuation of Stevens’ appraisal of the art and life dichotomy.

It was quite usual for Moore to retrieve notes, quotations and images from her many notebooks and scrapbooks when she composed poems, and in this case, it is possible that she recalled the glass bottle she sketched in 1921 because of its stark contrast to Stevens’ jar. The *Illustrated News* article actually featured two bottles, one of a more usual shape with handle and tapered neck, in black, white, blue and yellow, and the second an ornate fish-shaped bottle, referred to as the “gem of the collection” (185; see Figure 2). The collection of photographs that the bottles appear in is titled “Egypt of the Fourteenth Century Before Christ: Domestic Life Over Three Thousand Years Ago,” and the other objects pictured include a “bed,” a “bath… used for ceremonial washings,” “a small hand-brush, with a larger broom,” “a flour-sieve,” “an oven,” a “hearth” consisting of a “pottery bowl,” and “a bath-room… the bath being a limestone slab” (184-185). The fish-shaped bottle is the most ornate of the objects, and the two bottles are the only items that are also art objects, which their privileged status in the article as “the finest object[s]” (184) suggests. These bottles are also in contrast to the only “jar” mentioned (on a previous page), which was a component of a “primitive drain” system in the ancient Egyptian kitchen (183). The main article by T. Eric Peet “‘The Horizon of the Disk’ and its 3000 Year-Old Treasures: Discoveries at Tell El-Amarna,” provides the context for the photographs, explaining that the “objects found in an excavation of this type naturally form a great contrast with those which come from tombs, for they are in all cases things which were in every-day use… The fish

\(^{24}\) See *SL* for examples (not a complete list): 97, 165, 216, 277, 281, 290, 368, 383, 386, 387.
which is made of glass with a wavy pattern in four colours is a unique object, and is perhaps the finest-known specimen of the glass-work of this highly artistic period” (183). Moore likely admired the fish-shaped bottle because of its status as an art object that was found useful on an “every-day” basis, fulfilling her criteria in “When I Buy Pictures” that art must give “pleasure in [one’s] average moments” (144).

At first glance, Moore’s fish-shaped bottle appears in stark contrast to Steven’s jar. The multi-coloured, elaborately shaped, referential and useful bottle makes it especially clear that Stevens’ jar refuses embellishment. The bald adjectives in Stevens’ final stanza describing the jar as “gray and bare” contrast with Moore’s vibrant, multi-syllabic adjectives in her penultimate line, “Spectacular and nimble.” (Her adjectives actually refer to the “fish,” but the description of the bottle in this stanza is fluid, wavering between the object and its dynamic referent.) In contrast, the minimalism of “a jar,” “the jar” and the ubiquitous pronoun “it” denies any imaginative transformation of Steven’s object; his jar is static. The specificity of the article in Stevens’ title also works to deny the association of this jar with any other of its kind. Moore’s title is excessively descriptive, inserting an adjective and drawing out the already wordy caption of the

Figure 2 Photograph from “Egypt of the Fourteenth Century Before Christ: Domestic Life Over Three Thousand Years Ago.” 6 Aug 1921. Illustrated London News.
Illustrated London News photo “A Fish-Shaped Glass Bottle” to “An Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish.” In comparison to the original caption, her title verges on hyperbole in its use of extra prepositions and articles, as if in deliberate reaction to Stevens’ insistent minimalism. Her use of the indefinite “an” is in contrast to the definite article used in Stevens’ title, possibly in an effort to underscore the sense of the “every-day” functional context of the historical bottle, or in an effort to avoid elevating the bottle above others of its kind, in opposition to the emphasized singularity of Stevens’ jar. In his 1919 essay “The Artist’s Vision,” Fry discusses how a “Sung Bowl” should be aesthetically viewed, stating that “it is irrelevant to us to know whether the bowl was made seven hundred years ago in China, or in New York yesterday” (33). Moore and Stevens both address this aesthetic isolation as a problem in divergent ways: Stevens’ poem mimics parodically the formalist shunning of context, while Moore desires to show that art is in fact connected with life in an “essential perpendicularity.” Moore’s poem begins “Here we have thirst” and lists “patience” and “art” as secondary qualities the bottle evokes, making more literal and concrete the claim that art is created to satisfy human needs. For Fry these are only intellectual and spiritual needs, whereas Moore disrupts the dichotomy of the aesthetic and the functional that Fry’s justification for art depends upon.

Moore’s fish-shaped bottle also disrupts the obsession with the “round” characteristic of the jar in Stevens’ poem. Frank Lentricchia points out the prominence of this word hidden throughout the poem:

“A whole lot of “round” for such a short poem: surround, around, round (twice), ground. “Round”: an insidiously invasive sound which evokes at this poem’s aural level all of the big thematic points condensed in the key word of the poem: “dominion.” Dominion “everywhere” — “everywhere” / “air” / “bare” — this triplet, in a poem otherwise devoid of [end] rhyme, is unavoidable to the ear: a saturating totality, a faceless totality of authority. The jar is into every damn thing. (11)

If, as Lentricchia suggests, Stevens uses the word “round” to create a sense of aural dominance, we can read the jar’s centrifugal character as a commentary (likely a critique) on the formalist premise of self-sufficiency, on the separation of the aesthetic from historical reality that Fry asserts in “Art and Life.” Moore’s criticism of Fry via Stevens anticipates the allegations of his

25 Although Moore does not include notes to the source article as she frequently does in other poems, she provides enough context to note its origin, and an informed contemporary reader could well have associated it with the much publicized Tell El-Amarna excavation.
later critics that the desire to disconnect art from worldly contexts is ethically spurious, even though, as Reeve argues, Fry himself perhaps saw this separation as necessary for the viewer’s moral development. To evoke their self-sufficiency, Fry frequently uses the vocabulary of “balance,” “unity,” “harmony” and “wholeness” to describe ideal works of art: “Unity of some kind is necessary for our restful contemplation of the work of art as a whole… this unity is due to a balancing of the attractions to the eye about the central line of the picture” (Vision and Design 20-21). This vocabulary was also picked up not only by later modernist art critics, including Greenberg, but also by formalist literary critics in the decades following Fry’s collection. In his book about the New Critical movement, The New Apologists for Poetry, Murray Krieger notes the “common claims about the organic unity and inviolable context of the poem which functions for us as aesthetic object,” elaborating that this context is a “self-contained and self-sustaining world of linguistic interrelationships… To allow the poem to function referentially is to break the context. It is to allow the poem to point outside itself and thus to lead me into… the uninspiring familiarities of the workaday world, having been denied the… purely poetic experience” (20).

Krieger notes that this rhetoric of “organic unity” and “self-contain[ment]” is a “common claim” across critical disciplines by 1956, though he suggests that formalist art criticism is a major analogue in his definition of the poem which “functions for us as aesthetic object.” Formalist terminology from art criticism also made its way into the ekphrastic criticism that began to emerge in the late sixties, most notably with the 1967 publication of Krieger’s seminal essay, “The Ekphrastic Principle and the Still Movement of Poetry; or Laokoön Revisited.” From this perspective it is no surprise that one of the poems repeatedly made to stand in defence of these theories is Stevens’ “Anecdote of the Jar.”

In his essay, Krieger uses the “spatial metaphor” (88) and, implicitly, a similar formalist rhetoric as that of Fry (and his successor Greenberg) to construct his unusual theory of ekphrastic poetry. He argues that ekphrastic poems exist only “in a specially frozen sort of aesthetic time” (88). His addition to the formalist rhetoric used throughout of “plastic relationships” (90), “self-sufficiency” (88) and “pur[ity]” (100) is his idea of “still movement”: Ekphrasis is meta-poetry,

26 Krieger notes that Joseph Frank’s essay “Spatial Form in Modern Literature” is his precedent for the application of spatial vocabulary to poetry. He explains that “Frank is interested more in the use of these spatial metaphors by recent authors than in the generic spatiality of literary form and - even more to my point - in the inevitability of spatial language by the critic or by the poem as its own aesthetician” (109).
which “use[s] a plastic object as a symbol of the frozen, stilled world of plastic relationships which must be superimposed upon literature’s turning world to ‘still’ it” (90). Fry’s rhetoric of “unity” and “harmony” appears in Krieger’s symbolic use of the circle; through its formal aspects, the ekphrastic poem creates a “sense of roundness” that “converts its linear movement into a circle” (88). He quotes Leo Spitzer to prove that traditional ekphrastic poems were devoted to circular objects: shields, cups and urns - to which Krieger adds Stevens’ “jar.” Moore’s critique in “Egyptian Pulled Glass Bottle in the Shape of a Fish” is not of the theory that formal unity produces effective art, but of the further claim that this formal unity cuts itself off from any functional relation to the world in which it was produced. Krieger’s essay was published well after most of Moore’s late ekphrases (still to be discussed), but it demonstrates that Moore’s engagement with formalist art criticism throughout her career anticipates and preemptively challenges the lens through which her ekphrastic poems would later be viewed.

1.5 Overcoming Mastery: Ekphrasis in the Late Poems

Though Moore had mentioned artists including El Greco and da Vinci in earlier poems, the late poems indicate a preoccupation with ekphrasis proper, often focusing entirely on specific artworks, a pattern of direct reference rather than diffuse engagement. “Charity Overcoming Envy” (1963) epitomizes this turn, as it names a particular tapestry and its museum location in the opening lines. In their reference to specific works, “Blessed is the Man” (Giorgione’s Self-Portrait), “Leonardo da Vinci’s” (Saint Jerome in the Wilderness), “Saint Valentine” (El Greco’s Lady in a Fur Wrap), “An Expedient - Leonardo da Vinci’s - and a Query” (da Vinci’s now lost Leda and the Swan), “Tippoo’s Tiger” (eighteenth-century automaton Tipu’s Tiger at the Victoria and Albert Museum) and “The Magician’s Retreat” (Magritte’s Domain of Lights) are all examples of actual ekphrasis published between 1956-1970. All but “Blessed is the Man” and “Tippoo’s Tiger” were published in The New Yorker, a context that likely contributed to the concentration on ekphrasis in Moore’s late career. The magazine’s huge emphasis on visual culture in the late 1950s provided a fertile space for commentary on the usefulness of art in contemporary society, and in the early 1960s, its regular column “The Art Galleries” showcased a breed of art criticism that conformed to the prevailing focus on Abstract Expressionism and the theories that attempted to explain it.
Moore’s choice of objects in her later ekphrases is also notable given *The New Yorker* context, since she largely turned to canonical works, as opposed to writing about the Abstract Expressionist movement that was discussed in virtually every “The Art Galleries” column during this time. In *The New Yorker*, and in the popular theories of Greenberg and Rosenberg generally, canonical artists like da Vinci were implicitly important, but in practice their works were seen either as the models upon which certain “academic” artists based their dull copies, or as formal precursors to favoured contemporary artists. Much of *The New Yorker*’s content conveys a similar impression that this work of the past is stale or clichéd. For example, a short anecdote in a “Talk of the Town” column (a collection of clever stories and commentary about contemporary goings-on that opens each issue), entitled “Reverence,” implicates da Vinci’s irrelevance in contemporary life:

A friend of ours reports that he was strolling down Fifth Avenue in the Eighties during the recent “Mona Lisa” showing at the Metropolitan and saw a family of two parents and three children, who were obviously survivors of the exhibit, approach a sidewalk vendor and buy not one but five lifesize reproductions of the old girl. (43)

Aside from the class distinction implied between *The New Yorker*’s informed readership (whose familiarity with art entitles us to refer to her as the “old girl”) and the tourist family that attempts to appropriate the painting’s prestige through purchase, this anecdote also points to the out-of-date (“old”) nature of the object of the family’s admiration. The middle classes are far away from appreciating art at its vanguard, this pithy anecdote seems to imply. The suggestion that da Vinci’s work has no genuine currency or meaning beyond this kind of uncritical, inherited imperative of value is the issue Moore takes up in her 1959 ekphrasis, “Leonardo da Vinci’s.”

Though Moore does not mention Greenberg in her essays and letters at this time, she was familiar with his writings from early in his career. In her essay, “Efforts of Affection: A Memoir of Marianne Moore,” Elizabeth Bishop recalls hearing that the poet met Greenberg at a party for writers and artists: “[T]his friend introduced the then comparatively young art critic Clement Greenberg; to her surprise and no doubt to Mr. Greenberg’s, Marianne seemed to be familiar
with his writing and said, on shaking hands, ‘Oh, the fearless Mr. Greenberg’” (138). Though Bishop does not date this experience, it is possible it occurred after December 1941, when Greenberg reviewed Moore’s collection *What Are Years?* for *The Nation*. His occasional praise does not obscure the belittling statements that comprise much of the review:

> It is small-scale poetry, lacking resonance, lacking really culture, belonging to an outlook that has to break things into small pieces in order to see them, that has to destroy the organic unity of everything it treats… In spite of her fondness for deducing the most serious morals from her material, the unity of Miss Moore’s work is too exclusively a unity of sensibility, without intellectual consistency, without large opinions, without a felt center of convictions… It is a kind of aesthetic pantheism. Instead of finding all heaven she finds all that’s nice in a wildflower - or preferably in some more curious object.” (1: 85)

Insofar as it contrasts the stringent imperatives of art formalism, which the critic’s writings would come to epitomize, Greenberg’s assessment of Moore’s poetry is ironically apt. During the rest of the decade, Moore and Greenberg also published art criticism in many of the same journals: Both contributed to *Partisan Review, Arts, Art News, The New York Times Book Review,* and most frequently, *The Nation*, where Greenberg was art critic from 1942-1949, and where Moore published ten articles between 1936-1946, six of which appeared during the time Greenberg’s regular “Art” column appeared. Many of Greenberg’s articles in the above journals suggest that Moore’s reason for keeping it was not admiration. This review of Jack Lindsay’s book, *J. M. W. Turner: His Life and Work, A Critical Biography,* entitled “The Smoothness of Turner,” was published 11 Sept. 1966 in an unidentified newspaper in the section “Book Week.” It was republished in Greenberg’s *Collected
publications were early versions of those that appeared in *Art and Culture* in 1961.

Greenberg’s approach to Abstract Expressionism, popularized in essays including “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” and “American-Type Painting” (published in *Partisan Review* in 1939 and 1955, respectively), emphasized what he called “medium specificity,” by which he meant the artist’s ability to manipulate the “unique” properties of a particular medium, such as “literal” abstraction and the quality of “flatness” in painting. Greenberg’s theory was among the standard methods of explaining contemporary art by the late 1950s, when “Leonardo da Vinci’s” was published.

During the year this poem appeared, “The Art Galleries” was written by Robert Coates, credited with coining the term Abstract Expressionism. Coates’ column of June 13, 1959, published the month before Moore’s poem appeared, focuses on two exhibitions of American painters through the lens of their relationship to Abstract Expressionism, praising a fifty-year-old Alfred Maurer “Landscape” for its “Expressionistic freedom of color that startlingly foreshadows the Abstract Expressionist techniques of today” (81). He then moves to the American Abstract Artists’ exhibit, noting that “Stuart Davis… was barred from membership because his paintings contained elements of the representational” (82). This taboo against the representational (or interpretations of representational content) was a major tenet of Greenberg’s formalism at the time, which extremetized Fry’s emphasis on “plastic relationships” as the foremost value in art by excluding all discussion of content and limiting interpretation to the formal relation to medium. This denunciation of “content” (by which he means any reference or depiction of whatever is outside the history of art forms) appears as early as his 1939 “Avant-garde and Kitsch,” when he states that “Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself” (1: 8). “Leonardo da Vinci’s” is exaggeratedly positioned against the Greenbergian taboo of “content,” which for Moore in this poem includes narrative elaboration, associative digression and allegorical suggestion. As opposed to her earlier poems, which use the Cubist-inspired strategy of quotation and juxtaposition to work against narrative, the later poems adopt a story-telling mode.

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*Essays and Criticism* (Vol. 4). Greenberg spends most of the review establishing his opinion that Turner’s late work is overrated and attacking the apparent pretensions of the book’s author to the role of the critic: “Like so many other biographers, Mr. Lindsay succumbs to his subject instead of mastering it. But when he is not an art critic and not an interpreter, he is a scrupulous scholar and sets straight many facts about Turner” (8).
Moore’s choice of da Vinci’s *St. Jerome in the Wilderness* (c. 1480) for this poem in *The New Yorker* suggests her appeal to the same snobbish sense of venerate, though slightly dull, familiarity with great art as that of the “Reverence” anecdote. Her title immediately triggers recognition of the great artist, and her opening lines reward the amateur art enthusiast who recognizes the unfinished sketch from her obvious description of “Saint Jerome and his lion / in that hermitage / of walls half gone” (314). As the poem progresses, however, it becomes apparent that she provides this aesthetic familiarity for the rhetorical purpose of disrupting the stability of interpretive expectation, and particularly any account of the sketch that refers its meaning only to itself. The fact that Moore chose a work based on the existing cultural myths surrounding St. Jerome (similar to her use of the now lost painting of Leda and the swan alluded to in “An Expedient - Leonardo da Vinci’s - and a Query”), rather than the *Mona Lisa*, for example, can be attributed to their greater potential for integration into a larger, narrative fabric. That she chose to represent an unfinished sketch in this poem (and a lost painting in “An Expedient”) also disrupts the “unity” or “wholeness” that premises the sense of dissociation from cultural, political and ideological context that Greenberg’s formalism demands. The poem uses the mythology of St. Jerome to begin a process of association that transforms the painting into a playful and entertaining story, combining several different mythologies thematically related to St. Jerome and lions:

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Saint Jerome and his lion
in that hermitage
of walls half gone,
    share sanctuary for a sage—
joint-frame for impassioned ingenious
    Jerome versed in language—
    and for a lion like one on the skin of which
    Hercules’ club made no impression. (314)
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Like Greenberg, Moore immediately notes the artist’s attention to his “frame,” but her “joint-frame” points to the literal double-frame of these depicted walls and the actual frame around the sketch. The consciously awkward syntax that propels the comparison of Jerome with Hercules

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30 Moore’s notes to the poem reveal that the poem was also influenced by the appearance of the da Vinci reproduction in *Time* magazine’s 18 May 1959 issue (“Art: Matter & Spirit at the Vatican”).
also emphasizes the figurative “joint-frame” that Moore constructs through association. The initial attempt to describe the painting itself is interrupted and abandoned following the word “language.” Instead of focusing on the painting as a static object, Moore uses it to stimulate the hybridized narrative she constructs beyond its art-historical frame:

The beast, received as a guest,
    although some monks fled—
    with its paw dressed
        that a desert thorn had made red—
    stayed as guard of the monastery ass. . .
    which vanished, having fed
its guard, Jerome assumed. The guest then, like an ass,
    was made to carry wood and did not resist,

    but before long, recognized
    the ass and consigned
    its terrorized
        thieves’ whole camel-train to chagrined
Saint Jerome. The vindicated beast and
    saint somehow became twinned;
and now, since they behaved and also looked alike,
    their lionship seems officialized.

    Pacific yet passionate—
    for if not both, how
could he be great?
    Jerome—reduced by what he’d been through—
    with tapering waist no matter what he ate,
    left us the Vulgate. That in Leo
the Nile’s rise grew food checking famine
    made lion’s-mouth fountains appropriate,

    if not universally,
    at least not obscure.
And here, though hardly a summary, astronomy
    or pale paint makes the golden pair
in Leonardo da Vinci’s sketch—seem
    sun-dyed. Blaze on, picture,
saint, beast; and Lion Haile Selassie, with household
    lions as symbol of sovereignty. (314-315)

Following its first lines, the rest of the poem engages in a playful process of reframing, linking the painting to two of Aesop’s fables, the astrological constellation Leo and the then-contemporary Ethiopian Emperor, “Lion” Haile Selassie. Moore creates a narrative whereby da
Vinci’s painting is completely woven into a larger cultural fabric, negating its separation as an isolated object for veneration or for aesthetic analysis only.

Most notable about Moore’s associative digression is her very playful tone, at odds with the conventional reverent or grave attitude expected in ekphrastic writing. Moore references Aesop’s “The Shepherd and the Lion,” in which a shepherd aids a lion who “got a thorn stuck in his paw” (37), when she refers to the lion’s “paw dressed / that a desert thorn had made red,” and she fuses this fable with Aesop’s “The Ass, the Cock and the Lion,” in which suddenly “the lion turned round and devoured [the ass]” (200). She goes on to embellish the hybrid narrative by depicting that the lion was (apparently) mistakenly blamed for killing the ass, but then cannily “recognized / the ass” and “consigned / its terrorized / thieves’ whole camel-train to chagrined / Saint Jerome.” Moore then points to Jerome as a fellow storyteller, since he “left us the Vulgate.” Like Moore herself in the poem bearing his name, Jerome responds to an existing artwork (the Bible) in order to interpret and translate it (the Vulgate) for his contemporary audience. The article accompanying the Time magazine reproduction states that in da Vinci’s painting “the whole range of human virtue, from leonine passion to saintly devotion, is here made manifest. Animal and intellectual interlock” (“Art: Matter & Spirit at the Vatican” par. 3). For Moore, Jerome’s translations (or what remain of them) are important as art because they contain the spectrum of intellect and passion that she valued in responses to art, requiring an openness to the possibilities of association that “passion” demands and that Greenberg’s brand of formalism denied.

The brazen shifts between fable, myth, astronomy, contemporary politics and da Vinci’s painting emphasize that criticism should facilitate rather than forestall active engagement with the art it takes as its subject. In a poem published a couple of years earlier, “In the Public Garden,” Moore suggests succinctly the individual nature of response: “happy that Art, admired in general, / is always actually personal” (304). Her self-reflexive comment in “Leonardo da Vinci’s,” “And here, though hardly a summary,” referring to both painting and poem, suggests that criticism should also not pretend to provide any definitive, singular model of response. Greenberg’s

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31 Moore’s library at the Rosenbach contains six different editions of Aesop’s fables published between 1870 and 1966, including an edition published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Aesop: Five Centuries of Illustrated Fables (1964), of which Moore owned two copies.
criticism is notable in this regard in its proliferation of declaratives and imperatives, including his restriction of “advanced art” in “American-Type Painting” to painting that “test[s] the limits of the inherited forms and genres, and of the medium itself” (3: 235). He claims that painting is the most important medium because it has the “greatest number of expendable conventions imbedded in it,” conventions that “advanced art” attempts to minimize (3: 217). Moore’s association of the painting in “Leonardo da Vinci’s” with different literary myths and stories dissolves the barriers that Greenberg attempts to erect with his reductionist rhetoric about medium specificity. In contrast, Moore emphasizes interdisciplinarity in her breadth of reference, and suggests that part of the pleasure of responding to art inheres in the myriad associations it triggers, as well as in its ability to enrich and renew existing frames of reference.

Moore’s emphasis on the productivity of contextual interpretation could also perhaps be read as a hyperbolic version of Erwin Panofsky’s iconographical method, one of the dominant approaches to the study of Renaissance painting at the time Moore wrote her poem. Panofsky outlines three layers of meaning in works of art: manifest or literal content, existing cultural contexts and intrinsic meanings (5-8). The privileging of content inherent in Panofsky’s method was the tradition Greenberg explicitly reacted against by championing form. Moore’s poem progresses through a description of the sketch and an exaggerated account of mythological, biblical and cultural meanings. She then ends her poem with an imperative addressed not to the artist or the reader, but to the multiplying frames of reference the work propagates: “Blaze on, picture, / saint, beast; and Lion Haile Selassie, with household / lions as symbol of sovereignty.” By figuring the sketch’s multiple meanings as a light or “blaze,” Moore inverts Panofsky’s notion of intrinsic meaning to explicitly highlight what she would have seen as the truth underlying his method, which is that meaning in art, whether based on content or form, is paramount. The poem’s last lines evoke another famous ekphrasis, Rilke’s “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” in which the speaker depicts the sculpture “breaking out of all its contours / like a star” (181). Moore’s “Blaze on” also serves to resist Greenberg’s ideal of “flatness” that would reduce the sketch’s “pale paint” to the literal 2-D realm of its framed space. The pun on “blazon” - the poetic convention by which the beloved’s body is metaphorically associated with a far-reaching range

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Moore’s library at the Rosenbach contains four different volumes of Rilke’s verse, including a 1962 edition of M.D. Herter Norton’s Translations from the Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke in which this translation appears.
of references that interweave her into every aspect of the speaker’s (or viewer’s) world - also suggests a negation of metaphorical “flatness” or reduction as opposed to the fullness of response Moore desires.  

Moore’s most anthologized ekphrastic poem “Charity Overcoming Envy” (1963), shares with “Leonardo da Vinci’s” its focus on a canonical art object and an emphasis on narrative. It begins with an invitation that asks the reader to accept the premise that visual art can evoke narrative: “Have you time for a story / (depicted in tapestry)?” Also like “Leonardo da Vinci’s,” it uses the artwork’s subject matter (the depicted encounter between Charity and Envy, one of a series of tapestries showing the virtues conquering the vices), but changes the tone and content of the existing story. Hollander provides an English translation of the Latin titulus of the tapestry: “The envious soul’s sorrow is at the prosperity of its neighbor; it rejoices at the evil befalling him, like the dog. But the elephant does not know this. And charity smashes that evil” (299). Moore’s poetic version, however, presents these characterizations differently:

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Charity, riding an elephant,
on a “mosaic of flowers,” faces Envy,
the flowers “bunched together, not rooted.”
Envy, on a dog, is worn down by obsession,
his greed (since of the things owned by others
he can only take some). Crouching uneasily
in the flowered filigree, among wide weeds
    indented by scallops that swirl,
little flattened-out sunflowers,
thin arched coral stems, and—ribbed horizontally—
    slivers of green, Envy, on his dog,
    looks up at the elephant,
cowering away from her, his cheek scarcely scratched.
    He is saying, “O Charity, pity me, Deity!
    O pitiless Destiny,
what will become of me,
maimed by Charity—Caritas—sword unsheathed
over me yet? Blood stains my cheek. I am hurt.”
In chest armor over chain mail, a steel shirt
to the knee, he repeats, “I am hurt.”
The elephant, at no time borne down by self-pity,
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Moore’s description of “little flattened-out sunflowers” in the tapestry could be an allusion to Greenberg’s obsession with “flatness” as an essential quality of painting. The tapestry is identified by Moore as “[l]ate-fifteenth-century… Flemish or French, in the Burrell Collection, Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum” (335).
convinces the victim
that Destiny is not devising a plot. (335)

Though Envy is despicable, whining (twice) “I am hurt” despite his “cheek scarcely scratched,” he, unlike Charity, evokes our pathos. His distress, though objectively out of proportion to his minor harm, does not seem wholly feigned, as Moore emphasizes his much smaller size in the tapestry: He is a “victim,” “cowering away from her” and is depicted, child-like, “In chest armor over chain mail, a steel shirt / to the knee, he repeats, ‘I am hurt.’” Aside from her position “riding an elephant,” Charity is not described at all, and she is so detached from Envy’s pleas that Envy only ascertains her indifferent reaction through the actions of her steed: “The elephant, at no time borne down by self-pity[.]” Envy is cowardly, but Moore inflects her portrayal with pathos to encourage the reader to relate to his flaws. Harder to fathom is Charity’s cold indifference, which bespeaks a lack of compassion that is, ironically, not so charitable. Moore reframes the expected allegory to suggest that it is Charity who creates and perpetuates the rigid dichotomy between herself and Envy by refusing to communicate with him, acknowledging him only as her extreme other, and thus she damns both of them to remain in static allegorical roles. Given Moore’s preoccupation with the role of the critic throughout her career, Charity’s character is also reminiscent of a certain type of critical posturing, and in particular, of the self-righteous intellectual who approaches criticism in terms of rivalry, by attacking other theories and theorists to bolster his own rhetorical agenda.

Moore began writing “Charity Overcoming Envy” after receiving a postcard of the tapestry from Lawrence Scott in January 1962. She did not write the poem, however, until much later that year, since the earliest version in the Rosenbach files is dated November 24, 1962. It was published in the March 30, 1963 issue of The New Yorker. Significantly, it was written during the heyday of Greenberg’s and Rosenberg’s public feud over the movement referred to by the former as Abstract Expressionism and by the latter as Action Painting. The critics met in 1932 and by the end of the decade had begun to “demean and denounce” each other, a pattern that would provide “decades of amusement to all in the art world except the protagonists themselves” (Marquis Art Czar 37). Following the publication of Rosenberg’s The Tradition of the New (1959) and Greenberg’s Art and Culture (1961), the feud reached a boiling point in 1962, when each
published an explicit attack on the other: Greenberg’s “How Art Writing Earns its Bad Name” and Rosenberg’s “Action Painting: A Decade of Distortion.”34 In his essay, Greenberg is vicious, referring to Rosenberg’s “misinterpretation that was also a fatality of nonsense” (4: 136), blaming him for no less than the downfall of modern culture itself.35 Greenberg’s problems with Rosenberg’s theory, the idea that abstract art does away with aesthetic standards and that it reflects psychological struggles “waged outside the limits of art” (4: 135; my emphasis), are subverted by his major grievance that Rosenberg’s influence has polluted the prevailing art climate. He pulls no punches, striking out simultaneously at Rosenberg and these influenced critics: “That [Rosenberg’s] ‘literary discoveries’ could seem to anyone to throw light on anything is explained only by the supposition that the blind actually prefer being led by the blind. This would also help explain Sir Herbert Read’s present status as an authority on art” (4: 141).36 When Rosenberg argues that “[t]o forget the crisis, individual, social, esthetic, that brought Action Painting into being… is to distort fantastically the reality of postwar American art” and that “[t]he root theory of the distortion is the academic concept of art as art” (44), his not so implicit adversary is Greenberg, though he is slightly more tactful than Greenberg, naming him only once outright in the seven page article. Nevertheless, he does launch a thinly veiled counterattack: “Art criticism is probably the only remaining intellectual activity, not excluding theology, in which pre-Darwinian minds continue to affirm value systems dissociated from any observable phenomena” (62). Moore wrote and published “Charity Overcoming Envy” during the brief interval that Rosenberg took over “The Art Galleries” column from its long-term art critic Robert Coates,37 enlarging the terrain of this heated feud to the publication Moore’s poem

34 Greenberg’s “How Art Writing Earns its Bad Name” was first published in The Second Coming Magazine in Mar. 1962 and was reprinted in Encounter in Dec. 1962, the same month that Rosenberg’s “Action Painting: A Decade of Distortion” was published in Art News. Rosenberg also wrote a riposte in Encounter’s May 1963 issue, in which he condemned Greenberg for his “burlesque of art history” that attempted to situate Abstract Expressionism in an arbitrary lineage where “artists vanish and paintings spring from one another with no more need for substance than the critic’s theories” (qtd. in Marquis Art Czar 190).

35 “All in all, the only place where the absurd has made a new lodgement in the area of art is its criticism. There it flourishes with greater vigor perhaps than anywhere else in our culture” (Greenberg 4: 143).

36 Unsurprisingly, Read later published a “Letter to the Editor” about this article condemning Greenberg for “indulg[ing] in baseless attacks on his colleagues” (qtd. in Greenberg 4: 145).

37 24 Nov. 1962 to 5 Dec. 1964.
would appear in.  

“Charity Overcoming Envy” depicts an encounter between two rivals. When Moore read it at a 1963 American Academy of Arts and Letters dinner for her seventy-fifth birthday, she introduced it as an “allegory” of a “few lines which… have tried with schoolboy diligence to make themselves clear” (CP 658). Loizeaux and Hollander read this poem as an allegorical comment on the ekphrastic situation, and both emphasize that it is ultimately about mastery of situation and self: “Mastering a steed, or a canonical enemy, is a matter in the tapestry” (Hollander 300). Yet there is little evidence in the poem to suggest that Envy is a real threat to Charity, whose depicted “mastery” over Envy is akin to that of a lion over a mouse, or perhaps that of a righteous critic over the straw men he constructs and then attacks to bolster his own theory. Yes, Hollander is correct to point out that mastery is the crucial theme, but it seems the “enemy” to be overcome is not the “canonical” artist or art object, but the desire to distort what (for Moore) is supposed to be one’s art-critical appreciation into an antagonistic venture. She was perhaps drawn to the tapestry for its title and the word “overcoming,” since this term is used by both Rosenberg and Greenberg in their respective theories of artistic creation, and she suggests that this rhetoric of rivalry is also applicable to the way both approached criticism in the 1962 essays. It is possible that her allegorical project in “Charity Overcoming Envy” was to caution against the kind of critical struggle for mastery that Greenberg and Rosenberg were engaged in during the years she wrote and published this poem.

In contrast to its last four lines, the bulk of the poem is highly descriptive, emphasizing the narrative movement of a “story,” as Moore depicts the struggle between unimpeachable Charity, elevated “riding an elephant,” and Envy, her “victim.” The “story” of Charity and Envy comes to

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38 Moore was also familiar with Rosenberg’s poetry as early as 1932, saying in a letter to Pound that a Rosenberg poem she saw in *Fifth Floor Window* “interested” her (SL 277). Furthermore, Rosenberg contributed to *Poetry* throughout the 1930s, where Moore likely saw more of his poems, since she mentions this publication frequently in her letters at this time. She may also have seen his seminal essay “The American Action Painters” when it was first published in *Art News* in 1952, since she read, contributed both poetry and criticism to, and corresponded with its editors throughout the 1950s.

39 In his essay “The American Scene,” Rosenberg explains that action painting emerges from the artist’s understanding of space as a “place for the individual to locate himself; this entails overcoming his separation from his surroundings” so that “the artist bring[s] to the canvas an inner landscape that is part of himself and that is awakened in the activity of painting” (154; my emphasis). In “American-Type Painting,” Greenberg argues that the New York artists he discusses “assimilate and digest” the work of their precursors, and emphasizes that Picasso is the most important for them to “overcome” (*Art and Culture* 210).
a static halt when Charity refuses to acknowledge Envy, even after he twice informs her of her violence against him: “I am hurt.” These lines echo the way Rosenberg belittles Greenberg in his article, when he writes that “[i]n regard to historical differences the critic’s sole qualification is his repeated ‘I fail to see’” (62). Moore’s attribution of the repeated “I am hurt” to Envy perhaps chides Rosenberg for his attempt to caricature Greenberg as obstinate and vacuous, by suggesting that Rosenberg’s callous rhetoric arises from same dark side of human psychology that Envy’s name evokes. Moore stops the action of the poem after Envy utters these lines to emphasize that Charity’s refusal to engage with him as anything other than her polarized opponent forestalls any development in either character that could transition them out of their flat, allegorical roles. Moore suggests that Rosenberg and Greenberg do the same damage to each other and stunt their own theories as a result. Since neither Charity nor Envy is allowed to change or learn from the other, the poem proceeds as allegory, shifting to an interpretive mode in the final four lines to suggest how its reader can ascertain the lesson about the dangers of mastery that its characters could not:

The problem is mastered—insupportably
tiring when it was impending.
Deliverance accounts for what sounds like an axiom.

The Gordian knot need not be cut. (335)

Moore wrote in her journal, about an early version, that she “had a problem with the poem and [would] not try to solve it” (qtd. in Loizeaux 92) and added its final line to emphasize this ambiguity and thus to throw the earlier assertion that “the problem is mastered” into doubt.

The didactic tone of Moore’s ending suggests that art is not (or not only) the record of individual psychology (as Rosenberg would have it) or a self-contained answer to art’s formal problems (as Greenberg would have it), but should have broader, cultural relevance. This may explain why she chose a tapestry depicting an allegory, a mode with the explicit purpose to teach social lessons. Moore was always suspicious of the desire for mastery in critical writing, or what she termed “egotism, synonymous with ignorance” (A Marianne Moore Reader xiv). For her, the best artists and critics avoid this odious trait, such as R. P. Blackmur, whom she praises in an interview because she saw him as “exempt from egotism of revenge” (CP 661). (Of course, Moore herself implicitly criticizes other critics in “Charity Overcoming Envy,” though her
language is tempered and her lesson easily generalized.) The assertion in her final lines, “The problem is mastered - insupportably / tiring when it was impending,” is not a compliment to Charity’s “restraint,” as Loizeaux (91) and Costello (202) would have it, but a parody of the smug assurance of someone, like Charity (or Greenberg or Rosenberg), who has presumed to “master” any discursive problem. For Moore, whose “ethic” (Leavell 168) required her always to move her poetry outward by engaging in it with quotations, objects, people and places in the world, Greenberg’s and Rosenberg’s feud would have appeared more like “revenge” than the thoughtful criticism she admired that intended to elucidate the value and function of art. Moore’s use of the term “deliverance” suggests that the “problem[s]” to be solved in art can only approximate any resolution by being transformed beyond the self of either artist or critic. The “axiom” in the final lines is that the “Gordian knot need not be cut”; Moore emphasizes the “[k]not” sound twice to suggest that the apparently grand act of resolving an intractable problem with one bold maneuver (like Rosenberg’s and Greenberg’s essays, each intended to stifle the theory of the other and to provide the definitive interpretation of abstract art) is not desirable. For Moore, art should be permitted to retain at least some of its mysteries. Perhaps she also suggests that the critical paradigm of seeing art as a “problem” with a singular theoretical solution is the true rival to overcome. An earlier manuscript at the Rosenbach shows that Moore initially crossed out “sounds like” and wrote in “what I hope is” in her second last line, highlighting her optimistic view that the only self-evident truth in art is that its meanings can never be wholly mastered and that any critical approach to art must overcome the desire for such mastery.

Hollander’s and Loizeaux’s understanding that “Charity Overcoming Envy” is about the “ekphrastic situation” is in keeping with the way that most critics understand these types of poems. Since ekphrastic poems are by definition about works of art, it makes sense to read them as meta-commentary on the poet’s act of speaking and looking, on the encounter between poetry and visual art and on the nature and value of art itself. But “Charity Overcoming Envy,” like all of Moore’s poems about art, shows that the “ekphrastic situation” is not just a self-contained encounter between poet and art object, but a dialogic exchange between poet as art critic and the tradition of art writing that has already embedded that object in discourse. Moore’s project throughout her career, in both her critical prose and ekphrastic poems, was to challenge existing ways of understanding the artworks in which she found value, in order to emphasize that criticism should widen one’s appreciation for the interpretive possibilities art contains. Her
ekphrastic poems also function as a check to criticism that in her estimation did not further this aim, such as McBride’s portrayal of an American and French rivalry, Fry’s separation of art from life and Greenberg’s and Rosenberg’s feuding. Though her suspicion of unified theories at times made her art criticism disjunctive, her ekphrastic poems stand as the record of her enduring effort to illuminate the worth of individual works and to affirm that the critic’s essential role is to explain to us, again and again, the myriad ways that art continues to be relevant in our lives.
2 Locating the “Human Position”: Auden and Fry in the Musée

2.1 Introduction: Auden and the Visual Arts

Unlike Marianne Moore, W. H. Auden did not often look to visual sources to inspire his poems. His biographers report that he was myopic, and Robert Craft claims that “he displayed little interest in the visual sense, being purblind to painting” (qtd. in Hecht 98).¹ Yet one of his most anthologized poems, “Musée des Beaux Arts,” is an actual ekphrasis of Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s Landscape with the Fall of Icarus (c.1558).² Though Auden did not write any other poems about particular works of art, he apparently did find the visual arts of “interest” when he wrote this poem in 1938.³ Like those of Moore, his ekphrasis is less a faithful representation of the object than an occasion to evaluate the interpretive lenses - particularly those of formalist art criticism - through which we have been taught to view it. “Musée des Beaux Arts” betrays Auden’s concern about the politics of looking inherent in ekphrastic poems.

Both Auden and Moore believed that art served an ethical purpose. According to his most thorough critic, Edward Mendelson, Auden’s poems were not conceived as “visionary autonomous objects, exempt from the practical and ethical standards appropriate to all other human works. They were made to be judged both for their art and for their truth” (Early Auden xiv); but whereas Moore understood art’s ethical function as operating at the individual level, through its potential to disrupt and to challenge our ossified modes of seeing and being, Auden - especially in the years prior to his emigration to America - spoke of art’s potential as a unifying

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¹ One of these biographers, Humphrey Carpenter, writes that Auden did not write many poems “before he realised he had no real aptitude for noticing the details of nature. He put this down largely to defective sight, damaged in some way (he said) during early adolescence, with the result that he was myopic. He had glasses, but for some reason rarely wore them - he did not need them for reading - though without them he could not see his surroundings very clearly. He did not mind this very much” (32).

² Most modern scholars now use the spelling “Bruegel,” rather than “Brueghel,” as Auden and Roger Fry do. Following a 1996 examination of the painting, it is now believed that the version in the Brussels museum, previously thought to be painted by Bruegel, is actually an early copy by an unknown artist. The museum catalogue states: “On doute que l’exécution soit de Pieter I Bruegel mais la conception lui est par contre attribuée avec certitude” (“La Chute d’Icare”).

³ Another of Auden’s frequently anthologized poems, 1952’s “The Shield of Achilles,” is a notional ekphrasis, but since like most notional ekphrases, its source is in the literary (Homer’s The Iliad) rather than the visual arts, it lies outside the parameters of this study.
force in the social and political realm. Though his later writings suggest that he ultimately thought that poetry can only influence the political present in diffuse and unpredictable ways, in the years prior to 1939 he repeatedly attempted to establish a satisfactory balance between poetry and politics, between individual and social morality, between what he called “art” and “life.”

The issue of art’s connection to political life pervaded not only Auden’s writing during the turbulent 1930s, but also that of many other English intellectuals. Some followed Clive Bell and Roger Fry in asserting a necessary separation between the two, claiming that art transcends worldly conflict and suffering to offer us a self-contained critique of its formal development and a reflection of universal, aesthetic values. Others, including Auden and his literary peers Stephen Spender, Christopher Isherwood and Louis MacNeice, contemplated how art and artists could occupy a politically relevant role, and many gravitated toward communism as an ideology with the potential to bring about a better social order. Auden, termed by Mendelson the “Court Poet of the Left” (qtd. in Carpenter 245) had publicly supported the Republican cause in Spain along with these peers, volunteering as an ambulance driver in Valencia from January to March of 1937. His 1937 pamphlet poem “Spain” and its inciting refrain “but to-day the struggle” is often quoted as evidence of his earlier, optimistic understanding of the potential for art to participate in public discourse. That he later renounced this poem as propaganda has been taken by some as proof of his later belief that art must be divorced from politics, that “poetry makes nothing happen,” to quote his 1939 elegy for Yeats.

In the late 1930s, looking with exhaustion and horror at the unfolding of the Spanish Civil War and the Sino-Japanese War, at what he saw as the perversion of leftist ideologies in Spain, China, and the Soviet Union, at the increasing power of German fascist forces, and at the inevitable World War looming ahead, Auden repeatedly turned in his prose and poetic writings to the question of how art should orient itself to life. For Auden and many other artists and intellectuals at this historical juncture, “life” as the counterpart to “art” meant political life - the awareness that we are social beings with the practical and ethical responsibility to order our collective world. Auden’s active engagement with politics began with what Carpenter calls his “Communist phase” (147) in 1932, when he published the poem “A Communist to Others” and inflected much of his critical writing with Marxist ideology (148-50). As early as 1933 he advocated explicitly in a Daily Herald article for a “Socialist State in which everyone can feel secure” (qtd. in Carpenter 151). By the mid-1930s, Auden had gained a wide reputation for his
contributions to leftist causes. He published an article examining the political and “revolutionary” potential of the surrealist movement (1936), a commentary on the Spanish Civil War (1937), and essays entitled “Morality in an Age of Change” (1938) and “Democracy’s Reply to the Challenge of Dictators” (1939), which overtly attempted to define what the contemporary role of the individual in politics should entail. His brief employment with the [United Kingdom] General Post Office film unit provided opportunities to interrogate how the political could be manifest through art. Auden worked on six documentaries including Coal Face (1935), a film that exposed the dangers of coal mining, and God’s Chillun (1939), a film about the slave trade in the Caribbean. In this uneasy decade Auden became, though not deliberately, a spokesperson for the left, a role crystallized for him by F. W. Dupee’s 1938 article in Partisan Review, which placed him at the “center” of the “English literary left” (11).

Like many others who initially perceived the conflicts in Spain as a fascist threat to a preferable socialist or communist order, Auden went to Spain to volunteer for the Republican cause. Though he was ostensibly there to drive an ambulance, “[o]nce in Valencia...he was cajoled into making futile propaganda broadcasts, and became dismayed by the Republicans’ violence, harassment of priests and closure of churches” (Smith 19). Discussions that link Auden’s poem “Spain” to his alleged support for communism usually point to a short contribution he published in The Arts To-Day, in response to a challenge for authors to take sides on the Spanish Civil War:

The spread of Fascist Ideology and practice to countries as yet comparatively free from them, which would inevitably follow upon a Fascist victory in Spain, would create an atmosphere in which the creative artist and all who care for justice, liberty and culture would find it impossible to work or even exist. (qtd. in Bryant 3)

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1 Auden was employed by the G.P.O. for six months in 1935-36. Marsha Bryant’s Auden and Documentary in the 1930s is the most authoritative source for the influence of documentary on Auden’s poems. She reads Auden’s collaborative travelogues, Letters from Iceland (with Louis MacNeice in 1936) and Journey to a War (with Christopher Isherwood in 1938) as “experimental phototext[s]” (13) that use the paradigms of documentary filmmaking to portray something of their respective social realities. In his biography of Auden, Charles Osborne also notes that Auden collaborated with Benjamin Britten on God’s Chillun, but that it was not made “along the lines they had planned. It appears not to have been released” (110).

2 Partisan Review is described by Alexander Nemerov as “the fiercely left-wing journal” (798) of the 1930s. It was published in New York beginning in 1934. Much debate about the role of intellectuals and artists in politics unfolded in its pages throughout the remainder of the decade.
Auden’s statement suggests that his support for the Republican cause is underwritten by the concern that politics should coexist symbiotically with art. Though he admitted, “I shall probably be a bloody bad soldier,” he felt his participation in the Spanish conflicts was necessary, indicating that his poetic role hinged on an engaged political life: “how can I speak to/for them without becoming one?” (qtd. in Carpenter 207)

Following what Isherwood called his “unsatisfactory” (qtd. in Carpenter 215) experience in Spain, Auden received an offer to write a travel book with Isherwood about the state of the Sino-Japanese war, understood by most in the west as “another United Front against fascist aggression” (Bryant 128). If Auden had once believed his earlier assertion about “The conscious acceptance of guilt in the necessary murder” (Selected Poems 54) in “Spain,” he did so no longer after experiencing air raids and their devastating results - the injured and dying civilians and soldiers he photographed and wrote about in Journey to a War. He would later offer a bleak conclusion: “War is bombing a disused arsenal, missing it and killing a few old women... War is untidy, inefficient, obscure, and largely a matter of chance” (qtd. in Carpenter 238). When Auden arrived in Brussels after this experience, it is fair to say that politics, war and human suffering were on his mind as he completed the sonnet series for Journey to a War and began the poems that would comprise Another Time (1940), including “Musée des Beaux Arts,” penned over November and December before he immigrated permanently to America.

Though the question of art’s relationship to political life had been on Auden’s mind throughout the decade, his poetry and prose suggest that it plagued him most during the last months of 1938, when he made the decision to emigrate from Europe. His decision, Carpenter explains, was motivated by the desire to separate himself and his poetry from his former role as “Court Poet of the Left,” which had “become intolerable simply because he did not have the political beliefs to sustain it” (245). Separating himself from this public, residually aristocratic role and the political

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3 A set of paired photographs in Journey to a War entitled “The innocent” and “The guilty” suggests the futility of assigning moral superiority to the left or right faction: Bryant describes “The guilty” as “a dead man’s right arm and chest emerging from rubble, alongside a hollowed-out oval shaped like the back of a skull... a face with an eye, nose, and mouth” and she explains that “Auden confuses our response with his abstract caption, ‘The guilty.’ Was the person ‘guilty’ because he was Japanese? Because he was a soldier? Or is Auden pointing to the irrelevance of such labels when faced with the atrocities of war?” (133).

4 John Auden, the poet’s brother, said Auden discussed his wish to move to America as early as August 1938, though he apparently only began to tell others of his decision and to make preparations to leave later in the year (Carpenter 242).
entanglements it had come to entail was essential to the continuation of his poetic career. Cyril Connolly claimed that “[h]e reverts always to the same argument, that a writer needs complete anonymity, he must break away from the European literary happy family” (qtd. in Buell 187). Critics have made much of Auden’s emigration, following Mendelson in seeing the end of 1938 as marking a pivotal shift in his life and work, and specifically in the way that he answered what for him was an ethical question: To what extent is poetry responsible for circumscribing its own relation, and that of its reader, to the political context from which it emerges?

2.2 Auden’s “Apologia”: Negotiating Art and Life in the Poems of 1938

The few weeks that Auden spent in Brussels were among the most fruitful of his poetic career, and the poems he wrote suggest that they were also among the most internally gruelling, as many are thematically linked by the attempt to answer the ethically charged question of art’s relation to life - a question at the heart of his decision to emigrate. Indeed, Charles Berger reads these poems as motivated by Auden’s “need to formulate an apologia for emigration” (15). Some of them are about other writers who negotiated this relation, including “Rimbaud,” “A. E. Houseman” and “Edward Lear.” In particular, “The Novelist” and “The Composer,” written for Christopher Isherwood and Benjamin Britten respectively (Izzo 60), exemplify Auden’s struggle because he makes them represent the polarities of an art engaged with political life and an art detached from its historical context. He depicts “The Novelist” as a kind of everyman, who needs to immerse himself in the dailiness of upper and lower class life in order to experience it from multiple perspectives, to “Become the whole of boredom, subject to / Vulgar complaints like love, among the Just // Be just, among the Filthy filthy too” (180). In contrast, “The Composer” is given license to ignore verisimilitude - “Only your notes are pure contraption”

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5 Each of these poems portrays the artist’s retreat or escape from socio-political influences in his art: Rimbaud is depicted as a haunted “child” in whom “the rhetorician’s lie / Burst like a pipe” (181), causing him to abandon poetry at a young age. A. E. Houseman, according to Auden, was “Heart-injured in North London” and turned away from this “human situation” by becoming the “Latin Scholar of his generation” who channelled his impotent rage at the work of other scholars “In savage foot-notes on unjust editions” (182). Edward Lear similarly sought escape from “Germans and boats” by writing children’s literature and creating a comic “land” (183) detached from his historical context.

6 All citations to Auden’s poems refer to W. H. Auden: Collected Poems, edited by Edward Mendelson, unless otherwise indicated.
(181) - in favour of an invented realm detached from the world and exempted from politics and ethics: “You alone, alone, imaginary song, / Are unable to say an existence is wrong” (181). Both poems also use “the poet” as an initial point of contrast to the respective artist figures they depict, but “The Composer” complicates this distinction by first describing “the painter” and “the poet” before separating both from the art of the title figure. The poem begins

All the others translate: the painter sketches
A visible world to love or reject;
Rummaging into his living, the poet fetches
The images out that hurt and connect,

From Life to Art by painstaking adaption,
Relying on us to cover the rift;
Only your notes are pure contraption,
Only your song is an absolute gift. (181)

Auden links the painter and poet in an inventory of artists who “translate.” The first quatrains emphasize a concordance between the rhymed actions of the painter, who “sketches / A visible world,” and the poet, who “fetches / The images,” and also between the consequences of these artistic actions, in the metrical parallelism of “to love or reject” and “that hurt and connect.” The verisimilitude connoted by the diction “sketches” and “his living,” referring respectively to painter and poet, suggests that both types of art engage us with our world. Whereas the painter provokes the polar reactions of “to love or reject,” the poet fuses these reactions by using the images that “hurt” to emotionally “connect” the reader to this disquieting content. The similarity between painter and poet is their process of “translat[ion]” whereby they move “From Life to Art by painstaking adaption, / Relying on us to cover the rift.” The capitalization of “Life” and “Art” in this poem explicitly denotes the importance of these terms and their interrelation, particularly in contrast to the composer’s music, which is “pure contraption.” Though the poem superficially praises the composer’s music as an “absolute gift,” John Fuller astutely points out that “one cannot help feeling that there is something unconsciously lowering in that last line,” and that “[he is] credited with very little” (268). Indeed, the apostrophe to the composer in the last stanza, in which the speaker addresses him as “You... [who] Are unable to say an existence is wrong, / And pour out your forgiveness like a wine,” dissociates him from ethical responsibility. The painter and poet have more at stake than the composer, emphasized by the negatively rendered
“unable” and in the implied meaninglessness of “forgiveness” without the accompanying ability to acknowledge a moral breach.

The extent to which “Life” gets “translate[d]” into “Art,” or to which the artist chooses to “cover the rift,” was a particular preoccupation in the other Brussels poems, as Auden negotiated his own removal from the European political landscape. Berger argues that three poems particularly - “The Capital,” “Brussels in Winter” and “Musée des Beaux Arts” - can be understood as the “triptych” (16) of Auden’s rationale to leave Europe. The first two are notable in opposition to “Musée des Beaux Arts” for their explicit concern about the class divide in Brussels. “The Capital” exposes “the rich” in their “Quarter of pleasures,” a place of “Dim-lighted restaurant[s]” where they can ignore that the exploitation of the lower classes undergirds their privileged existence. The speaker shifts into the second person to accuse, “In unlighted streets you hide away the appalling; / Factories where lives are made for a temporary use” (177). “Brussels in Winter” highlights the same contrast between the “the old, the hungry, and the humbled” and those who occupy “Ridges of rich apartments” (178). Though many critics read “Musée des Beaux Arts” as marking a shift away from poems such as “Spain” that comment on the contemporary political context, the critique of class divisions in the poems written during the same period suggests that politics was not far from Auden’s mind as he wrote the ekphrasis.

![Figure 3](image)

**Figure 3** Circle of Pieter Bruegel the Elder. *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. c.1558.

“Musée des Beaux Arts” is the poem most critics point to when identifying where Auden begins to abstract his poetry from the political arena. Frederick Buell claims that the collection the poem
first appeared in, *Another Time*, represents a distancing from left-wing politics, which alienated
the author from many of his early admirers (182). Mendelson ends *Early Auden* with a
discussion of “Musée des Beaux Arts,” claiming that it marked the point when the poet was
“ready to begin his personal and public life anew, and was ready to begin alone. After years of
resistance, he knew he had chosen his isolation and could accept another future” (364). If this
poem indicates a shift away from a socially engaged role, as these critics suggest, it at least does
so by examining the ethics of this decision. Like Moore, Auden exploits the critical potential of
ekphrasis. He uses Bruegel’s painting as the premise to interrogate the ramifications of how we
choose to understand art’s relationship to our most ethically charged encounters with life - those
involving the “suffering” of others. The poem begins by contextualizing the question:

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About suffering they were never wrong,
The Old Masters: how well they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood:
They never forgot
That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course
Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot
Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer’s horse
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel’s Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on. (179)
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Critical interpretations of this poem usually proceed by taking a stance on the issue of whether
the poem comes down more on the side of political engagement or poetic autonomy, i.e. “Life”
or “Art” in Auden’s terms from “The Composer.” These readings are differentiated by how they
understand the speaker: whether he uses Bruegel’s painting to highlight a modern crisis of
indifference, or whether he advocates for this indifference, particularly for the artist’s necessary retreat from a public, political role and for an understanding of the aesthetic as a sublimated response to the kind of suffering poetry cannot ease.

The canonical reading is elaborated by many critics who follow Mendelson in arguing that the speaker teaches the reader about the moral hazards of ignoring suffering by using Bruegel’s painting as a disturbing example of indifference. Michael Riffaterre, for example, states that the poem is “about the true horror of evil” (3), and that “Auden’s words focus on the disaster by stressing that [the painting] pretends to ignore it” (13). In addition to their chronological proximity, formal similarities between “Musée des Beaux Arts” and the contemporaneous “Brussels in Winter” and “The Capital” support these readings and suggest that an ethical critique was on Auden’s mind when he wrote the poem, though a critique focused more on the inner, individual causes rather than the collective results of indifference, as compared to the other poems. “Brussels in Winter” (like “The Novelist,” “The Composer,” “Rimbaud,” “A. E. Houseman” and “Edward Lear”) is a sonnet, and as Anthony Hecht and others have pointed out, “Musée des Beaux Arts” is “proportioned and divided, generally though not exactly, like a somewhat enlarged Petrarchan sonnet” (99), with a 13/8 split loosely mirroring an octave and sestet. Parallel images and diction in “Musée des Beaux Arts” and “The Capital” also indicate an overlap in thematic, as well as formal, preoccupations in the poems of this period. The description of “the rich” in “The Capital” as “always waiting, / Waiting expensively for miracles to happen” (177) mirrors the portrayal of “the aged… reverently, passionately waiting / For the miraculous birth” in “Musée des Beaux Arts,” implying a class critique of those who are able to distance themselves from the contemporaneous suffering of others in the latter poem. The diction “expensively” combined with the multi-syllabic, double adjectives of “the innocent / Unobservant offender” (177) in “The Capital” formally parallels that of the “the expensive delicate ship” that sights Icarus, and semantically hints at a moral indictment of the ship’s “calm” detachment from the scene of suffering it “must have” witnessed.

Aidan Wasley counters Riffaterre’s argument that Auden’s speaker intends to indict the figures in Bruegel’s painting, reading their disengaged reaction to suffering as a necessary coping

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7 Though not divided proportionally like a sonnet, “The Capital” is 20 lines long, one line shorter than “Musée des Beaux Arts.”
strategy for dealing with the “inescapable tide of human suffering that always surrounds us” (xvii). A number of poetic responses to “Musée des Beaux Arts” extend this interpretation by reading Auden as his speaker, which in the case of Randall Jarrell’s “The Old and the New Masters” prompts a vicious critique of the precursor poem.  

Recent art-historical accounts of Bruegel’s painting align with Wasley’s argument about the function of indifference in maintaining social order, including that of Ethan Matt Kavaler, who argues that by the sixteenth-century, the myth of Icarus had “come to exemplify hierarchy secured and disruptive ambition thwarted, thus conforming to one of the arch narratives of [Netherlandish] culture” (57). Similarly, Auden’s speaker maintains an aesthetic “order” in the poem by “thwart[ing]” his initial subject, as well as any disturbing details about “suffering” in the particular. (It is “suffering” rather than “ambition” that is disruptive in Auden’s rendering.) Loizieux suggests that “Musée des Beaux Arts” could be read as a “self-probing response” to George Orwell’s scathing remarks about “Spain” in the December 1938 issue of The Adelphi, and particularly to his accusation that “Mr. Auden’s brand of amoralism is only possible if you are the kind of person who is always somewhere else when the trigger is pulled” (qtd. in Loizieux 70-71) - perhaps somewhere “eating or opening a window or walking / Dully along,” Auden’s poem seems to add.

Mary Ann Caws and James Scully take Wasley’s line of argument further, contextualizing it with reference to Auden as an artist, for whom the “oblivious, or indifferent” (Wasley xvi) reaction to suffering was not only adaptive, but inherent to his conception of art. Caws and Scully suggest that there exists no significant distance in the poem between the painting’s indifference toward suffering and the ethical position of Auden himself in the late 1930s. Scully points to historical accounts of Auden at this time, arguing that he was disillusioned by the cavernous gap he perceived between leftist ideology and practice, and by the inability of artists and intellectuals to promote social change. By the spring of 1939, Auden would state flatly, “[i]f one reviews the political activity of the world’s intellectuals during the past eight years... one is

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8 See p. 96-98 for a discussion of these poetic responses to “Musée des Beaux Arts.”

9 Orwell was contemptuous of Auden for presuming to write about the casualties in Spain from what Orwell perceived as a removed perspective: “Mr. Auden can write about ‘the acceptance of guilt for the necessary murder,’ because he has never committed a murder, perhaps never had one of his friends murdered, possibly never even seen a murdered man’s corpse” (qtd. in Loizieux 70).
compelled to admit that their combined effect... has been nil. As far as the course of political events is concerned, they might just as well have done nothing” (qtd. in Nemerov 795-96). By September he would side with Rainer Maria Rilke on the issue, quoting the latter’s belief that poets “cannot be helpful [by] concerning [themselves] with the distresses of others, [except] in so far as we bear our own distresses more passionately” (qtd. in Nemerov 802). Carpenter claims that Auden’s trip to Iceland in 1936 with Louis MacNeice was motivated by his desire to “distance himself from his own life, and observe it from some way off” (202). Similarly, Berger argues that Auden’s removal to Brussels and then America functioned as a self-imposed exile, which “afforded... a saving distance” (15), indicating his urge “to evade the reality of war” (24). Caws and Scully interpret his turn to the canon of visual art and the “Old Masters” as a statement about how he came to (or wanted to) understand art - as a sphere unto itself, occupied with suffering in the abstract rather than the historically particular. The image of “Icarus falling,” argues Caws, “is neither a right representation nor a wrong one, the conviction and the concern about it lie in another realm altogether... we do not care [about]... Icarus, within the water, but only as [he is] enclosed in... the painting and the page” (330). This detachment of art from ethics is understood by Scully as “performative. [The poem] confers humanly, superior status on the refusal of grand, social, ‘other’ concern. And it naturalizes that refusal” (215).

Scully’s emphasis on performativity is astute, since Auden’s speaker in “Musée des Beaux Arts” does attempt to “naturalize” the idea that art exists “in another realm altogether,” in Caws’ terms; but the function of this “performance” is not necessarily to endorse the marginalization of suffering that the speaker interprets in Bruegel’s painting, but perhaps to test one of the dominant approaches to art interpretation by the late 1930s, which similarly “naturalize[d]” the separation of art from political life: formalist art criticism.

While the historical accounts above indicate Auden’s belief that the direct involvement of intellectuals in “political activit[ies]” was futile, and even that his own poetry depended on his removal from the European landscape, these facts alone are not sufficient to prove that he had ruled out an indirect way by which poetry could participate in the ethical dimension of political life. His quotation of Rilke signals this difference between direct and indirect political engagement with its exception clause; poets must “bear [their] own distresses more passionately,” presumably within their poems and for their readers, who can then contemplate the possible sources and stakes of these “distresses” with reference to the collective histories they
share with the poet. Mendelson’s and Riffaterre’s insistence that “Musée des Beaux Arts” poses an ethical dilemma is thus convincing, even in light of Auden’s disillusionment in the 1930s, but it is not the painting that is critiqued but the speaker’s approach to interpretation. The quality of “performativity” that Scully notes in “Musée des Beaux Arts” can be read as a strategy that Auden uses to interrogate the ethical implications of the approach to art that Caws and Scully believe that he advocates: the separation of art from life, which underlies formalism.

The speaker of “Musée des Beaux Arts” is less a generic formalist, emphasizing shape, line, colour and other aesthetic relations, than he is an exaggerated version of the theoretical underpinnings of the formalist agenda that concern Auden in this poem. Through his repeated attempts to naturalize the separation of art from life, the speaker functions to parody this touchstone of formalist criticism. Auden is critical of his formalist speaker, though as Linda Hutcheon and Margaret Rose emphasize, parody in the modern era is often tinged with some degree of ambivalence. The evasions and denials of Auden’s speaker are primarily critiqued in the poem, but they are also pathetic because they are motivated by anxiety about the limitations of human control. Though Auden’s speaker begins by purporting to speak “[a]bout suffering,” he goes on to increasingly distance himself from the disturbing subject, initially within the realm of the “Old Masters” in the extended octave, and then within the depicted landscape of “Bruegel’s Icarus” in the long sestet. If the conventional imperative of a sonnet is to establish and then resolve a rhetorical problem, the speaker creates an anti-sonnet in which both sections conspire to vehemently deny that the subject of “suffering” is concerning at all. Scully inadvertently reflects the irony of the poem’s first lines when he argues that for the speaker “[t]he superiority of the Old Masters is their understanding that nothing does happen - nothing alters, in any way whatever, the given order” (200). Throughout the poem, the speaker’s claims about art expose more about his methodology than they do about the actual works he discusses (many of which are not even named). Auden adopts this speaker to create an implicit counter-position from

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10 In A Theory of Parody, Hutcheon defines parody as “repetition with difference. A critical distance is implied between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signalled by irony. But this irony can be playful as well as belittling; it can be critically constructive as well as destructive” (32). Rose adds that “most parody worthy of the name is ambivalent towards its target. This ambivalence may entail not only a mixture of criticism and sympathy for the parodied text, but also the creative expansion of it into something new” (51).
which the reader can consider the ethics of the formalist separation of art from life that the
poem’s dubious claims are based upon.

2.3 “Poetry Makes Nothing Happen”: The Fallacy of Prescription

In order to situate Auden’s understanding of the relation between art and life in “Musée des
Beaux Arts,” it is useful to look to his writings about Yeats, who died within a month of the
poem’s conception. Those who argue for Auden’s advocacy of a politically disengaged art in the
ekphrasis often find support for this theory in Auden’s response to the death of Yeats, whom
Berger has called the poetic equivalent of the “Old Masters” referenced in the poem (21).
Auden’s 1939 elegy “In Memory of W.B. Yeats” is akin to “Musée des Beaux Arts” in its
seemingly ambivalent attitude toward art’s usefulness in the political arena. The elegy’s most
famous line, “For poetry makes nothing happen” (248), has frequently been cited in defence of
arguments about Auden’s disheartened turn from a politically immediate poetics. Auden’s
contemporaneous essay, “The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats,” suggests that this
line was not an apathetic statement of fact, but intended to distinguish between poetry as
reflective versus poetry as prescriptive, the latter of which aroused his suspicion.

Many critics have pointed to “The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats,” published in
Partisan Review’s Spring 1939 issue, as a key to interpreting the elegy.11 Given the socialist
inclinations of the journal, Auden’s essay was ostensibly intended both to memorialize Yeats and
to evaluate his contributions beyond aesthetic mastery - contributions that Yeats himself
explicitly intended to be political.12 Recognizing this evaluative imperative, Auden dramatically
exaggerates its implications, structuring his essay as a court scenario, in which the “Prosecution”
pits a case for Yeats’ failure to be a “great poet” against that of the “Defence.” The Prosecution
begins, offering a scathing (but witty) character assassination, portraying Yeats as one “whose
earliest writings attempted to revive a belief in fairies” and whose later work “confronted [us]

11 According to Mendelson, the essay was submitted “perhaps only a few days after adding the middle section” to
the elegy (Later Auden 16).
12 Fuller interprets Auden’s essay as a “rebuke of Yeats’ speculation in ‘The Man and the Echo’ about the effect of
his play Cathleen ni Houlihan on the Irish rebellion” (288).
with the pitiful, the deplorable spectacle of a grown man occupied with the mumbo-jumbo of magic and the nonsense of India” (48). Yeats’ major fault was, the Prosecution informs us, his indifference to “the great struggle of our time to create a juster social order” (47), which is attributed to his “feudal mentality” (47). Ultimately, the Prosecution associates Yeats with “[o]ur fathers,” who “imagined that poetry existed in some private garden of its own, totally unrelated to the workaday world, and to be judged by pure aesthetic standards alone” (47). 13

In contrast, the Defence’s tone is more tempered, acknowledging that art does not exist “independently of society. The relation between the two is just as intimate and important as the Prosecution asserts” (49). Yet the speaker for the Defence emphasizes that an artist’s reaction to his society can be less immediate and exact than the Prosecution suggests. Art is “a product of history, not a cause,” he continues, and claims that the case for the Prosecution rests on the “fallacious belief that art ever makes anything happen” (51), echoing the famous line from the elegy. Instead, Yeats’ poetry is great because it represents a reaction to the crisis of the “failure of liberal capitalist democracy” that created the “most impersonal, the most mechanical and the most unequal civilization the world has ever seen, a civilization in which the only emotion common to all classes is a feeling of individual isolation from everyone else” (50). Yeats’ poems “From first to last… express a sustained protest against the social atomisation caused by industrialism, and both in their ideas and their language a constant struggle to overcome it” (51). The Defence refutes the Prosecution’s condemnation of Yeats’ Irish “Nationalism,” because “Nationalism is a necessary stage towards socialism” (50). The Defence argues that even if Yeats as a historical person had ideas “false or undemocratic,” his fairies, heroes and later “doctrine of Anima Mundi” were an attempt to find in the “folk tradition a binding force for society” (51).

The only “field in which the poet is a man of action” is “the field of language,” he argues, and in this field Yeats’ poetry “shows a continuous evolution towards… the true democratic style” (51). As Rachel Wetzsteon has suggested, it is likely that Auden himself came down more on the side of the Defence than the Prosecution because the former’s argument is allowed to be longer, and because of the similarities between it and the famous elegy, which she states is “a poem, after all,

13 As an example, the Prosecution sneeringly endorses “Easter 1916” as a “masterpiece” because “[t]o succeed… in writing a poem which could offend neither the Irish Republicans nor the British Army was indeed a masterly achievement” (48). Auden may also have been thinking of Yeats’ idealized golden bird in “Sailing to Byzantium.”
about the separation of a poet’s life and art” (62). Yet it is also probable that Auden shared
certain convictions with the Prosecution, particularly his disdain for those who imagine that
poetry “exist[s] in some private garden of its own, totally unrelated to the workaday world,”
since the Defence is careful to dissociate himself from this conception of art. The vehemence
with which the Prosecution attacks Yeats is also analogous to the way that Auden’s detractors
critiqued what they saw as the separation of “life” from “art” in his poetry of the late 1930s, and
the court scenario dramatized in the essay perhaps reflects his internalization of this debate,
which is also implicit in the distance he creates between himself and his performative speaker in
“Musée des Beaux Arts.”

Though a number of critics have pointed out the similarities between Auden’s essay and his
elegy for Yeats, none to my knowledge have considered this essay as a coded response to the
infamous Partisan Review article by F. W. Dupee identifying that Auden’s writing had changed
from being politically to personally directed. Dupee’s article was published in the August-
September issue of 1938, about six months before Auden’s essay on Yeats appeared in the
Spring 1939 issue. Like the Prosecution’s case against Yeats, Dupee argues that Auden and his
leftist poet peers are too detached from the working classes to produce any politically effective
poetry, since “the available literary tradition” they drew from “was aristocratic” (12). Dupee
states that Auden was a “genuinely subversive force in English poetry” from 1928-1934, but
dismisses his poetry and plays between 1934-38 for drifting into the “simple exploration of
individuality” (19), which parallels the prosecution’s assertion that Yeats created a “private
garden” detached from the “workaday world.” The early poetry that Dupee praises is that which
indicates Auden’s interest in nationalism over socialism, when he was “intensely conscious of
himself as the prophet of a resurgent Britain,” and it is notable that Auden parrots this praise via
the Defence’s remarks about Yeats’ early nationalism as an evolutionary precursor to socialist
verse, the very trajectory Dupee says that Auden failed to fulfill. Dupee’s reasoning for this
failure is that Auden “is less responsive to the programs of political parties than he is to his
general environment; and after 1935 that environment could only be conducive to anxiety” (20).

Via the Defence in the Yeats essay, Auden repeats Dupee’s claim, but flips the derogative

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14 Dupee contrasts the English poets to their American counterparts, whom he presents as more successful in organizing a politically effective movement.
emphasis to a matter-of-fact assertion that art is a “product” not a “cause” of history, and thus that Yeats’ poetry is great because it responds to the “general environment,” marked by the crisis perpetuated by the failure of “liberal capitalist democracy.” Dupee diagnoses Auden as a man afflicted with a dual identity: Auden the Public Figure gave support to Stalinist causes, wrote accomplished poems for the Medical Aid fund, visited the scenes of democracy’s holy wars and reported them for the liberal weeklies. The private Auden envisioned socialism more and more as a dream of the future, gave expression to his fears for the present in long, melancholy, personal lyrics (Look, Stranger[!])... and endeavoured, with a rather ineffectual spirituality, to counteract the obviously disastrous trend of the Zeitgeist. (20)

The “dual identity” that Dupee characterizes becomes literalized in the “Prosecution” and “Defence” parties in the later Yeats essay, who respectively attempt to damn and defend the poet using differing criteria to evaluate what each argues is a correct relation of life to art. Dupee’s dismal characterization of the “private Auden[‘s]” poetry may also have been refuted by Auden in the poetry written around the time he produced his Yeats essay. His turn to shorter verse forms, particularly the sonnet, as well as the detached speaker he uses in the Brussels poems, could be read as a response to Dupee’s dismissal of the “long, melancholy, personal lyrics” of Look, Stranger!

Certain passages in “The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats” resonate with the depiction of art and its interpretation in “Musée des Beaux Arts.” The Prosecution’s dismissive reference to “[o]ur fathers [who] imagined that poetry existed in some private garden of its own... to be judged by pure aesthetic standards alone” is analogous to the speaker’s praise of the “Old Masters” in Auden’s poem, whose authority rests on their collective understanding that “suffering” always exists in marginal relation to ourselves - that all the events of life, particularly those most likely to draw our empathy, become detached from ourselves when we view them through the distancing lens of art. Though many scholars, including Berger and Loizeaux, have situated “Musée des Beaux Arts” in reference to Auden’s experiences in the 1930s, only Alexander Nemerov has considered at any length that he may have looked to the field of art history and criticism to situate the relation of art to life. Nemerov historicizes the poem, reading it as a rather direct “commentary about events in the months leading up to inevitable world conflict” (780) and claims that under Auden’s gaze, the painting becomes “not just an allegory of
1938 but something somehow made in 1938, as though it were a surrealist work of the poet’s own era” (785). For Nemerov, everything in Auden’s rendering of the painting becomes symbolic of the ineffectual response, particularly by artists and intellectuals, to the political missteps of the 1930s: “[The poem] models... the relation of intellectuals to world crisis in the years 1938-1940” (803). The “apolitical plowman,” who, like everything else in the poem, “turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster,” represents these intellectuals, as he is a “formalist” and “had come to seem [by 1938-39] improbably Roger Fry-like in his espousal of poeticized inward turnings” (798). Applied to Auden’s rendering of the “plowman,” Nemerov’s characterization is dubious, since even the name of this figure overlaps with his identity as a labourer; transposed as a characterization of Auden’s speaker, Nemerov’s comparison is more convincing. The capitalization of “Life” and “Art” in “The Composer,” written just prior to “Musée des Beaux Arts,” suggests that Auden may indeed have been thinking of Fry’s well-known essay “Art and Life” during this period when he was attempting to negotiate the dichotomy in his own career. This essay opens Fry’s seminal Vision and Design and provides the framework for his formalist approach throughout the collection. By late 1938, the recently deceased Fry was well established within the canon of art criticism, and his emphasis, most clearly elaborated in this essay, on the detachment of formal relations from political content was to be the dominant way of understanding the continuity between Impressionism, Cubism, and Abstract Expressionism to come.

2.4 Fry-Swatting in the Musée: Auden’s Critique of Formalism

“Art and Life” elaborated a way of thinking about the connection between art and its contemporary context alternate to the writings of previous art historians, who Fry says viewed art as “crystallised history” (1), using biographical, social and political cues in the “content” of artworks to speculate about their meanings. In contrast, Fry argues that “if we consider this special spiritual activity of art we find it no doubt open at times to influences from life, but in the

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15 Clive Bell, in his book Art (1914), proposes a similar, but less comprehensive, argument [though Bell admits in his Preface that his ideas are a product of his many conversations with “Mr. Fry” about “the principles of aesthetics” (viii-ix)]. He makes his case bluntly: “For, to appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing from life, no knowledge of its ideas and affairs, no familiarity with its emotions. Art transports us from the world of man’s activity to a world of aesthetic exaltation” (25).
main self-contained - we find the rhythmic sequences of change determined much more by its own internal forces - and by the readjustment within it, of its own elements - than by external forces” (6). When Auden characterizes both painter and poet in “The Composer” as “translat[ors],” relied upon to “cover the rift” from “Life to Art,” it is possible that he alludes to this popular theory of Fry’s, which posited an answer, albeit a contentious one, to the question Auden grappled with at the end of 1938. “Art and Life” suggests that the artist has no ethical responsibility in his art to comment on his contemporary context and that the artist is divorced from the political subject he is in everyday life. This recognition is what seems to be behind Fry’s overarching theory that the historical progress of art is a paradoxical movement away from history, that by turning “its vision inwards, [it] has begun to work upon the fundamental necessities of man’s aesthetic functions” (9). By abstracting the artist and the artwork from any history outside that of art forms, and by implying that this abstraction has a higher, spiritual function to fulfill “fundamental” needs, Fry provides a theoretical justification for the abdication of politics from art. In “Musée des Beaux Arts,” Auden’s speaker functions to parody this critical thread, unreservedly adopting the apolitical position naturalized in Fry’s essay. Auden’s poem takes Fry’s argument about the “self-contained” nature of art to an extreme by replacing Fry’s neutral term “life” with “suffering,” in order to allow the reader to consider the potential costs of fulfilling these “fundamental” needs.

The first five lines of Auden’s poem elaborate not a description but a thesis, though a highly irresponsible one. The rhetoric is heavy-handed, using that most exclusionary of phrases, “About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Masters,” to establish the argument that great art exemplifies the (lamentable) truth that - contra Donne - we are all islands, that the suffering of another always exists in marginal relation to ourselves. The reference to the “Old Masters” suggests that the speaker serves to parody an art historian or critic; the term is derived from the discipline of art history, originating in the writings of Giorgio Vasari and used routinely by scholars well into the twentieth century, many of whom - including Fry - capitalized it as Auden

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16 Also see p. 41-43 regarding Fry’s understanding of art’s spiritual function and the ethics of his formalism.
The speaker’s exaggerated praise continues, “how well they understood / Its human position,” and the rhetorical excess overlays his words with irony for the reader. The gross generalization elaborated in the opening lines, bolstered by the inflated authority of the exclusionary adverb “never,” further suggests that the target of Auden’s parody is the kind of rhetorical posturing his speaker uses to efface dissenting details in the interest of larger, theoretical claims. Though Auden’s speaker is certainly more extreme than Fry, his assured tone and diction are reminiscent of the rhetoric that academics, including Fry, conventionally use to make their claims. For example, Fry begins “Art and Life” with an insistently affirmative tone: “It is indeed this view of works of art as crystallized history that accounts for much of the interest felt in ancient art by those who have but little aesthetic feeling” (1). He goes on to assure his reader, “There is indeed a certain danger in accepting too naïvely the general atmosphere” (2), “One cannot doubt then that here was a change” (3), “Now the art of the Roman Empire showed no trace whatever of this influence” (3) and “the movement of art went on entirely unaffected by the new orientation of thought” (4). The opening lines of “Musée des Beaux Arts” begin by parodying not only formalist theory, but the conventional rhetoric used to convince us of its apparent truth, and these hyperbolic lines signal the distance that separates the speaker’s position from that of Auden.

The statement in Auden’s first lines indicates how his parody of formalism functions, since it is clear that it is not an accurate representation of how any art historian or critic would realistically portray the “Old Masters” and their understanding of suffering, indicated by the choice to make Bruegel’s Icarus exemplary. As Loizeaux points out, “Auden had been looking at the Rubens in the Musées Royaux and could have chosen, say, the violent Martyrdom of Saint Livinius,” and she also rightly emphasizes that Auden’s speaker ignores the only non-mythical suffering apparent in the Bruegel painting, the corpse in the shadows to the left of the plowman (76). The thesis only makes sense if understood as a theoretical claim about the relevance of these

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17 Vasari refers to the “old masters” in both Vasari’s Lives of the Artists (103; 113) and in Vasari on Technique (221; 224; 252), all in the section “Of Painting.” Later art historians adopt this catch-all term in capitals: In Vision and Design, Fry uses the term frequently, referring at one point to “my study of the Old Masters” (191). Fry’s capitalization contrasts with the format of the term as it was used in Partisan Review in the 1930s; for example, N. Bukharin refers to the “old masters” (12) in his article “Poetry and Socialist Realism” (Nov.-Dec. 1934). It also contrasts with Auden’s own reference to the “supreme masters” in his 1936 letter to E. R. Dodds (qtd. in Carpenter 207).

18 Italics were added in these passages.
suffering subjects to the speaker’s particular understanding of why such artworks evidence “master[y].” In particular, it makes sense as a parody of Fry’s proposition in “Art and Life,” where the content of life - including “suffering” - is always beside the (formal) point.

The rest of the poem proceeds through a series of “How” clauses that allude to a number of unnamed Bruegel paintings ostensibly demonstrating the inherent marginality of suffering. In a 1951 interview, Auden said the poem was “inspired by two pictures, Winter and The Mark of Innocence [misheard], I saw in Brussels” (qtd. in Fuller 266). The full title of the first is Winter Landscape with Skaters and a Bird Trap (1565), which depicts the skating children mentioned in lines 8-9, and the second is The Massacre of the Innocents (1565-7), from which Auden takes the image of the “torturer’s horse,” though the detail that the horse “Scratches its innocent behind on a tree” seems to have been invented for the poem. Many critics also point to The Census at Bethlehem (1566) as a likely allusion in lines 6-9. The network of coded references to these Bruegel paintings suggests that the speaker writes for an audience familiar with the details of the works of the “Old Masters,” and of Bruegel specifically. Anthony Hecht’s suggestion that “there is reason to believe [Auden] enjoyed reading art history and art criticism more than looking at the paintings themselves” (98) does have currency given art historical writings about Bruegel. For example, in Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1936), Gustav Glück refers to the artist’s “habit of concealing the real subject of a picture and letting it disappear in the surrounding masses” (14). Similarly, art historians traditionally argue that Landscape with the Fall of Icarus is an illustration of the Flemish proverb “Not a plow stands still when a man dies” (qtd. in Cuttler 472). Auden likely encountered this proverb, perhaps on the label of the painting when he saw it at the Brussels museum or in the exhibition catalogue, since it becomes the premise tested by his poem. It is possible that Auden chose to emphasize the “Icarus” painting because the marginalization of its subject literalizes (without necessarily endorsing) the theoretical premise behind the formalist art criticism spearheaded by Fry that continued to gain traction in intellectual discourse as Auden wrote his poem. Ekphrasis offered Auden the fruitful occasion to take this premise to an extreme, to depict the process of arriving at (or seeming to arrive at) this apparently ideal relation to art, purified of disquieting content.

The poem’s title also suggests that the familiarity with canonical art that is assumed by the speaker is institutionally determined, as the “Musée” materializes the critical consensus of a canon of “Old Masters.” Heffernan notes that museums physically enact the separation of art that
Auden is critical of in his poem: “the museum individuates [the work of art] for the eye, sets it off for contemplation or veneration in its own framed and labeled space, presents it to us as a self-sufficient icon. And the individuated work of art begets the individual ekphrastic poem” (Museum of Words 138). Auden contextualizes his speaker in a space that reinforces the latter’s belief that art exists in a separate realm, “self-sufficient” and detached from the messy entanglements and ethical uncertainties of the world outside the museum’s walls. As Riffaterre explains, “the ‘musée’ of the title prefigures the aesthetic detachment epitomized by the ‘expensive delicate ship,’” which he links to “a preference for form, to an ideal of beauty” (8).

The choice to refer to the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique as the decontextualized “Musée des Beaux Arts” further associates this reference to “beaux” / “beauty” with an understanding of the aesthetic, like Fry’s, which is defined in opposition to every other activity of “life.”

If, as I have suggested, Auden had Fry’s theory in mind, Bruegel is a remarkable choice of subject. Fry treated Bruegel most extensively in his short 1927 book, Flemish Art, and despite John Hollander’s assertion that Fry “ennobled” Bruegel as the best northern Renaissance painter (243) and Nemerov’s suggestion that Fry particularly admired the Icarus painting for its “unusually poetic, self-conscious departure from… the artist’s usual focus on brute social data” (798), Fry’s tone toward the “Old Master” in this book is at best patronizing. The distinction he draws between the Italian (“Southern”) versus the Flemish (“Northern”) schools, likely an unstated refutation of John Ruskin’s distinction in Stones of Venice, is essentially the art/life

19 This decontextualized definition of “art” or “beauty” is also reminiscent of Kant’s understanding of the “beautiful” in Critique of Judgment, which is defined by a judgment of “liking...devoid of all interest” (53). Kant characterizes this “aesthetic judgement” as a separate activity from the processes used to make other types of judgments, stating, “[i]f we wish to decide whether something is beautiful or not... we use imagination... Hence a judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment and so is not a logical judgment but an aesthetic one, by which we mean a judgment whose determining basis cannot be other than subjective” (44). Fry denies this emphasis on the “subjective” basis of aesthetic judgment, but reaffirms the basic separation of the aesthetic from other aspects of “life.” Greenberg frequently cited Kant in support of his theories (Marquis Art Czar 16).

20 In “The Nature of Gothic” from Stones of Venice (Vol. II), Ruskin argues for the superiority of the “Northern” over the “Southern” style of architecture, using the same generalizations as Fry would later employ, but privileging the opposite region. Ruskin describes “Northern” art as that which evidences “life” (66) in opposition to “Southern” work that is too preoccupied with “perfection” (85) and adherence to traditional forms. “Imperfection,” associated with “Northern” art, is “essential to all that we know of life” (86). In contrast to the “Southern sculptor,” interested in “express[ing] only the softness of leafage nourished in all tenderness, we [Northerners] find pleasure in dwelling upon the crabbed, perverse, and morose animation of plants... There are many subtle sympathies and affections which join to confirm the Gothic mind in this peculiar choice of subject; and when we add to the influence of these, the necessities consequent upon the employment of a rougher material, compelling the workman to seek for vigour
paradigm of his earlier essay: “the contrast I wish to enforce [is] between the intellectual power, the passion for abstract truth and for law in the Southern temperament, as against the acceptance of the immediate, actual reality, the uncritical and literal spirit of the Northerner” (101).

Though Fry superficially praises Bruegel, saying “I cannot hope to justify my estimation of him” (121), it is clear that the Flemish painters (with the tacit exception of Rubens, according to Fry) are inferior because of their interest in life, or content, over art, or form. In contrast to the Italians, who have “sought by that contemplative and disinterested vision to discover those more universal truths which escape the untrained vision ... by the needs of the practical and instinctual life” (102), Bruegel is essentially an illustrator rather than an artist. He is the counterpart in his day of a great cartoonist... his designs are the outcome of a moral and psychological, not of a visual, inspiration... Form is then for him subservient to the expression of psychological realities. He does not speak to the mind directly through visible harmonies but by the associations which his images call up, by their references to actual life. (121)

It is ironic that Fry devalues historical content as providing criteria for interpreting art while at the same time making sweeping (historical) generalizations about the “spirit” and “temperament” of people from northern versus southern Europe. This contradiction that bases his separation of Italian “art” from the Northern “illustrat[ion]” of “life” inadvertently exposes an inconsistency within the methodology he uses to designate which art belongs to which category, and it is perhaps this inconsistency that gives Auden license to use a speaker who adopts Fry’s terms but who switches Fry’s pairing of “Southern” with “art” and “Northern” with “life.” The speaker adopts Fry’s dubious strategy of rhetorical extrapolation in the initial claim about the Old Masters’ universal understanding of suffering, but reverses Fry’s theory in Flemish Art by foregrounding the aesthetic mastery of the painting instead of the connection initially posited to “suffering,” which Fry would categorize as part of “practical and instinctual life.” Like Fry’s
assessment of Bruegel in *Flemish Art*, the speaker’s description of the “Icarus” painting in Auden’s poem reveals as much about the methodology of his art criticism - motivated, at least in part, by a desire to evade the politics of suffering - as it does about the painting. The irony that Auden’s speaker can use Fry’s formalist theory to privilege the work of an artist that Fry himself thought minor further indicates Auden’s suspicion of this theory, particularly in terms of how it limits the importance of certain artists to either aesthetic or social value.

In contrast to Fry’s characterization of Bruegel as immersed in the details of “immediate, actual reality,” the speaker is only interested in those details that support his initial thesis. In the poem’s extended octave, the speaker omits the names of the other referenced Bruegel paintings to assume his educated reader’s familiarity with them, and also perhaps to downplay the emphasis on content these titles would suggest. Instead, the speaker is obsessed with marginal “position[s],” highlighting at every opportunity Bruegel’s formal attempts to conceal the most poignant “references to actual life” - those of suffering subjects - while simultaneously diverting the poem away from any close examination of the taboo subjects themselves. The extended octave is one long sentence, punctuated by numerous semi-colons and colons that over-associate the many clauses so that the central argument about the “human position” of suffering is diverted to a vaguely sited canine colony: “some untidy spot / Where the dogs go on with their doggy life.” Similarly, the exemplary “How” clauses of the first eight lines become the digressive “Anyhow in a corner” of the enjambed ninth. This series of “how” clauses is indicative of the speaker’s ironic attempt to use the apparent evidence for his thesis to avoid it. The proliferation of these “how” clauses could also be read as a pun on Fry’s frequent use of the word to denote the superiority of formal analysis, as in his essay that Auden quotes elsewhere:21 “To one who feels the language of pictorial form all depends on how it is presented, nothing on what” (362; emphasis original). The double conjunction in “While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking / dully along” enacts the same decentring through the speaker’s distraction. His line becomes too long to fit within its allotted right margin of the printed text, reinforcing the evasion of suffering inherent in his initial thesis.

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21 Fry’s “The Artist and Psychoanalysis” is quoted by Auden in his 1935 essay “Psychology and Art To-day” (discussed further on p. 89 and following).
Like Fry’s commentary on his favourite (“Southern”) artists, Auden’s speaker emphasizes anything but the details of “actual” or “immediate” life apparent in Bruegel’s works. The people in these paintings are described as generic types, the “aged” versus the “Children,” whose rhymed activities of “waiting” and “skating” are metaphors for their generalized modes of being, as they are respectively focused on the (Biblically promised) future and subjective present, not on their collective social reality and the suffering of others. The speaker’s depiction of the “dogs” and the “torturer’s horse” are charming rather than disturbing because the characterizations are not examples of “immediate” life as Fry would have it, but of artifice, emphasized by the sanitizing, anthropocentric euphemisms of “doggy life” and “behind.” Instead, Auden’s speaker makes Bruegel representative of the “contemplative and disinterested vision” that Fry opposes to him. By the time Auden’s speaker names a specific painting - “Icarus” - it is not the details of life, reality or “suffering” that preoccupy him, but those of form. Icarus’ fall is depicted as a sublime and distant event, rather than the terrifying plight of a person, through the speaker’s emphasis on its visual properties. In an ironic reversal of Fry, Bruegel’s painting epitomizes the “disinterested vision” by underscoring form as a strategy used to decentre Icarus’ suffering. In this stanza, the speaker comes closest to being a recognizable formalist, noting the juxtaposition of shape and colour in the description of the “white legs disappearing into the green / Water,” as well as that between the vertical line of “a boy falling out of the sky” and the horizontal line of the ship that “Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.” The implied movement of the ship toward the left side of the canvas formally mimics the speaker’s semantic departure from the ship’s implications for the poem’s initial thesis. Instead of returning to his initial subject of “life” or “suffering” by the end of the poem, the speaker completes its rhetorical separation from the tranquil, contained world of “art” that his depiction of the Icarus painting models for him.

Auden’s choice of Landscape with the Fall of Icarus is notable in reference to Bruegel’s canon, since it was his only rendering of a mythological subject, and perhaps for this reason the painting Fry disliked least, saying it was exemplary of the artist’s “rare” “lyrical mood” (122). Fry attributes this “mood” to the fact that it was painted after Bruegel’s trip to study the “Old Masters” in Italy, arguing that it was influenced by the “Southern scenes” he experienced and by the “classical mythology” he was immersed in while there. Though Bruegel picked up these “literal” influences, he was of course too much of the Northern persuasion to benefit much from his trip:
No one was likely to profit less than he by Michaelangelo’s precepts … It seems to me that this picture is the record of Brueghel’s response to some moment of lyrical exaltation when the Mediterranean first flashed on his astonished gaze as he made his way down the Alps. But for all its exaltation the forms remain descriptive; its evocations are through associated ideas rather than by their directly expressive power. (122)

Though Nemerov suggests that Fry admired the “lyrical” aspects of the *Icarus* painting, it is apparent that for Fry this quality in painting is subordinate to the “directly expressive power” of (visual) form. Fry imagines Bruegel, “when the Mediterranean first flashed on his astonished gaze” not as a serious artist absorbing (and perhaps rejecting) the stylistic innovations of the Italian artists he thoughtfully studied, but quite transparently as a figure out of Romantic poetry, suspiciously akin to Keats’ depiction of Cortez in “On First Looking into Chapman’s *Homer,*” when with “eagle eyes / He star’d at the Pacific” (32). Whereas Fry’s evaluation of the painting leaves us with only the (albeit, very “lyrical”) image of Bruegel staring dumbly in a “wild surmise,” Auden transposes this “lyrical exaltation” onto his speaker. Ironically contesting Fry’s assessment, the painting for Auden’s speaker does possess “directly expressive power” due to its aesthetic forms - so much so that its initial relation to “associated ideas,” specifically those “about suffering,” is dissolved entirely.

Like the “ploughman” who “may / Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,” the speaker also spends the entire poem “turn[ing] away / Quite leisurely from the disaster.” Initially, this evasion is enacted by postponing the introduction of the suffering subject until after the lengthy, first verse paragraph. The enjambed connection between the “dreadful martyrdom [that] must run its course” and “Anyhow in a corner” can either be read as another relegation of suffering to the margins of the canvas, or as the speaker’s use of anacoluthon, the rhetorical term for aborted syntax, to grammatically sidestep the messy subject altogether. The “martyr” is only assumed through the reference to “the” (not his or her) “martyrdom,” and the implied tortured subject (the same “martyr”?) only exists as the hypothetical complement to the adjective in the phrase “torturer’s horse.”

Though the second verse paragraph ostensibly returns to the subject of its initial claim about “suffering,” the speaker follows the ploughman in “turn[ing] away,” and thus diffuses the potential to disquiet the hegemony of his initial claim. Like the ploughman, “for him it was not an important failure” to dismiss individual suffering as worthy of commentary. Even the most
evocative references to Icarus drowning, “the splash, the forsaken cry” (again, not “his” cry), become abstracted in the depiction of “Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,” which reflects that the speaker has become blind to the splashing legs in the actual painting in favour of a retreat into the imagined sublimity of the myth. 22 As Riffaterre points out, this line is likely influenced by Ovid’s rendering of the myth in his *Metamorphoses* (4). In Auden’s poem, the speaker’s individual voice dissolves as it merges with the perspective of the “expensive delicate ship” and the inanimate object is endowed with visual capabilities as it “must have seen / Something amazing” - a metonymy that literalizes the speaker’s attempt to cultivate a disinterested self throughout the poem and renders him critically impotent as he, like Icarus, is effaced from the poetic landscape. Ultimately, we are left with a beautiful and timeless image, but at the expense of a speaker who makes art relevant for any timely context, and it is this type of speaker whose absence Auden makes felt, both in his ekphrastic poem and in the formalist art criticism it critiques.

2.5 What is Art?: Revisionary Essays by Freud, Fry and Auden

If, as I’ve suggested, Auden uses his speaker to engage with Fry’s theory that the achievement of the “Old Masters” was their emphasis on aesthetic form, effectively disqualifying problematic content such as “suffering” as a criterion for useful interpretation, we must evaluate to what extent the poet overlaps with his formalist speaker. Auden’s only (to my knowledge) explicit citation of Fry is a fertile place to proceed with an evaluation. This intersection occurred because both wrote articles on the famous passage from Freud’s introductory lecture that attempts to define art and its purpose. Fry’s 1924 essay is entitled “The Artist and Psycho-Analysis” and Auden’s 1935 article is called “Psychology and Art To-day.” Both quote the same long passage from Freud exactly, including this important section:

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22 Nemerov argues that this image parallels that of Auden’s and Isherwood’s description of watching a Japanese air raid on the city of Hankow in *Journey to a War*, when “suddenly, a white parachute mushroomeed out over the river while the plane plunged on, down into the lake behind Wuchang” (qtd. in Nemerov 784). Though Auden may have imagined this double meaning, it is apparent that for his speaker the falling Icarus is not a real, terrified person plummeting to his violent death, but an “amazing” sight, a novel aesthetic wonder, for those on the “expensive” ship as it “sailed calmly on.”
There is, in fact, a path from phantasy back again to reality, and that is—art. The artist has also an introverted disposition and has not far to go to become neurotic. He is one who is urged on by instinctive needs which are too clamorous; he longs to attain honour, power, riches, fame, and the love of women; but he lacks the means of achieving these gratifications. So, like any other with an unsatisfied longing, he turns away from reality and transfers all his interest, and all his Libido, too, on to the creation of his wishes in the life of phantasy... He is not the only one who has a life of phantasy; the intermediate world of phantasy is sanctioned by general human consent, and every hungry soul looks to it for comfort and consolation... A true artist... understands how to elaborate his day-dreams, so that they lose that personal note which grates upon strange ears and becomes enjoyable to others... When he can do all this, he opens out to others the way back to the comfort and consolation of their own unconscious sources of pleasure, and so reaps their gratitude and admiration; then he has won - through his phantasy - what before he could only win in phantasy, honour, power, and the love of women. (qtd. in Auden 94-95; qtd. in Fry Transformations 357)

The premise of both essays is to evaluate Freud’s characterization of art as a product of the artist’s sublimated desires. By this point in his career, Fry had moved away from the rigid polemic epitomized by “Art and Life,” but in this essay he returns to it, making what he admits is an “extreme statement” (qtd. in Reed 313) in service of a vehement opposition to Freud’s ideas. Fry claims that Freud only describes one type of “activity” classed (by others) as “art,” and has left out what Fry suggests is true art, “the contemplation of formal relations,” which is “as much detached from the instinctive life as any human activity that we know” (352). The fact that Fry initially presented this essay as a lecture to the British Psychological Society undoubtedly influenced his desire to classify the latter art as a “scientific activity,” though he qualifies this by referring to its “complete detachment from the instinctive life, its complete uselessness, its abiological nature, since it exists not to serve life but truth” (353). This truth is not relative but universal truth, attested to by the fact that “classic” or canonical works, Fry says, have a “curious vitality and longevity” despite their detachment from political context and their appeal to only a small fraction of the populace, those who have “emotions about form” (356).

Much of Auden’s 1935 essay is less an argument against Freud than a refutation of Fry’s argument about Freud, but since Auden does not make Fry his explicit adversary, the article proceeds strangely as a seeming argument against Freud. Following the lengthy quoted passage, Auden claims that Freud “draws attention to two facts” (95), both of which implicitly dispute Fry’s (not Freud’s) ideas. The first is “that no artist however ‘pure’ is disinterested: he expects certain rewards from his activity” (95). Since the context of this comment suggests that it
responds to Freud, Auden’s analysis is disjunctive, since nowhere does Freud use the word “pure” in the included quote or discuss the artist as a “disinterested” figure. It is Fry who refers to “impure” versus “pure” artists (358) and who parallels art to science as a “purely reflective and disinterested power” (353). The second “fact” that Freud teaches us, Auden claims, is that the artist “starts from the same point as the neurotic and the day-dreamer, from emotional frustration in early childhood” (95). The two “facts” together only make sense as a unified argument if read against those Fry makes in his earlier essay. Auden’s argument is a defence of Freud against Fry in terms of the psychological origins of the artist, along with a revision of Fry’s definition of art. Auden refers to Fry’s article only once, when he states, “In the passage of Freud quoted above, no distinction was drawn between art and phantasy, between, as Mr. Roger Fry once pointed out, Madame Bovary and a Daily Mirror serial about Earls and Housemaids” (96). Though the rest of Auden’s essay continues the engagement with Fry’s article only implicitly, this overt quotation does establish the one point of agreement with Fry, which is Freud’s conflation of all art with fantasy. It also establishes where Auden diverges from Fry, since for Fry the definition is problematic because it denies the importance of form and formal development through history, whereas for Auden it is problematic because it makes art only a vehicle for escapism, disengaging art from any political, social and ethical role.

Auden uses Fry’s distinction between (serious) art and fantasy, but redefines the former by emphasizing its connection to social morality rather than to form. Auden associates Freud’s understanding of art with D.H. Lawrence and outlines that the danger of [his] writing is the ease with which his teaching, “trust the unconscious”... may be read as meaning, “let your personal unconscious have its fling”... In practice... this itself may have a liberating effect for the individual... [but it] is rotten political advice, where it means “beat up those who disagree with you.” (102)

Inherent in Auden’s critique of Freud in this passage is an equally potent indictment of Fry’s definition of art, since Fry reinscribes art within the parameters of the personal (shifting focus

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23 Carpenter explains that “Auden was greatly impressed by Lawrence when he first read him, which was either while he was an undergraduate or shortly after,” naming the imperative in Fantasia of the Unconscious that one “liv[e] from the spontaneous centres” as an idea Auden found appealing at the time (87). Auden later grew suspicious of Lawrence’s ideas and their social implications, as the Freud essay makes apparent.
from the unconscious to the intellect), and thus maintains Freud’s original exclusion from the sphere of political life. Auden renames the art of fantasy “escape art” in his essay, and unlike Fry, claims that this type is important, “for man needs escape as he needs food and deep sleep” (104). But Auden spends more time focusing on a second type of art implicitly opposed to Fry’s art of formal relations: “parable-art, that art which shall teach man to unlearn hatred and learn love” (Ibid). The category of “parable-art” goes far enough to correct the Lawrentian fallacy of narcissism by emphasizing the individual’s social relations to others, while at the same time stopping short of the idea that poetry should be instructive about the contemporary political context in specific ways. He suggests that the artist is analogous to the psychologist, since

The task of psychology, or art for that matter, is not to tell people how to behave, but by drawing their attention to what the impersonal unconscious is trying to tell them, and by increasing their knowledge of good and evil, to render them better able to choose, to become increasingly morally responsible for their destiny. You cannot tell people what to do, you can only tell them parables; and that is what art really is, particular stories of particular people and experiences, from which each according to his immediate and peculiar needs may draw his own conclusions. (103)

In contrast to Fry, “what art really is” for Auden is the rendering of narratives that make us reconsider our moral positioning in the world. He uses the diction of “stories” not, to my mind, to exclude the visual or musical arts, but to oppose Fry’s self-titled “extreme statement” about the ultimate value of visual form, dissociated from historical context. Ironically, the intellectual pleasure that Fry associates with the reception of great art is described as an “emotion” about “form,” a personal, intellectual pleasure experienced in the same way by each of the rare viewers who can perceive it. This spontaneous “emotion” contrasts with the uncertain reception of Auden’s “parables,” in which each person “according to his [or her] immediate and peculiar

24 These comments are also applicable to an understanding of Auden’s elegy “In Memory of Sigmund Freud,” particularly the lines

[he] showed us what evil is, not, as we thought, deeds that must be punished, but our lack of faith, our dishonest mood of denial, the concupiscence of the oppressor (274).
needs” may interpret moral relevance in varying ways. Unlike Fry, Auden does hold art to ethical standards, though at this point in his career these are portrayed not as specific goals, but as a secularized version of the Christian golden rule, to “teach man to unlearn hatred and learn love.”

Auden’s insistence on “parable art” as an implicit alternative to Fry’s criterion of formal complexity accords with the parody he elaborates in “Musée des Beaux Arts,” even if he was intending to abdicate his appointed role as “Court Poet of the Left.” The parody of the formalist separation of art from life could also be read as a “parable” about the difference between “escape art” and “parable art,” the latter of which has more to do with reception than inherent meaning in the work itself. The speaker’s chosen “escape” in the second stanza into the aesthetic form of the painting collapses Fry’s distinction between the art of fantasy and the art of formal relations in his 1924 essay. Though the speaker of “Musée des Beaux Arts” chooses this formalist “escape” in his interpretation of Bruegel’s painting, the reader is given the option of critiquing the separation of life from art that this escape entails, or not. In his essay on Freud, Auden states that both types of art are valid, though the ekphrasis suggests that an ethics is implicit in the choice between them when the decision to “escape” political context is generalized as a theoretical principle. The balance Auden gestures toward between art and life depends on the reader, who perceives the irony in the poem’s initial premise to be “about suffering.” The reader brings the political resonance to bear on the poem, which functions as a general “parable” to elicit engaged responses of varying types. It is as a potential testing ground of ethical relations between the

25 Though Auden’s response to Fry in the Freud essay and the ekphrasis suggests that he reacted to what Fry himself identified as an “extreme statement” about the ultimate value of form, his reaction is perhaps ironic if one considers Charles Reeve’s argument (see chapter 1, p. 41-43) that for Fry, the separation of art from life was intended to serve an ethical function: this separation, according to Reeve, would enable the distanced perspective needed for the individual to critique dominant ideologies and modes of thinking. The difference between Fry’s and Auden’s understanding of art’s ethical function is that Auden’s “parable art” makes explicit its connection to individual and (contingently) social morality. Auden’s understanding of art invites interpretations based on particular socio-political contexts, whereas Fry’s emphasis on abstract critical thought distances the implicit injunction that “parables” have to apply this thought as contextualized moral action.

26 This phrase echoes the imperative from Auden’s 1937 poem “As I Walked Out One Evening”: “You shall love your crooked neighbour / With your crooked heart” (Selected Poems 135). Richard Davenport-Hines declared that “Auden never wavered from the knowledge that, unless you love someone, nothing makes any sense” (115). These lines about love also recall Auden’s “vision of agape,” which the poet described as an experience he had in June 1933 while sitting on a lawn with three colleagues when, he said, “I felt myself invaded by a power which, though I consented to it, was irresistible and certainly not mine... For the first time in my life I knew exactly... what it means to love one’s neighbour as oneself” (qtd. in Carpenter 160).
reader or viewer and the world that art can indirectly participate in political education and further the “true democratic style” that Auden refers to in his essay on Yeats.

2.6 Parables and Politics: The Artist as Educator and Auden’s Sole Ekphrasis

Auden’s essay “Democracy’s Reply to the Challenge of Dictators,” published in January 1939 and likely written concurrently with “Musée des Beaux Arts,” suggests a connection between the “failure of liberal capitalist democracy,” as he terms it in his Yeats essay, and the formalist theories of art he critiques in the ekphrasis. In the essay, he explains that this “failure” is due to a lack in “education,” and while “we have had a certain success in giving people educational training and enabling them to do certain kinds of tricks and jobs ... [in] so far as making citizens or influencing the world in any way is concerned we have utterly failed” (464). By emphasizing “freedom” over “justice,” Auden continues, liberal democracy encouraged its citizens to develop a view of themselves as autonomous and disconnected from the rest of humankind: “Nobody feels that they are needed by society. The strongest feeling of the kind and tender is, ‘Well, I can’t do anything about it. I must just be a decent chap, and the tough can go their own way’” (464). Fascism is opposed to liberal democracy because it conceptualized most people as “naturally bad” and “incapable of moral choice” (465). What both ideologies have in common for Auden is the same evasion of individual moral responsibility for others that his speaker advocates for in “Musée des Beaux Arts”: fascism removes it to the realm of rulers and liberal democracy views it as a threat to individual “freedom.”

The poem presents Bruegel’s painting, and implicitly the formalist separation of art from life the speaker uses it to uphold, as a “parable” about how “moral choice” functions or fails in art. Whereas Fry sees inferior formal accomplishment in Brueghel’s Icarus, Auden sees a parable of the formalist agenda, which is the abstracted, intellectual variant of the liberal democratic philosophy he denounces for its detachment from social justice. In the essay, Auden presents “Social Democracy” as a desirable alternative to liberal democracy, because in it education has explicitly a “double task: to train for a particular vocation, and to equip all citizens for an intelligent political life” (466). Auden’s description of “parable art” suggests that he saw the artist as a form of teacher who participates in this indirectly political “task” of education by encouraging readers or viewers to interpret art as “parables” with ethical implications.
That Auden only wrote one actual ekphrasis in his career perhaps indicates that he exhausted his need for the genre in this poem. If he believed that the poet must “translate” from “Life” to “Art” in order to create universal “parables” with innumerable specific applications, ekphrasis would violate this trajectory because it is inscribed within the category of “Art.” Since ekphrasis literally compels the poet to turn away from the world and toward art, it makes sense that Auden would be suspicious of the genre as the poetic equivalent to what concerned him about formalism. In “Musée des Beaux Arts,” Auden gets around this impasse by writing a poem that forces its reader to contemplate the impasse itself as the barrier its speaker attempts to erect between political “life” (as the “suffering” of others) and “art.” Auden’s remarks about Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” testify that he understood ekphrasis as a genre that critiques itself:

If anyone asked who said Beauty is Truth, Truth, Beauty! a great many readers would answer, ‘Keats’ … But Keats said nothing of the sort. It is what he said the Grecian Urn said, his description and criticism of a certain kind of work of art, the kind from which the evils and problems of this life… are deliberately excluded. (qtd. in Aisenberg 39-40)

Auden’s definition of “parable art,” in addition to the fact that his speaker argues for Bruegel’s formal mastery in stark opposition to Fry’s assessment of the painter, suggests that Auden did not believe that meaning in art is static or inherent. Thus, when he writes of Keats’ criticism of a “certain kind of work of art, the kind from which the evils and problems of this life… are deliberately excluded,” it makes more sense that he refers to interpretations of art that circumscribe meaning in this way. These interpretations, rather than the art objects, are more liable to “exclude” particular topics from their purview, as the speaker of “Musée des Beaux Arts” exemplifies. The chiasmus and semantic meltdown of the Urn’s statement reflects the same circularity in Fry’s “extreme statement” that the form is the (only) meaning in high art. The central irony of Auden’s poem is that it creates a speaker intended to out-Fry Fry, to make even more of an “extreme statement” than Fry himself made in “Art and Life” and in his essay on Freud. That Auden is able to do so by using Bruegel’s paintings - patronized by Fry as too “literal” and overly immersed in “actual life” - makes the critique especially potent. Perhaps this was Auden’s last and only actual ekphrasis because he felt that the only contribution he could make to the genre was a statement about its problematic nature, contextualizing the contemporary resonance of the Grecian Urn’s words to suggest that it is always an “important failure” when art is permitted to erase life.
3 From Parody to Pastiche: Williams, Bruegel, Auden

3.1 Introduction: Williams and the Visual Arts

Among modern ekphrastic poems, Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” has prompted more poetic responses than perhaps any other, responses that have themselves become well-known examples of the genre. More than popularizing Bruegel’s paintings as a subject, Auden’s poem has also provoked much debate about the claims his speaker makes about Bruegel, about the “Old Masters” and especially, “[a]bout suffering.” Many of these derivative ekphrases are contemptuous of their predecessor. In “Just Another Smack” (1983), for example, Irving Feldman sarcastically praises “Schoolmaster Auden” for deigning to impart his apparent wisdom about the “Old Masters” in “Musée des Beaux Arts”: “One is pleased to see / things put in place, grateful for instruction” (qtd. in Loizeaux 74). What particularly bothers many of these later poets is the indifferent response to suffering adopted and endorsed by Auden’s speaker (even if this speaker is used to critique this position, as the previous chapter has argued). In his poem “Brueghel in Naples” (1991), Dannie Abse assumes the voice of Icarus to critique Auden’s speaker (whom Abse reads as Bruegel) for his aesthetic detachment from the scene:

My luck. I’m seen
only by a jackass of an artist
interested in composition, in the green
tinge of the sea, in the aesthetics
of disaster - not in me. (qtd. in Loizeaux 77)

The poetic controversy over Auden’s poem is similar to the critical one in that both hinge on how the speaker’s claims are interpreted, but many of the derivative ekphrases seem propelled explicitly by an ethical impulse - and by the need to strip the speaker of authority. Theodore
Weiss informs Auden in “As You Like It” (1976) that “in this you were wrong”: “People / are not indifferent, let alone oblivious, / to the momentary, great scene” (195).¹

Some of these later poems, including Abse’s above, continue the discussion begun by Auden’s poem about the relationship between “suffering” and theories of art. In “The Old and the New Masters” (1966), Randall Jarrell, a vicious critic of Auden after 1939,² begins like Weiss by establishing his contention with Auden’s opening lines:

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About suffering, about adoration, the old masters
Disagree. When someone suffers, no one else eats
Or walks or opens the window - no one breathes
As the sufferers watch the sufferer. (63)
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Jarrell’s use of the lowercase “old masters” and the abrupt enjambment between his first and second lines formally reflects the disruption he perpetuates in the reader’s recollection of Auden’s first stanza. As the poem continues, however, it becomes clear that Jarrell’s argument is less with Auden than with the formalist theory of art that Auden’s speaker represented. Jarrell’s poem registers the fact that by the time his own poem was written, the formalism that privileged “art” over “life,” in Roger Fry’s terms, had become the canonical standard for interpreting modern art. Jarrell indicates that when art is valued only for what Auden’s speaker valued - abstract formal accomplishments, detached from worldly contexts - it becomes irrelevant:

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in abstract
Understanding, without adoration, the last master puts
Colours on canvas, a picture of the universe
In which a bright spot somewhere in the corner
Is the small radioactive planet men called Earth. (64)
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If Bruegel’s accomplishment, and that of the “Old Masters” in general, was the elevation of aesthetics over considerations of “suffering,” Jarrell shows us the endgame of this “understanding” of art, so “abstract[ed]” in form and from historical context that it can only gesture in the past tense toward a distant “planet men called Earth.” The irony of Jarrell’s harsh critique is that “Musée des Beaux Arts” anticipates, and even encourages, this type of resistance from its reader. If Auden’s poem is understood as a “parable” intended to evoke the reader’s critical response to the suppositions made about art, suffering and ethics, then Jarrell’s poem is perhaps its ideal result.

Jarrell’s critique of “Musée des Beaux Arts” stands in company with another, though less explicit, response to Auden’s ekphrasis - that of William Carlos Williams in a number of poems throughout his career, culminating in *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (1962). “Pictures from Brueghel” comprises ten short poems that address ten different Bruegel paintings. The difference between Jarrell’s and Williams’ responses to Auden is the way each approaches the binary of “art” and “life” so central to the precursor ekphrasis. Jarrell adopts the binary but reverses the privileging of “art” or form as a way to marginalize “life” or “suffering,” taking Auden to task by depicting paintings by “Old Masters” that puncture his assertion. In contrast, Williams adopts and expands Auden’s subject matter and more importantly, his use of parody. Whereas Auden’s parody of the formalist art critic is, to use Margaret Rose’s definition, a “refunctioning of preformed linguistic... material” (52) that is used to critique the speaker’s indifference to suffering, Williams responds by extending the genre into its postmodern manifestation of pastiche. According to Fredric Jameson, parody and pastiche both involve “the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask,” but pastiche “is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motives... Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor” (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 114). Williams’ minimalist style in “Pictures from Brueghel” (his short poems and lines, his insistent but sparse description) echoes the “blank[ness]” of his parody, as he deconstructs the binary between art and life that undergirds “Musée des Beaux Arts.” Auden’s parody gains its ethical function as a “parable,” in Auden’s terms, but does so only by replicating the privileged separation of art (through its creation of an interpretive frame) that the poem critiques. Williams’ ekphrastic

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3 See p. 92-95.
sequence implicitly calls attention to this disparity, though only, and paradoxically, by divesting itself of interpretive cues, especially in “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus.”

Many commentators have read Williams’ “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” as being influenced by Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts,” and indeed, this chapter will show that the former functions as a pastiche of the latter. It will also propose that Williams’ collection as a whole responds to Auden’s parody by emphasizing its precedent in the poets’ mutual subject. Even the title “Pictures from Brueghel” hints at this relation to “Musée des Beaux Arts” by re-contextualizing Auden’s depiction of Bruegel as exemplary of the “Old Masters” in order to emphasize the artist’s distinction within this tradition. Though Williams’ contention with Auden’s poem is less explicit than Jarrell’s, his response is ultimately more potent because he furthers the critique implicit in Auden’s earlier “parable” rather than only repeating it to try to decimate it.

3.2 “Good Sweet Verses”: Williams’ Bitter Take on Auden’s Early Work

From all accounts, Williams was not an unreserved admirer of Auden and his poetry. In a number of essays, he positions Auden as the counterpoint to his depiction of the ideal American poet - in short, to the poet he himself strove to become. This American poet, according to Williams, was given a “tremendous opportunity” (qtd. in Cappucci 58) in comparison to his European counterparts to experiment with new forms, free as he was from the entangled web of English literary tradition. Auden and his emigration represented a test case for this paradigm, since he had come to America to escape “the European literary happy family” (Cyril Connolly qtd. in Buell 187), but his poetry retained for Williams its sticky Old World residue. Williams’ criticism of Auden was an offshoot of his suspicion of English poetry generally, and poets whom he referred to as “THE TRADITIONALISTS OF PLAGIARISM” in Spring and All (10). These poets, epitomized in the modern period by T.S. Eliot, whom Williams would never consider an American poet, used established verse forms - recognized generic structures, rhetorical schemes

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4 Williams’ definition of America was less geographic than ideological, as he understood the literal distance from Europe as enabling freedom from its formal traditions. Eliot seems an unlikely straw man for European poetry in this regard, since many of his contemporaries adhered more strictly to established meters and forms than he did. Williams likely had in mind Eliot’s public attacks on free verse, including “Reflections on Vers Libre,” published in
and metrical arrangements - to encase the content of their poems. In 1930, Williams wrote that these traditional forms were “worn out” and not applicable to a poetry representative of present concerns, pointing to the particular problem of “all new work which follows the older line. No amount of reinflation after Eliot’s sorry fashion can help it... he is for us a cipher” (Selected Essays 103). In “The American Spirit in Art,” a lecture given in 1952, Williams takes up this thread again, stating that he and his contemporaries faced a crucial choice: “to survive or perish, to seek out new forms and ground ourselves for a new ascent to the first rank in art or to fail. We cannot use forms that are second hand. We cannot use the iambic pentameter after Shakespeare for any major work. We simply cannot - except at the cost of extinction” (A Recognizable Image 217). These “second hand” forms stunted the promise of innovation that Williams associated with American poetry, anchoring its progress to familiar ground, rather than fulfilling its ideological potential to reach a “new world” in art. As opposed to poets like Auden and Eliot, encumbered by the dead weight of tradition, Williams repeatedly looked to the visual arts - initially to the Cubists and later to the Abstract Expressionists and Neo-Dada artists - as a model for the aesthetic freedom he desired.

So much scholarly work has been done to illuminate the relationship between Williams’ poetry and the visual arts that it is now an obvious thing to say that he thought of the sister arts in analogous terms. Many of these studies focus on Williams’ early career, when his interest in objectivity, perspective and representation aligned closely with that of the Cubist painters. In The Hieroglyphics of a New Speech: Cubism, Steiglitz, and the Early Poetry of William Carlos Williams, Bram Dijkstra argues that the poet’s project throughout his early career was essentially to catch up to the technical accomplishments of the Cubists by adopting their strategies, to develop a style that could “reflect [these] developments in the visual arts with an almost uncanny accuracy” (67). Williams’ poetry used “verbal equivalents” to create a “tactile, visual space in language” (66). Dijkstra’s book is indebted to J. Hillis Miller’s influential chapter on Williams in

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*New Statesman* in 1917. Eliot’s polemical text argues, “[i]t is assumed that vers libre is a school; that it consists of certain theories; that its group or groups of theorists will either revolutionize or demoralize poetry if their attack upon the iambic pentameter meets with any success. Vers libre does not exist” (*To Criticize the Critic* 183).

5 As Herbert Leibowitz points out in his biography of the poet, Williams picks up on Pound’s tirade against the iambic pentameter line. Canto 81 states, “To break the pentameter, that was the first heave” (qtd. in Leibowitz x-xi).
Poets of Reality, in which he adopts Wallace Stevens’ phrase, “not ideas about the thing but the thing itself” (9), to describe the project of modern writers to use language to evade the Romantically conceived ego and make of their poems concrete pieces of reality (9). Henry M. Sayre’s study, The Visual Text of William Carlos Williams, claims that the dualities of the literary and the visual, of subject and object, that Dijkstra and Miller respectively emphasize are indeed integral to Williams’ poetics, but not because of his ability to transform one into the other as Dijkstra alleges, or to privilege one over the other, as Miller argues. Instead, Williams “embraced” the contradiction of these binaries in his poems: “His aesthetic was based on an unresolvable dialectical opposition: on the one hand was the mind, the imagination, and its potential to create order and form; on the other was the world, fragmented and chaotic” (5). This early belief about the “unresolvable” nature of the binary of art (“form,” “abstraction”) and life (“the world,” “realism”) anticipates Williams’ response to “Musée des Beaux Arts” in his Bruegel sequence. It also speaks to his hostility toward Auden throughout the 1940s, for it was to the potential for American poetry to disrupt conventional forms that Williams perceived Auden and his poetry as a threat.

Following Auden’s emigration to America, Williams repeatedly used him as a straw man to warn against the danger of modelling American poetry after its English predecessor. In these contexts, “Auden” becomes synonymous not only with English poetry and the use of traditional poetic forms, but with a whole climate of belated expectations about what good poetry should look and sound like. This complicated animosity apparently took root during a joint reading by Auden, Alfred Kreymborg, Malcolm Cowley and Williams in April of 1940 at Cooper Union, a few months after Auden arrived in New York and after he wrote “Musée des Beaux Arts.” Williams’ biographer, Paul Mariani, writes that the young Auden “stole the entire show” and that the evening “came to represent for [Williams] a re-enactment of the old Eliot nightmare: Williams’ American values rejected by his own countrymen in favour of the English import”

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6 According to Sayre, Williams’ poetry is exemplary of this “unresolvable dialectical opposition” between the visual and literary arts: each of his poems is a “visual text,” an “object to be perceived and read” (7).

7 The Cooper Union archives do not contain a record of the specific poems read by Auden that evening, but it is possible that Auden may have read one or more of the many poems he wrote while in Brussels, including “Musée des Beaux Arts.”
Williams’ resentment toward Auden was apparently not short-lived according to Mariani, who points to a passage written a few years later in the unfinished, improvisational novel *Man Orchid*, in which Williams uses the protagonist Moon as a “mouthpiece” to “take a shot at [Auden]” (515):

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\text{Remember at Cooper when the young Englishman read his verse to that supposedly tough bunch. I was there. Remember? There were a couple of American poets, not too hot but hitting along the line I’m telling [an authentic American line.] Well, this young English poet with his smooth Oxford accent got up and smiled at those lunks and said, I hope you’ll pardon my accent, I can’t help it! And they almost drowned in their own slobber they were so tickled to grant him any small favor that lay to their eager hands. Their faltering hands! And he read them his verses, and very good sweet verses they were and — they raised the roof with their gracious huzzas. It was magnificent to hear and to see. (qtd. in *A Usable Past* 254-55)}
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As a recollection of the event, this passage styles Auden as a rhetorical wizard, who shamelessly expends his English cultural capital to win over the eager masses of “slobber[ing]” “lunks,” whose easy pleasure in the “good sweet verses” is critiqued with as much vehemence as is the poet who indulges them. The audience fails to appreciate, or perhaps even to recognize, the “authentic American line” in the verses of Cowley, Kreymborg and Williams because it is seduced by familiar poetic forms, idolizing Auden as a synecdoche of the English literary tradition these forms represented.

If Moon is indeed the “mouthpiece” Mariani convincingly reads him as, the problem of Auden’s appeal - his admitted “magnificent,” despite Moon’s repulsion - is that it relies on familiar forms that neutralize rather than create meaning. These familiar poetic forms, the “good sweet verses,” are compounded for Williams by Auden’s “smooth Oxford accent,” the pleasant cadence that similarly nullifies the poetry he reads for his fawning American audience. The notes Williams wrote following the event indicate his frustration with what he perceived to be Auden’s recycled forms: “Listen as I would I could not find that he has traveled the world without

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8 Though Herbert Leibowitz’s biography, “Something Urgent I Have to Say to You”: The Life and Works of William Carlos Williams, is the most recent study, Mariani’s is still considered the standard treatment. Leibowitz’s method is to use the poems - the “crucial poetic evidence” (27) - to illuminate the life. For the purposes of assessing Williams’ relationship to Auden in this study, Mariani’s biography is in most instances the more comprehensive. All citations of Mariani in this chapter refer to William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked unless otherwise indicated.
perceiving a new measure such as I seek. What he ... did in his best poems... was to give an able exposition of new materials upon the old accepted basis” (qtd. in Mariani 437). The ultimate importance of a “new measure” curiously aligned Williams with formalist critics like Roger Fry and later, Clement Greenberg. The crucial difference was that the poet perceived the dichotomy between art and life as false. For him, there was only innovative form that generated new meanings, which could disrupt conventional ways of thinking about and understanding the world.

Auden’s success at Cooper Union certainly impacted how Williams conceptualized the political role of the artist in the year that followed. In “Preface to a Book of Poems by Harold Rosenberg,” written in 1942, Williams highlights the necessary relationship between poetic composition and the present:

How can an intelligent man say to himself that he will take some line, some arbitrary or convenient stanza, and that he is going to use it and make the words fit? He may even succeed but if he does it will be only at the cost of missing his MAJOR opportunity, as Auden obviously does and a whole train of copyists in his train. The major imperative is to make the line fit the language... and to discover there the new structural integer, completely new, forged under the hammering of contemporary necessity. (Something to Say 126-27)

The “contemporary necessity” of creating meaning through innovative forms is that the art then has the potential to impact its audience in topical ways. In his essay “The Poet in Time of Confusion” (1941), Williams elucidates this argument, explaining that a placated audience - like that given over to Auden at Cooper Union - is evidence that the poet has sacrificed the subversive potential of his craft. In contrast to the effect of the “good sweet verses” on Auden’s audience, Williams states that “the artist is not a very strong persuader of the generality of men” because his imperative is to pose radical disruptions to the status quo: “he is attacked right and left because the difficulties he proposes, which would make of peace a violent sphere of action, often by revolution, are too much for them” (A Recognizable Image 171). 9 He exhorts the artist,

9 This idea that art works in opposition to the ideology of the masses is similar to Greenberg’s argument in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” but Williams seems more invested in the idea that (what Greenberg would call “avant-garde”) art should be made for the “generality of men,” whereas Greenberg describes “kitsch” as “destined for” these “new urban masses” who are “insensible to the values of genuine culture” (1: 12).
“Write to correct lies” (171). These “lies” are intimately connected to recycled forms. Unlike the Auden he portrays, Williams understood formal composition as an explicitly ethical act, because he perceived that new forms could facilitate new ways of conceiving the world, and thus that the greatest art could lead to “revolution.”

In his 1948 lecture, “The Poem as a Field of Action,” Williams elaborates an interpretation of art based on the “action” of composition by opposing it to the art of (predictably) Auden. An effective poem for Williams is a site of action, a space of creation that can challenge conventional ways of looking and thinking by arranging language in new ways, implicitly juxtaposing it to the familiar linguistic structures that underlie the construction of our collective understanding of reality. He begins by using Auden’s own words from The Orators (1932) to reprimand him for his formal belatedness: “Need I remind you that you’re no longer living in ancient Egypt?” (Selected Essays 280). Williams goes on to distinguish the difference between poetry conceived according to its “subject matter” as opposed to its structure, using the same point of reference as Fry and Auden in their respective essays of 1924 and 1935 - Freud’s interpretation of the artist.

In contrast to Fry, who dismisses the idea that art is the product of wish fulfillment and emphasizes the artist’s “contemplation of formal relations,” and Auden, who emphasizes the function of “parable art” to engage one’s moral capacity, Williams fuses their polarized emphasis on form and content to suggest instead that a poem’s structure is “reality.” According to Freud, Williams explains,

[t]he poem is a dream, a daydream of wish fulfillment but not by any means because of that a field of action and purposive action of a higher order... And let me remind you here to keep in your minds the term reality as contrasted with phantasy and to tell you that the

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10 See also “Axioms,” an unpublished commentary from 1943, in which Williams overtly names Auden as the representative figure opposed to his own understanding of poetry, who does not intuit the correct relationship between form and content: “Writing is not a means as Auden mistakenly believes, man is the means, writing is the word” (A Recognizable Image 175).

11 Though I will situate Williams’ essay in the context of his ongoing dialogue with Auden, the theory of “The Poem as a Field of Action” is strikingly similar to Charles Olson’s idea of “COMPOSITION BY FIELD” (16) from “Projective Verse,” an essay first published in pamphlet form in 1950. Olson was an admirer of Williams and would often drive to New York for the meetings of Les Amis de William Carlos Williams, a group of artists dedicated to advocating for Williams’ verse (Leibowitz 327). In turn, Williams helped to publicize Olson’s ideas by quoting extensively from “Projective Verse” in The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams (1951).

12 See p. 89-93 for a discussion of Fry’s “The Artist and Psycho-Analysis” (1924) and Auden’s “Psychology and Art Today” (1935).
subject matter of the poem is always phantasy - what is wished for, realized, in the “dream” of the poem - but that the structure confronts something else. (281)

Though Williams elevates the importance of “structure” or form over “subject matter” (like Fry and Greenberg), he collapses the formalist binary when he claims that the “structure” of the poem confronts “reality” and that the “subject matter” is “phantasy.” Williams continues the argument he makes in Spring and All (1923), which defines poetry as a “force of imagination” that creates “new form dealt with as a reality in itself” (67). His later lecture makes clear that this “reality” is not the same as Fry’s, Greenberg’s and later, Michael Fried’s assertions that form has a separate history divorced from historical context, but instead, is the structural representation of this context:

And what is reality?.. The only reality that we can know is MEASURE... what we are trying to do is not only to disengage the elements of measure but to seek (what we believe is there) a new measure or a new way of measuring that will be commensurate with the social, economic world in which we are living as contrasted with the past. (283)

As opposed to the “phantasy” of “subject matter,” a poem’s “measure” can reflect the “social, economic” realities of the present; The poem functions as a “field of action” by repeating familiar language but “disengag[ing] the elements of measure,” to reflect but also to challenge how language constructs the “world in which we are living.” This understanding of the poem foreshadows Williams’ later interest in parody and pastiche.

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13 The paragraphs that follow suggest that Williams was thinking about these formalist critics, particularly when he states that the artist’s “attack” on “the past” functions as a “service to tradition, honouring it and serving it... confirming and enlarging its application” (284). Greenberg emphasizes in “American-Type Painting” (1955) that “‘abstract expressionism’ makes no more of a break with the past than anything before it in modernist art has” (Art and Culture 210). Further, in “Modernist Painting” (1961) Greenberg nearly echoes Williams’ earlier comment, defining his subject by “the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence” (4: 85).

14 Williams refers to the “wish for aristocratic attainment” in pre-Victorian poetry and the “ruined industrial background of waste and destruction” in Auden’s early verse that reflects the “new spirit” of the modern era (282).

15 Williams often spoke about the importance of the particular arrangement of words rather than verse forms. By the mid-1950s, he wrote that he had come upon a “solution of the problem of modern verse” (Selected Letters 334). He called this form the “variable foot” and saw it as a “way of escaping the formlessness of free verse” (I Wanted to Write a Poem 92). Similar to Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “sprung rhythm,” the variable foot would, according to Williams, allow the poet to use the components of verse meter to inflect meanings while avoiding the limitations of prefabricated forms.
In the latter half of his essay, Williams returns to his initial referent to portray Auden as exemplary of poets who privilege “subject matter” to the detriment of “reality.” In contrast to the resentment apparent in the *Man Orchid* passage, in this essay Williams styles Auden as a tragic figure, whose entrenchments in the English academy and in the formal history of English poetry are liabilities that geographical distance cannot overcome. Intuiting that Auden came to America “because of a crisis in his career” (a rationale Auden himself articulated), ¹⁶ Williams goes on to conclude that what Auden wanted was “a basic attack upon the whole realm of structure in the poem... I think that’s what he came here looking for, I think he has failed to find it” (288-89); Williams perceived that Auden saw the danger that he was “begin[ning] to devote himself to the subject matter of his poems, genre, [and therefore that] he ha[d] come to an end of his poetic means” (288). According to Williams, Auden ultimately could not escape his “English ears” (289), which rendered him unable to overcome the “rigidity of the poetic foot” (289) or to use the American idiom “full of those hints toward newness” (290). For Williams, the “rigidity” of stale poetic forms is a part of the ingrained ideological structures - linguistic, economic and social - of the present. Thus, even though Auden may have thought of his poems as “parables” that participate in a reader’s political education, Williams would argue that Auden’s failure to use forms derived from his present experience neutralizes the potential for his poems to challenge the status quo.

On the surface, many of Williams’ ekphrastic poems, and especially his late “Pictures from Brueghel” sequence, seem to contradict the emphasis on “action” in his 1948 essay with their seeming focus on description and in their controlled and consistent use of the triadic stanza. One would expect that a poem “as a Field of Action” would suggest the kind of unrestrained emotional energy that Harold Rosenberg attributes to the “action painting” of Jackson Pollock in his 1952 essay “The American Action Painters.” (It is likely that Williams’ “The Poem as a Field of Action” was indeed the precedent for Rosenberg’s influential theory). ¹⁷ Yet, when his Bruegel

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¹⁶ See p. 67-68.
¹⁷ Cappucci has corroborated the likelihood of this influence: Williams and Rosenberg corresponded frequently throughout the 1940s and Williams wrote “Preface to a Book of Poems by Harold Rosenberg” in 1942. The understanding of the artist as one who enacts an “attack” on previous ways of writing poetry is modified by Rosenberg to emphasize the unconscious sources of this act, which ironically marks a return to Freud’s elevation of “subject matter” and the idea of art as “wish-fulfillment” that Williams refuted. The genesis of this idea of art as action may have been with Marsden Hartley, who said in 1914, “A picture is but a given space where things of the moment which happen to the painter occur” (qtd. in Cappucci 69).
poems, both those written in the 1940s and his “Pictures from Brueghel” sequence of the late 1950s, are read as a response to Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” and to the artistic climate in which they were written, they exemplify how this “action” is apparent through the intertextual disruption they perpetuate.

3.3 Painting What He Saw: Early Responses to Auden in “The Dance” and *Paterson V*

By the late 1940s, Williams had stopped using Auden as the explicit counterpoint to his ideal for American poetry in his essays. This reticence perhaps resulted from Williams’ improved estimation of Auden’s poetry, as the two poets became collegial acquaintances, if not friends.  

Mariani reports that they met over lunch in March of 1951, after which Williams “could honestly praise [Auden’s] *Nones*, which he thought much stronger than much of [his] earlier work” (629). Similarly, Williams lists Auden among the respected poets he names in his *Autobiography* who are “alive and working” (319). Though it may be possible to argue that Auden’s poetry did change substantially in some way during this time, it is also possible that Williams developed a new approach for his ongoing critique, using his poetry to invigorate the issues he saw in Auden’s early verse. Williams began his decades-long preoccupation with Bruegel around the same time that he began to critique Auden in his essays. The reticence that replaced Williams’ early prose critiques of Auden correlates with a differing treatment of Bruegel’s paintings in his ekphrastic poems, indicating that these poems perhaps constitute a continuing engagement with Auden.

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18 In contrast to Williams, Auden had made his esteem for the older poet known as soon as he arrived in America in 1939, when he (like Olson above) allied himself with Les Amis de William Carlos Williams. In 1946, Auden was also involved in efforts to endow the older poet with an honorary “Doctor of Laws.” Williams wrote to Charles Abbott, “Did you say Auden had something to do with this? Now, I know he’s really intent on becoming an American. If true, the situation as it concerns him would be really very touching. It does him also honor” (*SL* 245).

19 In 1952, Williams wrote to Robert Lowell that Auden had offered the use of his villa in Ischia, an offer Williams declined because he said he was “a little afraid of it” (*SL* 313).
Williams saw Bruegel’s paintings in 1924 when he visited the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, but did not address a Bruegel painting in a poem until 1942, when he wrote “The Dance,” a response to The Peasant Dance (ca. 1567), alternatively titled The Kermess. Sayre has explained how Williams creates a “circular poetic structure” (138) in this ekphrasis, using rhyme, repetition and a chiastic overall form to reflect the movement and energy of the dance that Bruegels captures in paint. This poem can also be read as a response to Auden’s ekphrasis published less than two years earlier, as it uses an alternate Bruegel painting than those alluded to in “Musée des Beaux Arts” to counter the poem’s portrayal of the disconnectedness of Bruegels figures. “The Dance” begins by echoing Auden’s introduction, “In Brueghel’s Icarus, for instance,” in its opening lines:

In Brueghel’s great picture, The Kermess, the dancers go around, they go round and round, the squeal and the blare and the tweedle of bagpipes, a bugle and fiddles tipping their bellies (round as the thick-sided glasses whose wash they impound) their hips and their bellies off balance to turn them. Kicking and rolling about the Fair Grounds, swinging their butts, those shanks must be sound to bear up under such rollicking measures, prance as they dance in Brueghel’s great picture, The Kermess. (58-59)

The entire poem, with its emphasis on a movement “round” and “around” and “about,” explodes the rhetorical strategy of circuitousness inherent in the figurative dance “about suffering” that Auden presents as characteristic of the works of “Old Masters,” and especially of Bruegel’s Icarus, where everything “turns” from suffering. In contrast to the solitary figure of “the ploughman,” Williams emphasizes the social connectedness of the collectively described

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20 The Kunsthistorisches Museum houses a third of Bruegel’s known works, including four that appear in Pictures from Brueghel: The Hunters in the Snow (1565), The Peasant Wedding (c.1567), The Peasant Dance (c.1567) and Children’s Games (1560). The painting that Williams erroneously calls “Self-Portrait” also belongs to the museum.

21 Williams’ first published reference to Bruegel appears in In the American Grain (1924), when he describes studying an early engraving, Big Fish Eat Little Fish (1557), with Adrienne Monnier in Paris (see Diggory 48).

22 “The Dance” also recalls the comic allusion to the Ballets Russes in Williams’ early poem “Dance Russe” (1917): “if I in my north room / dance naked, grotesquely / before my mirror / waving my shirt round my head” (86-87).
“dancers,” whose coordinated physical movements “about / the Fair Grounds” reflect the bond that the Bruegel figures according to Auden lack. In fact, everything about Williams’ poem seems to grate against that of Auden’s. In contrast to the solemn, tranquil tone of Auden’s poem and its final image of the ship sailing “calmly on,” “The Dance” is noisy and raucous, full of “the squeal and the blare and the / tweedle of bagpipes, a bugle and fiddles.” As James Heffernan points out, the poem’s “rollicking measures” are “mimicked” by the “rollicking dactyls” of its meter (Museum of Words 154). The rhyming couplet in Auden’s last stanza (“green”/ “seen”), which underscores the beautiful visual aesthetic of the “falling boy,” is transposed in Williams’ penultimate line as the internal rhyme in “prance as they dance,” which again emphasizes the playful affection and connection of the dancers in opposition to Auden’s solipsistic portrayal of humanity.

As a response to “Musée des Beaux Arts,” “The Dance” proceeds from a similar position of dissent as Jarrell’s ekphrasis, using a different painting by an “Old Master” (in this case, the same “Old Master”) to counter Auden’s assertion. In contrast to Auden’s portrayal of Bruegel’s figures, Williams recreates, through the poem’s formal composition, the physical and emotional connectedness that Bruegel evokes in “The Dance.” Yet Williams does not simply reverse Auden’s speaker’s thesis about human indifference. Jerome Mazzaro notes that the symbol of the “dance” functions for Williams in both Kora in Hell and his essay on Leaves of Grass to signify the “interplay of life and art” (159), indicating that the poet was attempting as early as this poem to counter Auden’s assumption that these terms could be conceptualized separately. Williams’ preoccupation with Bruegel continued through the 1950s, and it is apparent that he felt he had not exhausted his response to the artist, and to Auden, in “The Dance.” His responses also functioned topically as covert commentaries on formalism, extending Auden’s critique of the movement, which was reaching its height in Greenberg’s championing of Abstract Expressionism.

Though Williams admired the abstract painters, praising Jackson Pollock in Paterson V and Robert Motherwell in a 1952 lecture, his early scepticism about the future of abstract art aligns him with Auden’s critique of Fry, since Greenberg’s brand of formalism took the separation of “art” and “life” in Fry’s early essays to an extreme. For Greenberg, the best modern painting enacted what he called a “process of self-purification” (Art and Culture 208) or the shedding of non-essential conventions, which he believed would define the course of modernist art to
come. Like Auden, Williams turned to Bruegel to challenge his contemporary art-critical climate. Bruegel and Pollock both appear in Williams’ *Paterson V* (1958), only twelve pages apart in the revised edition. Like Greenberg, Williams praises Pollock, but does so by grafting his notion of “reality” from his 1948 essay “The Poem as a Field of Action” onto Fry’s terminology of “design”; “Pollock’s blobs of paint squeezed out / with design! / pure from the tube. Nothing else / is real” (211). In *Paterson V*, this aesthetic “real” is contrasted to the daily experience of the middle classes in an American capitalist economy that stifles creativity and innovative thinking. Williams conceived *Paterson* as a record of how this climate affected its people, describing the book as the “resemblance between the mind of modern man and a city” (*Paterson* xii). Though Williams as Paterson conceives of the middle classes in this poem similarly to Greenberg, Williams understood the artist as visually immersed in these degraded aspects of “life”:

> It is no mortal sin to be poor— anything but this featureless tribe that has the money now — staring into the atom, completely blind — without grace or pity, as if they were so many shellfish. The artist, Brueghel, saw them…

> — we have come in our time to the age of shoddy, the men are shoddy, driven by their bosses, inside and outside the job to be done, at a profit. (225)

The “real” that Williams earlier identified in Pollock’s work is the implicit antidote to the “age of shoddy” he portrays here. The relationship between Pollock’s work and modern society is paralleled to that between Bruegel and his contemporary world, portrayed through the Christian story he depicts, and *Paterson V* uses the latter pairing to define the “real.”

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23 Williams does not name Greenberg in any of his essays, but he likely knew of Greenberg and read his articles and reviews. In June of 1941, Greenberg reviewed *New Poems: 1940 for The Nation* (1: 74-76); though this anthology contained a number of Williams’ poems, Greenberg does not mention him (he does however single Auden out for praise). Williams and Greenberg also published concurrently in *Art News, Arts Digest*, and *Arts* in the mid-1950s.
Throughout *Paterson V*, the degradation of public sensitivity to the “real” is represented through the symbol of a snake or fish eating its tail - a symbol that Williams derives from Bruegel. This symbol appears repeatedly in *Paterson V*: “a snake with its tail in / its mouth” (212), “fish / swallowing / their own entrails” (220), “the serpent / its tail in its mouth” (229), “the serpent / has its tail in its mouth / AGAIN!” (230). Mazzaro argues that this image has its roots in the early Bruegel drawing *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* (1556) that Williams discussed with Adrienne Monnier when he visited Paris in 1924, which depicts a large fish eating a smaller fish eating a smaller fish and so on (159-60). In *Paterson V*, Williams turns the image on itself, and the meaning of the snake swallowing its tail and the fish swallowing its entrails is explicitly stated to be “the mind rotted within [the times]” (230), the atrophy of the intellectual, creative aspects of humanity that Williams perceived in his contemporary “age of shoddy.” Juxtaposed to the recurring symbol of the snake and fish is the art of Pollock and particularly, of Bruegel, who unlike the speaker of *Paterson V*, is able to present multiple perspectives from his world without privileging one or another as superior.

**Figure 4** Pieter Bruegel the Elder. *The Adoration of the Kings*. 1564.

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24 The implicit centrality of Bruegel to *Paterson V* supports Mazzaro’s theory about the “poet’s predisposition to make Brueghel one strand of *Paterson*” (158), and could indicate why Williams felt inclined to devote his final collection of poems to the painter. Mazzaro also points to the positioning of “The Dance” in *The Wedge* (1944) between “Paterson: The Falls” and “Writer’s Prologue to a Play in Verse” (158).
The ekphrasis of Bruegel’s *The Adoration of the Kings* that begins Book III of *Paterson V* indicates that what Williams admired about Bruegel’s paintings was the artist’s ability to portray existing binaries but to portray them as suspended. In the “Nativity” ekphrasis, this binary is the class division, and its effect on religious practice, between the wise men in “rich robes” who see “visions... and saw, / saw with their proper eyes,” and the “vulgar soldiery” and the “unkempt... old man” whose reactions to Christ range from “incredulous” to hungry, “their mouths / watering for the feast” (225). For Williams, the marker of Bruegel’s ability to present the world from multiple and equally weighted perspectives is sight. Paterson states, “The artist, Brueghel, saw them,” and then elaborates the significance of this observation in parentheses:

(I salute
the man Brueghel who painted
what he saw —
many times no doubt
among his own kids but not of course
in this setting [])(224).

The poem’s final stanza again stresses sight, but also defines it in terms of duality:

Peter Brueghel the artist saw it
from the two sides: the
imagination must be served —
and he served
dispersionately (225).

Williams also references Bruegel’s sight in nearly identical language in the later “Pictures from Brueghel,” as he opens and closes the sequence with this emphasis: In “Self-Portrait,” the first poem, he imagines Bruegel’s “eyes red-rimmed // from overuse he must have / driven them hard” (385) and in the final lines of “Children’s Games,” the last poem, he states that “Brueghel saw it all” and in paint “with his grim / humor faithfully / recorded it” (394). For Williams, Bruegel’s accomplishment was his seemingly simple ability to “see” from “the two sides” - from the perspective of both those who perceived the “real” in the miraculous figure of Christ and those who were “incredulous / that there was so much fuss / about such a simple thing as a baby” (224). Bruegel juxtaposes these “two sides” “dispersionately,” allowing the binaries depicted in his paintings to remain “unresolvable,” in Sayre’s terms.
Williams suggests in *Paterson V* that Bruegel’s painting positions itself differently toward society than that of other artists he refers to. In the section just prior to the “Nativity” ekphrasis, Williams puns on “satyr” to refer to how other writers and artists reacted to the intellectual deadening of their respective societies:

. . . have you read anything that I have written?
It is all for you

or the birds . . .
or Mezz Mezzrow...

. . . or the Satyrs, a pre-tragic play,
      a satyric play!
      you cannot be an artist
      by mere ineptitude

The dream
      is in pursuit!...

the cure began, perhaps
      with the abstraction
      of Arabic art

Dürer
      with his *Melancholy*
      was aware of it —
      the shattered masonry. Leonardo
      saw it,
      the obsession,
and ridiculed it
      in *La Giaconda*.
      Bosch’s
congeries of tortured souls and devils
      who prey on them
      fish
swallowing
      their own entrails (219-220).

The “satyrs” in this passage recall Williams’ dismal evaluation of the Paterson populace, the “featureless / tribe... without grace or pity,” and he suggests that the inventory of artists he lists also used satire in their works. Paterson, a version of Williams himself, introduces the subject by...
informing the reader that everything he has written “is all for you,” but there is the sense that satire is not entirely satisfactory for him. He presents Dürer, da Vinci and Bosch as artists who used satire to “ridicule” some form of perceived folly in their contemporary world, vaguely referred to as “it” three times in five lines. The referent of this “it” is apparently whatever also necessitated the “cure” discovered through “abstraction,” which is perhaps the idea that art uses form to contain depths of semantic meaning that must be excavated from this form. Da Vinci’s infamous La Giaconda (or Mona Lisa) is especially exemplary of this premise, since the woman’s enigmatic expression incited a centuries-long “obsession” with the identity and psychology of the woman ostensibly lurking beneath the surface. The juxtaposition of this passage at the end of section II with the ekphrasis of Bruegel’s The Adoration of the Kings that begins section III suggests that Bruegel’s critique proceeds differently than the “ridicul[ing]” satire of the other artists discussed, and perhaps that it functions as an ideal that Paterson (as Williams) aspires to. Bruegel’s ability to see “from the two sides,” both from the perspective of what Williams would call the “featureless tribe” and from that of the “proper eyes,” distinguishes his work from the satire that Williams saw in the works he cites by Dürer, da Vinci and Bosch.

Since Pollock’s art is praised alongside Bruegel’s in Paterson V, it is necessary to distinguish the two artists in terms of the ideals they represent for Williams, particularly in relation to the poet’s ambivalence about Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s. In 1951, when the movement was nearing the height of its popularity, Williams gave his infamous address to the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Paul Cappucci has interpreted the lecture as an attempt to “defend the development of abstraction in the visual arts” (53), but this statement is misleading. Much of the article is not even about abstract painting, but about modern poetry.25 Williams’ main point about abstract art is that its importance extends only so far as it remains historically necessary to “work out” the importance of “structure” over “subject matter” (A Recognizable Image 218), at which point its transient function is exhausted. The significance of abstraction is to denote “the exact place where for us modern art began,” which was with Cezanne: “It is exactly there that we began to say that it is no longer what you paint or what you write about that counts but how you

25 In A Recognizable Image, the transcribed lecture is eleven pages, and Williams only mentions abstract art in its opening paragraphs as a precedent to discuss the apparent “obscurity of the modern poem” (211) and the latter’s trajectory. Between the third and ninth pages, Williams does not mention the visual arts at all, except once as the complement to the formal possibilities open to the modern poem.
do it: how you lay on the pigment, how you place the words to make a picture or a poem” (218).  

If this lecture is read as a “defence” of Abstract Expressionism, it is a highly qualified one. Though the movement’s emphasis on form through abstraction is seen as necessary, for Williams it risks dissociating art, as Jarrell warns in “The Old and the New Masters,” from “life,” or the “social, economic world in which we are living.”

This lecture was not well received by its audience, which began to holler “catcalls and boos” (Mariani 623) almost as soon as it began.  

That Williams managed to insult both traditional art historians, who were opposed to abstraction (the majority of the audience, according to Cappucci and Mariani), and those formalists who agreed with Williams’ premise and his initial praise of abstraction, explains the poet’s unpopularity that night. The lecture ends by denying the continuing relevance of abstraction: “there is one further step awaiting [abstract painting] before its extinction: when it is being done by the blind” (219). In an essay written the same year as the lecture, “The Portrait: Emmanuel Romano,” this “extinction” is linked to the tendency of abstract art to polarize form as a value by excluding historically situated meanings. Williams praises “the portrait” as “the most complex” of “all painting” and states, “Modern painters have been baffled by it. They have been afraid of the horrible word ‘representational’; they have run screaming into the abstract, forgetting that all painting is representational, even the most abstract, the most subjective, the most distorted” (A Recognizable Image 197). This prediction of the inevitable “extinction” of abstract art, combined with Williams’ turn again to Bruegel in his final collection, suggests that the poet sought an alternate understanding of the dichotomy between form and content than the one abstract art could offer. His late poems indicate that he found it in what he presents as Bruegel’s use of parody, which Williams extends through the use of pastiche.

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26 Robert Motherwell is praised in this regard as someone who “has turned up among us to work out that (thankless) historical process” (219).

27 In a letter to Kenneth Burke written after the event, Williams admitted, “I damned near DIED reading my 10 pages to the wolves. I could hear them growling before I had got half way down the first page... They wanted to kill me” (Selected Letters 311).

28 Williams states rather condescendingly to these art historians of the Institute, “You’ve finally abandoned all medieval and classic criteria. You do not select subjects any more; to classify poems or pictures by their subject matter is today a little childish” (218).
3.4 An Old Master of Parody: Bruegel as Critical Precedent in “Pictures from Bruegel”

Williams’ assertion that “all painting is representational” could certainly be taken as a summative statement about how many readers and critics of “Pictures from Bruegel” have interpreted his approach to ekphrasis. Critical reception of the sequence has been lukewarm in comparison to the earlier ekphrastic poems. Many critics seem puzzled by the switch in subject from avant-garde Cubist paintings in these early poems to sixteenth-century Flemish peasant scenes in the late poems: “gone is the Cubist angularity and verve of Williams’s anatomy of Juan Gris’s collage ‘Roses’ in Spring and All,” laments Leibowitz (443). To many others, as Loizeaux has pointed out, the sequence has “seemed...so deliberately uninterpretive” (35), substituting description of content for the earlier innovation of Cubist forms in verse. Many of these negative criticisms are levied by comparing the collection to Auden’s earlier ekphrasis: Heffernan states that “[w]hile Auden sounds like a man long familiar with museums and the masterworks they exhibit, Williams often sounds like an amateur seeing a picture for the first time” (Museum of Words 155). John Hollander is more explicit in his judgment, dismissing Williams’ poems (following a lengthy analysis of Auden’s ekphrasis) as “particularly vapid” and “characteristically flat, rather than strong, in their interpretive resonance” (252). Hollander, like many critics who discuss Williams’ final collection, implicitly presents these bland poems as the logical complement to the elderly poet’s age and sickly state in his final decade. He claims that Williams was “imaginatively tired with his old project of denying that there were valid allegorical or mythopoetic agendas for poetry” (252), perhaps thinking of some of the accounts of Williams’ late life that have reached near mythic status.29 Both Leibowitz and Mariani

29 Most critics who discuss these poems refer to Williams’ advanced age when he wrote them. Leibowitz claims that “[b]y the time he was writing and assembling the poems of Pictures from Brueghel, Williams plainly lacked the energy, focus, and patience to continue his search for advances in technique” (437). Grant F. Scott reminds us during his discussion of “The Parable of the Blind” that “Williams himself” is “quietly added to the tragic procession” depicted in the painting, since “at 77 years of age, [he] is indeed forced to make his way through the world ‘stick in / hand,’ half-blind and crippled by a series of debilitating strokes” (74). The biographical accounts do indicate that Williams experienced significant impairment following his third stroke in 1958. Mariani emphasizes his psychological downturn especially, quoting a letter to Kenneth Burke at the end of 1959 in which Williams admits, “I am eternally so depressed that I can’t live with myself and my slightest error in conducting my life is exaggerated until it becomes an obsession” (qtd. 748). Denise Levertov solidified the mythology of Williams’ physical and creative demise by making it the subject of her poem “September 1961,” quoting a letter from Williams that read “I can’t / describe to you what has been / happening to me,” and grouping his decline with that of Pound and H. D.: “They are not dying, / they are withdrawn / into a painful privacy” (81).
emphasize Williams’ depressed state following his third stroke in 1958, and both also suggest that this depression extended to the poet’s confidence in his ability to write (Mariani 763; Leibowitz 435). Mariani reports that in 1961 Williams dumped the copy of Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems he had revised for book publication into the trash, fortuitously to be retrieved by his watchful wife, Floss (763).

Despite these rather dismal assessments, the Bruegel poems indicate Williams’ continued engagement with both Auden and the contemporary New York art scene, suggesting that their interpretive minimalism is integral to their method rather than to the poet’s physical or literary downturn. Though Williams himself may have intuited (correctly, it seems) that his poems might be (mis)interpreted as “vapid,” or even literally as garbage, this is in large part attributable to the fact that the sequence as a whole is “deliberately uninterpretive,” to use Loizeaux’s terms, as the poems reflect the overt pastiche in “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus.” The poems adopt the aesthetic distance of Auden’s speaker but invert the attempt to use this distance to evade the subject of suffering or to provide an interpretive framework. Through this omission, Williams’ poems implicitly subvert the false dichotomy of “art” versus “life” that “Musée des Beaux Arts” and the formalism it critiques depend upon.

Taking his cue from their mutual subject, Williams responds to Auden’s use of parody in two ways: by evoking Bruegel’s parody of the “Old Masters” of the Italian Renaissance through the description of the paintings and by extending Bruegel’s strategy through the explicit pastiche of Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” in “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus.” The first level of parody activates the second of pastiche. Williams’ descriptions of the paintings illuminate Bruegel’s use of parody as a correction to the way that Auden’s speaker homogenizes Bruegel and the “Old Masters” in his poem. Williams also makes it clear through the content and form of his own poems that Bruegel’s use of parody must be evolved to avoid replicating the binary between art and life that “Musée des Beaux Arts” relied upon, in order to make the issue relevant in a new way. The pastiche of “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” does not mimic aspects of the precursor text in order to “refunction” or redirect Auden’s ambivalent critique of human indifference to suffering, but rather to present this indifference without the indicators of the interpretive frame or “ulterior motive,” in Jameson’s terms, that parody necessitates. Pastiche loses both the comic and the (at least, overtly) critical potential of parody because, according to Jameson, it emerges from a world that has also lost its “latent feeling that there exists something
normal” against which the parodied object can be compared (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 114). Williams repeatedly critiqued Auden for his excessive allegiance to linguistic and formal “norms” in his “good sweet verses”; his late poems further this early critique, but only by paradoxically refusing the distance from his speaker required to facilitate it, perpetuating a shift from Bruegel’s and Auden’s uses of parody to that of postmodern pastiche, a strategy Williams likely adapted from Neo-Dada art.30

While “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” functions as an explicit pastiche, the remainder of the collection also adopts its resistance to the conventional “interpretive” mode of ekphrasis, which links the lyrically rendered meaning of an art object to the poem’s thematic aims, as in “Musée des Beaux Arts.” Yet there is a curious obsession with the person and mind of Bruegel throughout “Pictures from Brueghel” that disrupts the otherwise disinterested speaker. These references both confirm Bruegel as a master of parody and nostalgically idealize him. In “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” Jameson suggests a possible rationale for Williams’ preoccupation with the person of Bruegel when he refers to the postmodern crisis of the ‘death of the subject’ or, to say it in more conventional language, the end of individualism as such. The great modernisms were, as we have said, predicated on the invention of a personal, private style... But this means that the modernist aesthetic is in some way organically linked to the conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality, which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world and to forge its own unique, unmistakable style... in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum. (114-15)

If a central component of postmodern art is “the death of the subject,” it is certainly notable that Williams repeatedly emphasizes Bruegel’s “unique[ness]” as a crucial value. In contrast to Auden, Williams makes a concerted effort throughout the sequence not to compare Bruegel to

30 In his essay “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” Jameson argues that pastiche is “[o]ne of the most significant features or practices” in postmodernist art (113). Williams is frequently read as a transitional figure between modernism and postmodernism, and his use of pastiche in “Pictures from Brueghel” makes Jameson’s theory especially applicable. As John Lowney points out, the “extraordinary impact of Williams’ poetics on postmodernist open-form poetry... is widely acknowledged” (13), and many scholars consider him among the first postmodernist writers; for example, Zsófia Bán’s Desire and De-Scription: Words and Images of Postmodernism in the Late Poetry of William Carlos Williams attempts to “place him... in the history and tradition of postmodernism” (2).
other painters or to see him as representative of the “Old Masters,”\textsuperscript{31} repeatedly emphasizing his singularity and resistance to established conventions. “Haymaking” makes this distinction explicit, in one of the few instances that diverge from the insistently descriptive mode:

Painting

that the Renaissance
tried to absorb
but
it remained a wheat field
over which the
wind played (389).

By attributing the active phrase “tried to absorb” to the personified “Renaissance,” Williams exaggerates the way that Auden’s speaker ascribes a singular understanding of suffering to a collective and vaguely defined group of “Old Masters.” The metonymic meaning of “Renaissance” in Williams’ poem also suggests the similar contiguity in Auden’s “Old Masters,” as both terms really refer to how the artists of this period have been retrospectively theorized about by art historians. Williams makes it clear that these efforts, implicitly including Auden’s speaker, to “absorb” Bruegel into the tradition of Renaissance art, can never be entirely successful. He uses the metaphor of a “wheat field” that “men with scythes,” “gleaners,” “magpies” and even “the wind,” can reap, but never entirely possess: “it was his own... no one / could take that / from him” (389). The preoccupation with Bruegel’s singularity is reflected in Williams’ severe enjambment that echoes and perpetuates the disruptions that for Williams subtly marked Bruegel’s distinction from his contemporaries.

Williams’ repeated emphasis on Bruegel’s singularity is also marked by an admiration for the unique organizing vision of an artist who uses parody, but who carefully balances what Williams calls elsewhere “the two sides,” that of the sympathetic and the critical. Bruegel is admired as a

\textsuperscript{31}Heffernan has shown that Williams was also influenced by Gustav Glück’s study, \textit{Pieter Brueghel the Elder} (1936), and Thomas Craven’s \textit{A Treasury of Art Masterpieces} (1939) while writing his ekphrastic sequence, and that both studies would have supported the poet’s idea about “Brueghel’s transformation of the Italian mannerism that his Flemish contemporaries thoughtlessly adopted and that his own ‘un-Italian’ painting reflects with a radical difference” (\textit{Museum of Words} 159).
master of parody, whose paintings both exemplify and critique, in ambivalently equal measure, the human indifference to suffering that Auden’s speaker wants to see them as representative of. This admiration, however, also seems potently nostalgic, as the past tense in these references contrasts with the present-tense descriptions of the paintings themselves. The reader is systematically reminded of Bruegel as the creator of the art represented, beginning with Williams’ (intentional?) misreading of a painting (no longer attributed to Bruegel)\(^\text{32}\) entitled *The Old Shepherd* as a “Self-Portrait.” Bruegel is explicitly mentioned in all but three of the ten poems, and implicitly evoked as the overarching organizational force in two of those remaining. The nostalgia in Williams’ poems is both for Bruegel as an artist, but also implicitly for the aesthetic and cultural norms of a world that allowed him to depict scenes that reflected his contemporary context in comprehensively unified and formally organized works of art - in other words, for a world that accommodated his masterful use of parody. Williams portrays Bruegel’s ability to keep the categories of “art” and “life” in suspension by repeatedly emphasizing how the artist’s encompassing vision translated the heterogeneity of his world into effective aesthetic forms. In “Children’s Games,” Williams notes that “Bruegel saw it all” (394) and in “Haymaking,” he praises “The living quality of / the man’s mind” with “its covert assertions / for art, art, art!” (389). Recalling Williams’ own ideal for the artist to use innovative forms to challenge static conceptions about the world, Bruegel is praised for his ability to find order within a disorderly world: “Brueghel the painter / concerned with it all,” he explains in “The Hunters in the Snow,” “has chosen / a winter-struck bush for his / foreground to / complete the picture” (387); “The Parable of the Blind” repeats the word “composition” three times, which is juxtaposed to the rendering of imminent “disaster”; “The Corn Harvest” and “The Parable of the Blind” begin with assertions about how “the painting is organized” (389) and how it was “Disciplined by the artist” (390), respectively. The idealization of Bruegel’s ability to illuminate the content of his art through innovative forms is implicitly contrasted to the depthlessness, or what critics have called the “uninterpretive,” “vapid” and “flat,” quality of Williams’ collection.

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32 Though the painting was thought to be by Bruegel when Williams visited the Kunsthistorisches Museum in 1924, it is now attributed to Jean Fouquet and entitled *Portrait of the Ferrara Court Jester Gonella* (c. 1442).
In the ekphrastic sequence, Williams portrays Bruegel as exemplary of the artistic ideal that he spoke about as particularly American and as explicitly opposed to Auden. Williams presents the artist as one who successfully opposed the perceived superiority of the “Italian Masters” that he studied and (at least in part, according to Williams) rejected in his day. The effort to present Bruegel in isolation from the other “Old Masters” is manifested grammatically in “Pictures from Brueghel” in the near obsessive use of the verb “to be” and in the infrequent use of active verbs throughout the collection, which ground each poem in a single painting rather than making that work “about” some other issue or theme. The insistence on what initially reads as sparse description is what makes Williams sound like an “amateur” to Heffernan, but this resistance to commentary is one of the critical differences that distinguishes his method from Auden’s use of parody. Williams makes it clear that his model for this difference is Bruegel, whose parodies were effective because of their extreme ambivalence, their capacity to present things “from the two sides... dispassionately.” In “Pictures from Brueghel,” this ability is alluded to in “The Adoration of the Kings” when Williams calls the artist “the chronicler” (387) and in “Children’s Games” when he states that Bruegel “saw it all / and ... faithfully / recorded it” (394). Unlike Auden’s speaker, for whom poetry could talk “about” something, particularly the ethical dilemma humans encounter when faced with the realities of suffering in the world around them, for Williams this discursive aspect of poetry is more suspect because it assumes a distance between poetic language and the world. Williams collapses the distance between himself and his speaker in “Pictures from Bruegel,” but he largely stifles the interpretive capacities of his voice. His explicit reference to himself in “The Adoration of the Kings” is the only personal pronoun in the collection. That it refers to his previous ekphrasis on the same painting in Paterson V draws attention to the disparity between the absence of Williams and the ubiquity of Bruegel in “Pictures from Bruegel.” In Jameson’s terms, this is the difference between the “fragmentation” of the subject in postmodern art (Postmodernism 14) and the nostalgia of that subject for lost

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33 It may be that Williams understood the division, and its hierarchical implications, between northern and southern Europe (and their respective artistic traditions, as Fry saw them in Flemish Art, for example) as analogous to that between America and Europe. As Ethan Matt Kavalier points out, Bruegel’s works “can seem so Northern, so evidently Netherlandish” because of their “idiosyncratic spatial properties and broad distribution of details that contrast with the focussed action and perspectival setting that we have come to consider the norm” (4).

34 The opening line of Auden’s ekphrasis reminds one of Derrida’s cautious use of the word “about” in The Truth in Painting, in which he claims that this “truth” is only a discourse “around” painting, a circuitousness movement “about” some physical or, in the case of art writing, linguistic object, which entails a central blind spot that defines the limits of what is signified.
aesthetic and cultural norms, including the understanding of art as the product of a unique, acutely perceptive and ordering “mind.” In this collection, Williams employs an insistently descriptive mode while minimizing the interpretive cues that activate the parody in Auden’s poem. The achievement of Bruegel’s paintings is that the parody is apparent solely through Williams’ minimal description, which adopts and furthers this admired ambivalence.

The subtle resistance to tradition that Williams presents as inherent to Bruegel’s work indicates that he imagined the artist as a master of parody, both of his artistic and social climate. If parody is understood as “a stylistic confrontation, a modern recoding which establishes difference at the heart of similarity” (A Theory of Parody 8), as Linda Hutcheon argues, one effect of Williams’ collection is to show, largely through description, how Bruegel’s paintings establish this “difference” between himself and the “Old Masters.” The inclusion of an ekphrasis on “The Adoration of the Kings” is notable in this regard because it rewrites and redefines the emphasis on the painter’s ability to present a scene from differing perspectives in the earlier, longer ekphrasis of this painting in Paterson V. In the version that appears in “Pictures from Brueghel,” the emphasis is instead on the genre and convention of devotional paintings and particularly on the difference between Bruegel’s rendering of his subject and implicitly that of other (Italian) artists, such as Sandro Botticelli, Andrea Mantegna, Fra Angelico and Leonardo da Vinci:

From the Nativity
which I have already celebrated
the Babe in its Mother’s arms

the Wise Men in their stolen splendor
and Joseph and the soldiery

attendant
with their incredulous faces
make a scene copied we’ll say

from the Italian masters
but with a difference
the mastery

of the painting
and the mind the resourceful mind
that governed the whole
the alert mind dissatisfied with
what it is asked to
and cannot do

accepted the story and painted
it in the brilliant
colors of the chronicler

the downcast eyes of the Virgin
as a work of art
for profound worship (240).

Williams begins with a description of the scene so predictable it could be any account, art-critical or literary, of this subject, even his own previous ekphrasis or “celebrat[i]on” of the work in *Paterson*. He interrupts the inventory of characters - “the Babe in its Mother’s arms,” “the Wise Men,” “Joseph” and the “soldiery” - to emphasize that Bruegel’s “scene,” though similar to those of the “Italian Masters,” is rendered “with a difference,” which signals Williams’ presentation of the work as parody. The key to interpreting this “difference” is the divergence of this poem from the earlier version in *Paterson V*.

The class division emphasized in the *Paterson V* version is once again apparent between the “Wise Men” and the “soldiery” in the “Pictures from Brueghel” version, but in the latter there is no overlap between the “proper eyes” of the wise men and those of Bruegel himself, nor does the Christ child function to symbolize the “real” amidst the “featureless tribe” of the lower classes. Instead, the enjambment between “stolen / splendor” underscores the revised depiction of the “Wise Men,” as does the frequent use of capitalized words throughout the poem, stylistically unlike any of the other poems in the sequence: “Nativity,” “Babe,” “Mother’s,” “Wise Men” and “Virgin.” This capitalization also mirrors the capitalization that grants the “Old Masters” authority in Auden’s poem. The “stolen / splendor” of the “Wise Men” makes their devotion ironic; the “incredulous faces” of the “soldiery,” alluding particularly to the figure who peers in dumbstruck amazement over Mary’s right shoulder, are similarly ironic because these expressions are comic rather than solemn. This ironic juxtaposition in what is supposed to be a solemn scene marks Bruegel’s “difference” for Williams from the “Italian Masters,” whose paintings of this scene lack the note of absurdity that infuses Bruegel’s and renders it parody. In these more conventional renderings of the Biblical subject, the viewer is encouraged to model the rapt focus of the major figures through her own fixed gaze on the painting, as religious devotion
is measured by this standard of attention. The final designation of the painting as a “work of art / for profound worship” suggests the irony that the people Bruegel depicts, the “Wise Men” and the “incredulous” soldiery, do not seem to be very effective models of piety (though perhaps their humanity is also the point).

In contrast to many who understand Bruegel as an illustrator of proverbs and parables, Mazzaro notes that Williams largely ignores the “moralizing” in the biblical stories and proverbs Bruegel depicted (159). Mariani argues that this was because Williams saw in Bruegel “evidence of a mind that had been asked to accept what it could not: the all-pervasive Christian myth of its day” (747), alluding to Williams’ description of Bruegel’s “alert mind dissatisfied with / what it is asked to / and cannot do,” yet which “accepted the story and painted / it.” This contradiction points to a doubleness, a “repetition with difference” (Hutcheon A Theory of Parody 32), in Bruegel’s works, which both reproduce the conventions of previous artworks, but also distance themselves from these conventions through irony. In the case of “The Adoration of the Kings,” Bruegel via Williams adopts the traditional composition of the scene, but suggests a subtle critique of the way religion demands a similar imperative of attention as that of the figures to the child in conventional depictions of this story. The portrayal of Mary’s “downcast eyes” also suggests the possible deceit implicit in the claim of the capitalized “Virgin” earlier described as a “Mother,” as well as heightens the irony in the final lines that this painting was aligned with other devotional paintings as “a work of art / for profound worship.” Bruegel’s painting is thus “double-voiced” (Ibid 4), as it becomes the object that it also critiques, which allows for an “ambivalence” that mixes “criticism and sympathy for the parodied text” (Rose 51). The parodic work, unlike the satiric work, does not objectify what it critiques but confirms it as part of itself, which is the signal of Bruegel’s mastery for Williams; parody allowed the artist’s “mind” to permeate each work as he “chronicl[ed]” his perspective of his world as one entrenched within it.

Bruegel’s paintings are not, for Williams, objects to be viewed in isolation from the artist who created them. Rather, Williams suggests that Bruegel, like himself, understood art to be the product of a critical self or “mind” engaged in excruciating observation of his world: his “eyes red-rimmed / from overuse he must have / driven them hard,” he had “no time for any- / thing but his painting” (385). Bruegel’s “eyes smiling” also indicates a playfulness or humour that characterizes the kind of parody apparent throughout the rest of the collection, both in terms of Bruegel’s inversions (of the seriousness of devotional painting implied in “The Adoration of the
Kings,” for example) and in terms of how Williams uses Bruegel’s works as the occasion to update Auden’s critique of formalism in “Musée des Beaux Arts.” By the late 1950s, the formalist elevation of “art” over “life” had peaked following the rise of the first generation of Abstract Expressionists, and some critics, and many artists, felt that an impasse had been reached in modern art and in its criticism. The obsession with the “mind” of Bruegel throughout the sequence was likely also influenced by Williams’ reading of the alternative art writing of Nicolas Calas, a critic among the first to appreciate the Neo-Dada artists who emerged in the wake of Abstract Expressionism and the Pop artists who appeared on the scene shortly afterward. The strategies used by these artists to frustrate the expectation of interpretive depth provided the poet with aesthetic models to address the issues at stake in Auden’s ekphrasis in a new way.

3.5 The Mind in the Musée: Calas’ Challenge to Art-Historical Methodology

Williams’ emphasis on the “mind” of Bruegel has an important precursor in the writing of his friend, the art critic Nicolas Calas. Prior to Calas’ success as a critic in the late 1950s and onwards, when he wrote about Neo-Dada and then Pop art for publications such as Arts Magazine and Artforum, he was harshly criticized by notable experts in his field for his unconventional approach to criticism, and particularly for his study of Hieronymus Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights (c. 1500), funded and later rejected for publication by the Bollingen Foundation. Williams and Calas corresponded in the early 1940s, contributed to the small publications VVV and View, and spent time together at Yaddo in 1950 when Calas was working on his Bosch manuscript. Williams’ “Nicolas Calas: Four Poems” also appeared in Poems, 1939–1944. The two men shared a similar understanding that contemporary art must be “turned toward the future” (Calas qtd. in MacGowan 90–91). Calas also adopted Williams’ use of Eliot and Auden as explicit counterpoints to this imperative. In 1951, Williams was asked by the

35 Their collaborative critique of Herbert Read’s Politics of the Unpolitical appeared in View in 1944.
36 See Christopher MacGowan’s article “Sparkles of Understanding’: Williams and Nicholas Calas” for a more comprehensive account of the interaction between Williams and Calas from the 1940s through the 1950s.
37 Williams read Calas’ Confound the Wise in 1940, which discussed Williams’ poetry as “turned toward the future” (qtd. in MacGowan 90–91), in opposition to that of Eliot, Pound and Auden. MacGowan also adds that the December 1944 issue of View included a “discussion by Calas in similar terms of Auden’s For the Time Being” (91).
Bollingen Foundation for a reader’s report on Calas’ completed manuscript, following a dismal first assessment by Erwin Panofsky, who criticized Calas’ “associative methods as arbitrary and condemned his apparent unawareness of important previous scholarship” (MacGowan 93). H. W. Janson and Herbert Read soon joined the chorus of negative reports. According to MacGowan, these critics “complained of the lack of historical context” (94) in Calas’ work, deeming the extensive influence of particular commentaries of St. Augustine and St. Gregory that Calas insisted upon to be inadequately evidenced. Panofsky and Janson were particularly incensed by his argument about an allusion to Jan Van Eyck’s *Giovanni Arnolfini and his Bride* (1434), which they dismissed as “impossible” (93).

The criticisms of Calas’ manuscript were countered by Williams’ report. The poet was apparently aware of Panofsky’s initial report, since he positions his own as a defence against the supposed (the scare quotes are Williams’) “‘inaccuracies’ bred of [Calas’] method of investigation” (*A Recognizable Image* 192). Williams’ defence emphasizes Calas’ focus on the “mind” of the artist, which, Williams argues, makes the artist’s work contemporary again. Bosch via Calas presents “the image of how a contemporary mind... works” and Calas’ alternative “method” mirrors the ingenuity of Bosch in being “inclusive of all the resources of the mind, the modern mind” (193). A decade later, when composing “Pictures from Brueghel,” Williams would echo the diction and rushed syntax of his earlier appreciation of Calas, in his reference to “the mind the resourceful mind” of Bruegel. What was admirable about the “method” of Calas for Williams was the (at least partially) imaginative leap in asserting “the overall intention of the painting” (188; my emphasis), using the painting itself and the connections it suggests to other texts as the primary evidence for interpreting it as a reaction to them. According to Williams, Calas imagines Bosch reacting to the spiritual climate of his time, presenting “an exposure (resentful against impiety) of the disastrous effects of heresies current in that day, the folly of man, as against the teachings of St. Gregory and St. Augustine especially, the solid ground of the true church” (188). In his review, Williams is less intrigued by the substance of this discovery (he was critical throughout his life of religion and especially Catholicism), than by the method of investigation used, which parallels the response to precursor artworks idealized in “Pictures from Brueghel.”

38 Henry McBride wrote the only other positive review (MacGowan 93).
Williams’ defence of Calas indicates his agreement that the major task of writing about art is to make the work in question relevant to its contemporary context, rather than solely reconstructing the evidence for historical influences and for the work’s reception in its own time. For Williams, this alternative approach is what distinguishes Calas from traditional art historians. The poet’s defence of Calas in regard to the latter’s insistence on an allusion to Van Eyck in Bosch’s work - a major sticking point for Calas’ detractors - is notable because it speaks to Williams’ own ideal for art (and for art interpretation) that Bruegel represents in “Pictures from Brueghel.” The connection Calas claims between the Bosch and Van Eyck paintings is one of parody: “Christ and Eve join hands in a way suggesting a parody of the joining of hands of the Arnolfini... Even if Bosch held Van Eyck in high esteem, he must have deplored the negligence with which this mundane court painter treated religious ceremonial” (Calas qtd. in Williams 192). Calas’ elaboration of this parody allows him to become a kind of creative ally to Bosch, explicating how Bosch’s understanding of his social world was apparent through his response to a precursor artwork. Again, Williams is less interested in the particularity of the argument about Bosch’s Catholicism than in the fact that Calas’ method allows the art to speak to both its historical and its contemporary context: first, in the way it indicates how Bosch makes Van Eyck relevant to his portrayal of his own society (even if only to ridicule it); second, in the way it privileges intentionality as important to interpretation and thus challenges the dominant approach of Panofsky and Jansen by emphasizing that the work itself can reveal the “mind” of the artist and thus can dictate how it is to be studied.

The ability to detect parody as Calas did is for Williams associated with the ability to work against established historical methodologies: “It is not stated that Bosch coldly and laboriously built up the intricate pattern Calas describes; this is what confuses the self-limiting experts who are staidly correct in rejecting some of Calas’s more difficult deductions ... They don’t see the rationale of his method. It is not their method” (193). Calas violates the existing academic taboo on using an extensive historical framework to establish overt and singular intentionality. He also implicitly violates the formalist dictate of understanding the influence between artists solely in terms of the working out of formal problems, since the formal relationship of the “join[ed] hands” in the Bosch painting is not based on a reductive method of medium “purification” but rather is used to restructure the viewer’s understanding of marriage in the precursor painting and in the contemporary world.
What the “self-limiting experts” (both traditional art historians and formalist critics) miss, in Williams’ view, is the potential Calas opens of studying historical connections indicated by the text (in this case, through parody), which perhaps cannot be solidly corroborated by previous art criticism or by the historical documents of the period. Parody contains an element of play that is only partially circumscribed by established historiographies. Readers and viewers are “decoders” of intention in parodic texts, according to Hutcheon, even when these intentions exist “only in the form of inferences, that we, as receivers, make from the text, but such inferences are not to be ignored” (A Theory of Parody 23). Both Hutcheon and Williams emphasize that these “inferences” do proceed from (potentially) historically verifiable evidence, though Williams is more liberal in his emphasis on potentiality because it opens the text beyond what history books can tell us and perhaps beyond what the artist overtly intended. For Williams, this “method” can allow us to see the past and the present from new perspectives:

Calas’s presentation is the work of a mind that puts itself on par with Bosch, as though he too were contemporary and his picture... were a contemporary phenomenon - as it cannot but be - something alive today. Such a view gives the text new authority. It is no longer an explanation in which the present day attempts to put itself into conditions of the past which it cannot know and so stultifies itself. It is rather an evocation in which the present mind brings the past up to today and makes it work before our eyes... Calas lends Bosch his faculties and bids him speak. It makes Bosch come alive and though we can’t always be sure (the process would defeat itself if this were true) by releasing itself unrestrainedly it achieves a new insight - provided the premises are correct, which I am convinced they are... [Calas’ method] can’t hold back without itself pretending to be wiser or more astute or a greater painter than Bosch himself - which would be absurd. And so... it must let itself go completely, not hold back: it cannot afford to be maimed by the thought that Bosch couldn’t have gone so far. He could and perhaps did: one must envision everything even remotely suggested to get at the full truth. (192-93)

Williams uses Calas as exemplary of the claim that great art can - indeed, must - suggest a wider awareness than historical research can prove an artist had direct access to. Calas’ text is not an “explanation” but a “detection of light... an evocation of an inner (continuous) meaning” that shows how Bosch’s work “is contemporary, it is alive, it is ourselves” (195). Though Calas may not have unequivocally “proved” Bosch’s engagement with the particular Van Eyck painting, for Williams this is less important than the potential meanings that could arise if one acknowledged the influence to be in the realm of possibility, since one “cannot know” past “conditions” with
absolute certainty. The word “evocation” suggests an open response to the possible inferences that enable meaning to be unveiled in the text.

By allowing the “inferences” of the work to determine the course of interpretation rather than solely historical documents [the “classical methods of ‘proof’” (193)], or solely the analysis of formal similarities without reference to historical context, the critic can participate in the process of making the artwork relevant in new ways to a contemporary audience. Parody is integral to this project, because it represents a way of drawing on a previous form, but contextualizing this repeated form to make it signify in a new and relevant way. The detection of parody is exemplary of Calas’ openness to all the possible meanings and associations that Bosch grappled with as he painted, as he, like all “masters,” “secreted [his] meanings in [his] paintings to have them live, if chance favored them, forever” (195). This statement holds exciting potential for the role of the critic, as the intentions of the artist become reinvigorated by the critic who envoices them for a contemporary audience. For Williams, Calas’ achievement is the new meaning he elaborates in the Bosch painting, but more importantly, it is also the model he provides for a strand of criticism that bridges the impasse between the authority of historical context versus the authority of form.

Though the overlap between Calas’ model of interpretation and Williams’ desire to illuminate the complexities of Bruegel’s “mind” by depicting the parodies in his paintings is evident throughout “Pictures from Bruegel,” the relationship between “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” and Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” does not function in the same way. Williams limits his evoked presence in the collection and he avoids referencing anything that would overtly suggest to his reader that, in Williams’ words, “it is contemporary, it is alive, it is ourselves.” Though Mazzaro goes so far as to call the artist, as he is portrayed in the sequence, “a kind of proto-Williams” (159), the repeated references to Bruegel’s mind and artistic process contrast starkly with the sole reference to Williams himself in “The Adoration of the Kings.” Williams’ admiration suggests that his own method for presenting Bruegel’s paintings is continuous with that of the painter, but the brevity of his lines and poems, his insistence on descriptive over interpretive statements and his multiplication of this method through ten ekphrases suggest his awareness of being limited in ways that Bruegel was not. Williams’ poems expose that Bruegel’s masterful use of parody was enabled by his idealized “mind the resourceful mind” that “governed the whole.” As Hutcheon explains, the detection of parody entails these discoveries
about the author’s “mind” and intentionality: “as readers or viewers or listeners who decode parodic structures, we also act as decoders of encoded intent” (A Theory of Parody 23). Yet the interpretive cues that would demonstrate the intentionality of Williams’ “mind” seem largely absent from the sequence. The fact that these poems (aside from the repeated, idealized references to Bruegel’s mastery) attend only to the details of the historical paintings they represent does not allow Williams to use parody in the way that Bruegel does. Whereas Bruegel’s parody is described as “dispassionately” well-balanced between “the two sides” of binary oppositions that allow for differing interpretations, Williams extends this model by removing, as much as possible, the inflections of interpretation from his language. Though description in language may never be neutral, “Pictures from Brueghel” as a sequence approaches interpretive neutrality by choosing sparse description of the referenced paintings, which aligns it with pastiche. In “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,” pastiche is overtly adopted in Williams’ rewriting of the second stanza of “Musée des Beaux Arts,” which implicitly undoes the assumption of a separation between art and life that Auden’s parody relied upon.

3.6 “Constant Watching of the Field”: Williams and Neo-Dada in the Late 1950s

In 1957, Williams would define his artistic experience in the same terms of sight that he uses to praise Bruegel in his poems: “My life is a constant watching of the field” (qtd. in Mariani 732). He explained that this task was his “daily business” as he scanned “every newspaper, every journal, every letter, for hints as to what is going on in the world of events” (Ibid). The purpose of this “constant watching” was, as Mariani explains, to “discover the gist of the new” (733). It is likely that Williams was aware of many of the exhibitions in the late 1950s and early 1960s that began to showcase artists whose works differed from the dominant Abstract Expressionist mode, including Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Claes Oldenburg, who were appropriating popular images and symbols, and using ready-mades and assemblage to challenge the abstract orthodoxy by violating its ban on subject matter (especially popular subject matter). In doing so, these artists called into question the binary that critics like Greenberg had used abstract art to uphold between the “avant-garde” of high culture and the “kitsch” of mass culture, between the formal accomplishment of “art” and the mundane content of “life.” Williams was certainly “watch[ing]” the art scene in the late 1950s as it began to shift away from Abstract
Expressionism - a decline he had anticipated as early as 1948. The critical trend decrying the decline of Abstract Expressionism gained momentum following Pollock’s untimely death in 1956, and in December 1959, as Williams began to compose “Pictures from Brueghel,” he wrote cheerfully to Donald Allen that “the turn of the painters against abstraction has come not a moment too soon for me” (qtd. in Cappucci 147).

If Williams was aware of this critical trend, he would also have been aware that a new group of artists was garnering much attention. Allan Kaprow published “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock” in 1958, in which he stated that after 1956, Abstract Expressionism had become “dull and repetitive, even futile,” but he acknowledged that Pollock’s work had influenced the emerging Neo-Dada art and its emphasis on the “space and objects of our everyday life” (qtd. in Hapgood 21). The Neo-Dada artists came into prominence in the late 1950s: Johns and Rauschenberg had their first solo exhibitions at Leo Castelli’s gallery in January 1958, followed by Oldenburg’s influential exhibitions at the Judson Gallery in May of 1959 and with Jim Dine later that year. In late 1959, Oldenburg, Dine and Kaprow participated in a panel discussion at the Judson, and Oldenburg writes that this panel marked a change in the artists’ initial use of figuration to counter the abstract mode of the earlier decade: “Soon after that it ceased to be painted images. It became real images - facsimiles of reality rather than illusions” (Dickason and Dickason 295).

Susan Hapgood, in her study Neo-Dada: Redefining Art 1958-1962, emphasizes that the attempt to incorporate everyday objects into art, “acting in the gap between art and life,” as Rauschenberg called it, also linked the movement to Dada (42). This imperative necessitated the adoption of Duchampian ready-mades and assemblage (Hapgood 42), which were used to respond particularly to the critical movement away from social “life” - representation, historical contextualization, and especially, elements of popular and “kitsch” culture - inherent in formalist theories of Abstract Expressionism. The Neo-Dada works were also characterized by a lack of interpretive cues to indicate semantic depth beyond the existence of the object depicted, and this minimalism was what enabled them to evade the dichotomy of “art” and “life,” and thus what aligned their project with that of Williams.

39 One example of this trend is Arts, in which the following articles appeared between 1957 and 1959: “Abstract Art Today: A New Publication ... Underscores the Decline of a Once-Important Group” (September 1957), “Epitaph for an Avant-Garde” (November 1958) and “The Crisis in Abstraction” (April 1959).

40 The panel was entitled “New Uses of the Human Image in Painting.”
Written contemporaneously with the emergence of Neo-Dada, “Pictures from Brueghel” similarly presents the artist’s paintings as “objects of our everyday life” and works against the interpretive mode. In contrast to the embedded nature of Bruegel’s paintings in Auden’s ekphrasis, semantically within the “Musée” of the title, literally within the text of the first stanza (not referencing the titles of the paintings alluded to before “Icarus”) and thematically in the canon of the “Old Masters,” Williams presents his ekphrastic subjects explicitly, by adopting their titles, and distinctly, by devoting one poem per painting.\textsuperscript{41} Williams’ refusal to construct an explanatory narrative between the paintings is the major strategy that he uses to evade Auden’s precedent of interpretation in ekphrasis. The adoption of this minimalist aesthetic in terms of his line and stanza lengths, and especially in terms of his emphasis on description rather than elucidation, parallels the approach of certain Neo-Dada works, like those of Jasper Johns, which similarly reproduced objects in a way that tacitly defied interpretation.

\textbf{Figure 5} Jasper Johns. Flag. 1954-55.

The example of Johns, one of the first artists to become well known in the late 1950s for pursuing an artistic style outside of Abstract Expressionism, is illuminating as a parallel to the project of “Pictures from Brueghel.” The response to his first exhibition in 1958, and particularly his \textit{Target with Four Faces} (1955), which appeared concurrently on the cover of \textit{Art News}, was

\textsuperscript{41} When Williams revised the version of the sequence that appeared in \textit{The Hudson Review} in 1961 for book publication, he further emphasized the distinction between poems, altering the numbers that he had used to title each poem and replacing them with the titles of Bruegel’s paintings.
explosive, according to Calvin Tomkins, who reports that Johns’ work “hit the art world like a meteor” (qtd. in Marquis *The Pop Revolution* 13), particularly after Alfred Barr acquired three of his works for the Museum of Modern Art. Part of what was so gripping about Johns’ work was its apparent resistance to interpretation, and especially to existing theories of art. Johns’ iconic *Flag* is notable in this regard because it reconstructs the American flag, but does so through the careful application of wax encaustic, a medium that dates to the ancient Egyptians. The meticulous aesthetic construction distinguishes it from the satiric ready-mades of Duchamp, indicating a difference from the common symbol, but without any explicit indication as to the semantic nature of this difference:

[*Flag* didn’t just represent but, when you thought about it, was the American flag - a sign the same as what it signified. By taking an object from the realm of common fact - as he did... with paintings of targets, numbers, maps, and more flags - and then returning it to that realm transfigured, he rescued art from the endgames of modern art, including lately played-out Abstract Expressionism. (Schjeldahl qtd. in Marquis *The Pop Revolution* 15)

Johns’ *Flag* is compelling not just because it uses the materials and techniques of art to recreate the familiar symbol, but because it does this while also “returning it” to the same “realm” of “common fact,” recognizable and functioning semantically as before. It deconstructs the formalist paradigm that separates art from life, but only through what Peter Schjeldahl calls a “transfigur[ation],” which suggests that the painting flips paradoxically between its status as an American flag and as a singular, constructed work of art. In contrast to ready-mades, which parody the binary between art and life that separates pieces in the museum from those outside this designated space, the lack of a discernable interpretive agenda in Johns’ aesthetic reconstruction of the flag challenges the viewer’s assumption of semantic depth. Like pastiche, it exemplifies “the wearing of a stylistic mask,” but without indication of its purpose for doing so, demonstrating what Jameson calls a “neutral practice of... mimicry, without parody’s ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter” (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 114). Johns’ painting is characteristic of postmodern art in the same way Williams’

42 Though Greenberg eventually came to appreciate the artist, he initially complained that his paintings did not “challenge or expand taste” (4: 95).
ekphrastic sequence is, in terms of its “depthlessness, which finds its prolongation... in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum” (Jameson Postmodernism 6), or “facsimiles of reality” in Oldenburg’s terms. In one sense, Johns’ painting is not strictly a pastiche because it imitates the style of a common object from life rather than art; however, its disruption of the binary also unsettles this definition of pastiche, since it treats the common object as if it had an individualized aesthetic style that could be imitated. If Neo-Dada demonstrates the difficulty of conclusively separating art from life in the postmodern world, then perhaps the stylistic imitation of the American flag in Johns’ painting can be considered a form of pastiche.

Much of the notoriety of Neo-Dada arose out of negative reviews from the art academy. The comprehensive New Forms - New Media exhibition in June of 1960 at the Martha Jackson Gallery included Johns, Rauschenberg, Oldenburg, Dine and Kaprow, and was especially criticized, particularly by Hilton Kramer. In his Arts column of November 1960, Kramer deems that the majority of the works represented are not “work[s] of art” (50) because they have no interpretive depth: “Every connection, every meaning, every last nuance and suggestion is labelled, defined, packaged, huckstered and sold before our very eyes” (50). Johns’ Target (1958), stylistically similar to his Flag, was included in this exhibition. That Kramer uses the metaphor of “poetry” to signify “art” in opposition to the “journalism” of Neo-Dada works is no surprise, since his evaluative criteria privilege work that enables a linguistic narrative about semantic meaning.

The highly descriptive nature of Williams’ “Pictures from Brueghel” sequence mimics the emphasis on the surface meaning, the fusion of “sign with signifier,” that flustered critics like Kramer about Neo-Dada works. Following his prediction of the “extinction” of abstraction in his 1951 address to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, Williams referred periodically to its decline, often where “abstraction” could easily be synonymous for the formalism that

43 Arts is exemplary in this regard. The Oldenburg and Dine exhibition received a dour appraisal in the December 1959 issue, in which the reviewer states, “James Dine is having a lot of fun making faces” and bemoans that “[o]ther works feature collage - bottle caps, printed fabric, etc. The reviewer has laughed (and wept) at these things before” (59). In May of the next year, a reviewer reports that “neo-Dadaist Rauschenberg… plays to the same jaded audience [as the ‘academy of modernism’] that now appreciates the novelty of the virtual filth and predictable insanity of his objects” (58). See also Hapgood’s list of “pejorative use[s] of the term ‘Neo-Dada’” (58: n.1).

44 The popularity of this exhibition necessitated a second exhibition in September of the same year.

45 Kramer omits “a few serious sculptors - Nevelson, Chamberlain, Stankiewicz, Zogbaum” (50) - from his censure.
championed it. In a 1957 article about Henry Niese, Williams praises the artist’s presentation of objects and scenes in contrast to “[a]bstract painting that has missed the point, we are not so much interested in those cerebral exercises, as in freeing the real from its boring implications: we want to recognize our lives but not the tiresome scenes and fellows which and whom we know all too well” (A Recognizable Image 231). These “cerebral exercises” read as a rather direct reference to Greenberg’s theory that the objective of Abstract Expressionists is to further an intellectual “process” - “that the conventions not essential to the viability of a medium be discarded as soon as they are recognized” (Art and Culture 208).

For Williams, art is not an “exercise” in rote forms, but a way to make one see aspects of the present world in new ways. His impatience with the way Abstract Expressionism had been depicted by formalist critics interested in “cerebral exercises” aligned him with the Neo-Dada artists, who began to draw on symbols and actual materials from American popular culture, like Johns in his Flag and Target and Rauschenberg in his “Combines.” Like the interpretive opacity many critics complain of in Williams’ “Pictures from Brueghel” sequence, the Neo-Dadaist works “defied traditional ‘interpretation’” (Hapgood 41) because of their appropriative ironic stance toward art and its history. Though these artists “rebelled against formal conventions” (Hapgood 12), reacting to the rhetoric of formal purity that had become synonymous with Abstract Expressionism, they also recognized their indebtedness to both Dada and Abstract Expressionism. But whereas Dada parodied art and the academy, Neo-Dada adopted a “neutral practice of… mimicry,” associated in this chapter with pastiche, to forestall interpretation. This distinction is apparent in the way the Neo-Dada artists conceived of their relationship to art, distinguishing their works from those of Dada artists by situating themselves within the tradition they critiqued, rather than outside of it. Rauschenberg, for example, resisted implications of nihilism in his work: “Dada was anti, I am pro” (qtd. in Hapgood 42). Williams differed from the

46 Williams’ comment predates Fried’s subsequent adoption of this strand in Greenberg’s theory, but it anticipates exactly Fried’s conception of “formal problems” (216) in “Three American Painters” (Art and Objecthood).

47 Rauschenberg and Johns were influenced by Robert Motherwell’s anthology The Dada Painters and Poets (1951): Hapgood notes the irony that Motherwell, one of the foremost Abstract Expressionists, was so integral in reviving Dada techniques among the Neo-Dada artists of the late 1950s. His anthology offered a way for these artists to “escape the increasingly stifling hegemony of abstraction” (13). The embedded objects in Pollock’s paintings - the nails, buttons, tacks, keys and cigarette in Full Fathom Five (1947), for example - are a major precursor of Johns’ technique of attaching objects to his paintings, as in Drawer (1957), Device Circle (1959), and Target with Four Faces (1955), and of Rauschenberg’s hybrid Combines, such as Bed (1955) and Canyon (1959). Johns’ brushstrokes in works like his famous Target (1958) have also been likened to Abstract Expressionist techniques.
Neo-Dada artists in choosing canonical works of art rather than everyday objects and pieces of consumer culture, but his use of pastiche aligns him with them, as he used this canonical art, often conceived as the foil for avant-garde work, in service of the recuperative project that Neo-Dada, and the Pop art it would later influence, undertook in disrupting the binary between art and life.

3.7 “A Splash Quite Unnoticed”: Pastiche in “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus”

Many critics assume that Williams’ “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” is an alternate version of Auden’s earlier “Musée des Beaux Arts,” and many also suggest that his belated attempt is inferior. Hollander makes explicit the suggestion that many critics bring to their analysis of this poem: “At the end of [the poem] Williams gets no further than Auden’s ‘not an important failure’” (252). Though Williams very likely had Auden’s poem in mind as he wrote “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,” and did indeed repeat many of its characteristics, it does a disservice to Williams to assume that he merely attempted to provide a rewritten or condensed version of the earlier poem. What Williams admired about Bruegel was his ability to carefully balance the “ambivalence” between critique and sympathy that Rose argues is inherent in every act of parody. In “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,” he extends this ambivalence to its breaking point by obscuring the interpretive cues that qualify it within parodic texts, thus dismantling the separation required for art to comment on life, as in Auden’s ekphrasis. Williams’ poem ultimately furthers Auden’s critique of the formalist separation of “art” from “life” by deconstructing this binary, but his critique is paradoxically only possible through the daring strategy of refusing critique, making interpretive “blank[ness]” an essential property of the poem.

Though Hollander’s disparaging comment misses how Williams’ poem functions in an effort to judge Auden’s the superior, his suggestion that Williams imitates certain aspects of “Musée des Beaux Arts” is accurate. “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” does repeat Auden’s second stanza, in terms of its chronological progression and in the use of a speaker who remains a detached observer as he depicts the event of Icarus’ “fall”:

According to Brueghel
when Icarus fell
it was spring
a farmer was ploughing
his field
the whole pageantry

of the year was
awake tingling
near

the edge of the sea
concerned
with itself

sweating in the sun
that melted
the wings’ wax

unsignificantly
off the coast
there was

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning (386).

Like Johns’ _Flag_, Williams’ ekphrasis represents the painting through conscientiously enacted form, his short lines and use of enjambment slowing the poem’s progression to enact a similar effect as that of Johns’ laborious encaustic technique. The poem begins, like the opening lines of Auden’s second stanza, by introducing the artist and ekphrastic subject. Both poets then refer to the figure of the “farmer” (or “ploughman,” in Auden’s terms) and emphasize the beauty of the landscape - “the whole pageantry // of the year” - focusing particularly on the “sun” and “sea” (for Auden, the “green / Water”). Williams also adopts but intensifies the detached tone of Auden’s speaker, distancing himself from any emotionally inflected depictions of Icarus’ death. The phrases “concerned with itself,” “unsignificantly” and “quite unnoticed” encapsulate the tone of Auden’s second stanza, which wanders from its initial subject of “suffering” to focus on the aesthetic beauty of the scene and the apparent indifference of everyone and everything in it.

The difference within Williams’ repetition is that he dispenses with the use of “suffering” as a frame of reference that initiates the interpretive mode of Auden’s long first stanza. In doing so, Williams dismantles the distance between himself and his speaker that in Auden’s poem mirrors the separation of “life” and “suffering” from “art,” and that facilitates the parody of his formalist
speaker. Williams collapses this frame to describe only the particular example of suffering related in Auden’s second stanza, which begins, “In Brueghel’s Icarus, for instance:” This opening line refers back to the interpretive frame of the first stanza, through the expository “for instance” and the colon that signals an elaboration of the example. Williams eliminates all traces of this frame in his pastiche, deferring only to the artist in his opening line. This resistance to interpretation makes Williams’ poem decidedly postmodern by Jameson’s definition, a world in which parody is “without a vocation” (*Postmodernism* 17) because the social, ethical and aesthetic norms that allowed for the nuanced critique in Auden’s poem are no longer available. Williams’ “splash quite unnoticed” adopts Auden’s diction but denies the interpretive suggestion in Auden’s “may have / Heard” and “must have seen” that the turning away is deliberate for the ploughman and ship, which is the precedent for Auden’s speaker to do the same. In “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,” any meaning assumed to be below the surface level is found to be literally dead: “this was / Icarus drowning[.]”

The indifference of Williams’ speaker, without the qualification of this indifference as in Auden’s ekphrasis, also complements the poem’s pastiche. The lack of a unique perspective and unifying vision, what Jameson calls the “disappearance of the subject” (*Postmodernism* 16), replaces the interpretive frame of “Musée des Beaux Arts” with resistance to ancillary meanings. Williams’ speaker is an observer rather than a commentator, who views Bruegel’s painting through the lens of Auden’s poem: “the edge of the sea / concerned / with itself” adopts the subtle personification of Auden’s “ship” but denies the use of synecdoche in the assertion “that [it] must have seen / Something amazing… [but] had somewhere to get to.” The description of the “sea” as “concerned with itself” mimics Auden’s speaker’s insistence on the ubiquity of indifference - not only of people (the “Children” and “the ploughman”), but animals (the “dogs” and “torturer’s horse”), parts of nature (the “sun”) and even the inanimate “ship” - as precedent for “turn[ing] away” from “suffering” and the politics of responsibility this suffering might entail. But in Williams’ poem, “concerned with itself” does not just function as a subtle adoption of Auden’s personification, but mirrors the speaker’s projected alienation from everything he describes - a state anticipated by Auden’s parody of the academic, who uses formalist rhetoric to

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48 In “Not Waving but Drowning” (1957) Stevie Smith recalls the myth of Icarus (and likely the famous painting and Auden’s ekphrasis), repeatedly using the refrain word “drowning,” which Williams adopts in this poem.
create a precedent for the inevitability of indifference to suffering. Jameson suggests that Williams’ indifference can be read as an extension of this professionalized rhetoric:

[Perhaps the immense fragmentation and privatization of modern literature - its explosion into a host of distinct private styles and mannerisms - foreshadows deeper and more general tendencies in social life as a whole... supposing that in the decades since the emergence of the great modern styles society has itself begun to fragment in this way, each group coming to speak a curious private language of its own, each profession developing its private code or idiolect, and finally each individual coming to be a kind of linguistic island, separated from everyone else? (“Postmodernism and Consumer Society” 114)]

Williams’ matter-of-fact, abrupt insertion of “unsignificantly” succinctly admits, without an apparatus of evidence, the indifference that Auden’s speaker so ardently attempts to naturalize, and it also signals this “privatization” of postmodern speech. The use of “ unsignificantly” instead of “insignificantly” is a telling archaic substitution (the Germanic prefix “un” has not been used in this context since the seventeenth century). The diction creates a subtle rupture between Auden’s language and that of Williams, perhaps signalling the move from the former’s parody of professional “idiolect” to the latter’s postmodern situation in which “the very possibly of any linguistic norms... [has] vanish[ed]” (Ibid).

Hollander is right to observe that Williams “gets no further” than the end of Auden’s poem because he likely never intended to. In “Musée des Beaux Arts,” the title of Bruegel’s painting is shortened to “Icarus” and aside from this title, Icarus is only referred to through the use of an indefinite article that makes him an aesthetic object: “a boy falling out of the sky.” Instead of commenting “about” Icarus’ fall as a theme, Williams extrapolates the implications of the present participle to formally represent this continuous “falling,” inverting the use of form to evade death that is inherent in Auden’s poem. Williams repeats Auden’s diction multiple times, using the full, translated title of the painting “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” and then repurposing its noun as a verb - “Icarus fell”- in his first stanza. The fall is also mimicked by the extremely short lines (among the shortest in the “Pictures from Brueghel” sequence) and by the extensive, deliberate use of enjambment in contrast to Auden’s speaker’s too-long lines that seem to spill over their edges. Auden makes this enjambment seem unintentional, and in doing so highlights the irony inherent in his speaker’s intellectual meandering. In contrast, Williams disrupts the progression of every grammatical sentence, and most clauses, to syntactically echo
the jarring experience of falling over and over again. The poet also uses what he calls elsewhere the “variable foot” to reflect Icarus’ fall throughout each of the short stanzas, as the first lines are metrically longer on average (all but one have two distinct, stressed syllables) in comparison to the second and third that follow. Williams, like Auden, observes the “sun” (that “shone / As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green / Water” in Auden’s version), but he identifies it as the agent that “melted / the wings’ wax,” echoing the connotation of Auden’s “disappearing,” but in the context of Icarus’ fall. Both use the diction “splash” to refer to the action of the flailing legs in Bruegel’s painting, but whereas Auden’s speaker evades the reference to the “forsaken cry,” Williams ends his poem by stating the fact plainly: “this was / Icarus drowning.”

That Williams’ poem is often read as a minimalist rendering of Auden’s reflects its status as pastiche that dispenses with the interpretive mode of the precursor poem. The use of pastiche was a method that Williams arrived at to emphasize that how an object is presented in an artwork is what is presented. In 1939, the same year that Auden wrote “Musée des Beaux Arts,” Williams wrote that “[t]he truth has to be redressed, re-examined, re-affirmed in a new mode ... But the thing is that the change, the greater material, the altered structure of the inevitable revolution must be in the poem, in it. Made of it. It must shine in the structural body of it” (Selected Essays 217). Paradoxically, Williams’ career-long obsession with this imperative to find a “new mode” is ultimately manifested in his use of pastiche, which gains its novelty only by resisting novelty. In “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,” Icarus’ fall is not admired for its aesthetic beauty, nor is the myth an example of how one should conceptualize suffering in art or in life. In the same way that Johns returns the form of the American flag to us “transfigured” in Flag but without overt indicators of its changed meaning, the figure of Icarus is repeated from Auden’s ekphrasis, from Bruegel’s painting and from our knowledge of the myth, but without any indication that his “fall” is being used to illustrate some principle or meaning beyond the fallen, “drowning” figure itself. The poem functions as pastiche when the reader perceives this repetition from Auden’s poem, and recognizes that the only differences it perpetuates are negative, as the interpretive frame from the precursor poem is missing. The perception of this lack in Williams’ poem, like the lack of interpretive markers in Johns’ Flag, does make Icarus meaningful in a new, though ambiguous, way, if only through the implicit juxtaposition to his ideological function in Auden’s poem.
Though Williams adopts and intensifies the disinterested tone of Auden’s formalist speaker, his approach also has an analogue in that of the Neo-Dada painters, and especially the Pop artists who followed them, toward the assumption of art’s permanence in relation to the fluctuating nature of life. In his essay for the *New Forms - New Media* exhibition, Lawrence Alloway refers to the Neo-Dada art as representative of “junk culture,” which he defines by its inclusion of impermanent and expendable objects, its “lack of prejudice about media” and particularly, its “indifference to permanence.” The detachment from historical context and the idea that form exists apart from this context, ideas inherent in the formalist approach to art, are inverted by the Neo-Dada artists of “junk culture,” who redirect this indifference to the conception of “permanence” or timelessness that some iterations of formalism, especially Fry’s, have as their aim. Similarly, without the interpretive frame of “suffering” that Auden’s first stanza provides, the detached tone in Williams’ poem loses the function it had in Auden’s to portray the speaker’s formalist shunning of context. Instead, if the indifference in Williams’ poem is directed toward anything, it is to the idea of permanence, including in art. Williams makes explicit the cyclical reality inherent but hidden in Auden’s imagery, particularly in the description, “the sun shone / As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green / Water,” where the present participle, as in “a boy falling out of the sky,” gestures toward its descent into the past tense. Williams makes this cyclical quality more explicit, indicating the hotness of the “sun” (“sweating”) in the “spring,” which suggests that the season is at its climax: “the whole pageantry / of the year was / awake tingling.”

Williams forefronts the juxtaposition of spring’s vibrancy with the death of “Icarus drowning” that is inherent in Auden’s poem, which emphasizes that the season, like Icarus’ life, and like all things, is transient. The suggestion of impermanence in Bruegel’s painting, which both poets represent, ironically outs the desire for permanence in Auden’s speaker’s conception of art as separate from life.

Whereas Alloway focuses on the objects literally taken from the city’s detritus in Neo-Dada work, the Pop artists that followed within a couple of years of the *New Forms - New Media* exhibition would use other strategies anticipated by Williams - particularly repetition - to heighten the resistance to interpretation inherent in Neo-Dada works. The observation that Williams’ poems share certain characteristics with Pop art is not an original claim. Calas was the...

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49 In a draft manuscript of this poem at the Beinecke Library, this line reads, “the whole pageantry / of the new year was / awake tingling,” which further emphasizes the juxtaposition between new life and death in the poem.
first to note this similarity. He told Williams that “American culture tended to avoid the iconic” but that Williams “had managed to embrace it” (MacGowan 82). Further, just as the origins of Rosenberg’s theory of “action painting” have been traced to Williams’ earlier essay “The Poem as a Field of Action,” Calas claimed in a 1965 essay that “Pop Art begins with Williams’ ‘This is Just to Say’” (94). What is analogous in Williams’ work to Pop art for Calas is that what “seems at first to be nothing more than a flat statement” perpetuates an “inversion” where “it is the awareness of the poetic structure that is delayed” as one eventually comes to realize it is a “lyric” poem (94). Calas claims that “on rereading the poem... we realize that the effect is created by the interruption of the narration by the insertion of the exclamation ‘Forgive me’” (94). In “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus,” this inversion is similarly apparent in the abrupt insertion of the one-word line “unsignificantly,” though the effect is opposite. Whereas it is the speaker’s emotional investment in the scene that is signalled in the first instance, it is his detachment from an emotional reaction to the scene, and from any interpretive frame, that is signalled in the second. The “inversion” Calas identifies between the “flat statement” and the “lyric” indicates the same distinction between “life” and “art” that is at stake in Auden’s and Williams’ poems. The pastiche in “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” (and in Neo-Dada and Pop art) perpetuates an inversion by frustrating the expectation of interpretive depth in artworks, though ultimately, this pastiche extends the “delay” of recognition indefinitely, rendering the inversion unstable because it disrupts the binary opposition, a strategy that recalls Rauschenberg’s comment about “acting in the gap between art and life.” The “flat statement” of Williams’ poem is analogous for Calas to Johns’ use of the American flag, Andy Warhol’s use of soup labels and Roy Lichtenstein’s use of comic strips, because they too challenge the boundaries of what can be considered “art” in the postmodern context.

Pop art was denigrated by its harshest critics using similar terminology as that of Hollander for Williams. It was considered by some to be “vapid,” devoid of significance, and was thought to suggest the indifferent attitude of the artist toward the importance of art and political life, as Warhol’s iconic persona would so infamously come to exemplify. The origins of postmodernism are usually seen to coincide closely with those of Pop art, as both are frequently defined in terms of ironic distance and an ambivalent exploitation, without a clear refutation, of dominant ideologies, particularly that of late capitalist consumer culture. Though Williams wrote “Pictures from Brueghel” just prior to the advent of Pop art, he, like the Neo-Dada artists, anticipated the resistance to semantic depth that defined this movement. Critics have frequently contested
whether certain postmodern art, particularly Pop art, has a political function. Jameson’s argument about “blank parody” or pastiche has been disputed by Hutcheon, who argues that "[p]ostmodern parody is a kind of contesting revision or rereading of the past that both confirms and subverts the power of the representation of history" (The Politics of Postmodernism 91). The “Pictures from Brueghel” sequence could perhaps be considered in support of both theories. By refusing Auden’s example of an interpretive frame, Williams extends the “ambivalence” of parody to the interpretive “blank[ness]” of pastiche, implicitly disrupting the terms Auden used to characterize the debate about art’s relationship to political life by emphasizing their contiguity. Through the insistently descriptive mode of his ekphrasis, Williams avoids the fallacy of Auden’s speaker in imagining that theories of art can be conceptualized separately from the ideological structures that construct “life.” His poems can thus be considered a “contesting revision” of history only insofar as Warhol’s silkscreens of repeated celebrity faces can be: Both use repetition to contain meaning at the surface level, questioning the means by which images evoke the ideological baggage that art carries and unpacks at once.
4 Toward a “Passionate Formalism”: Frank O’Hara, Clement Greenberg, Jackson Pollock

4.1 Introduction: O’Hara’s Unconventional Ekphrases

“When I saw you coming I forgot all / about Brueghel,” says Frank O’Hara in “Favorite Painting in the Metropolitan” (423-24). In characteristic style, O’Hara’s focus on the artwork he refers to gets repeatedly interrupted by his attention to the world and the people beyond the frame: “no ideas but in other people” was his revision of William Carlos Williams’ famous maxim (Ferguson 89). An avid admirer of Williams’ poems, O’Hara had internalized the notion that poetry shuttles between the “perennially contingent categories” of art and life (Silverberg 100). For him, creating art and being around artists was life, as these activities defined how he chose to spend his time, both professionally and personally. That he often treated art in his poems in humorous, ironic or off-handed ways was actually testament to its grave significance for him, according to his best-known critic, Marjorie Perloff. This ambivalence about how to present the experience of viewing art often manifests itself as the embrace of contradictory states in his writing. In different poems, and sometimes within a single poem, this experience is alternately in the foreground and background, it is mundane and sublime, it is highly personal and abstractly universal. In “Favorite Painting in the Metropolitan,” for example, the “favorite” painting alluded to is Giovanni Bellini’s Naked Young Woman in Front of the Mirror (c. 1515), though the designation is ironic since this painting is not owned by the museum. Perhaps satirizing the museum-commissioned ekphrasis, O’Hara uses the “Bellini mirror” as a prop in the romantic collage he creates. He imagines his companion, or perhaps the reader

seeing me in [the mirror]
first, the perfect image of my

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1 In O’Hara’s criticism, Williams is privileged as one of the best contemporary poets, and is favoured over T. S. Eliot: “Lord! [S]pare us from any more Fisher Kings!” (qtd. in Perloff 25).

2 Perloff claims that O’Hara reacted hyperbolically to the notion of poetry as an institution because he valued its importance so highly: “poetry is the highest art, everything else, however gratifying... moving, and grand, is less demanding, more indulgent, more casual, more gratuitous, more instantly apprehensible, which I assume is not exactly what we are after” (letter to Bill Berkson, qtd. in Perloff 18).
O’Hara imposes his face on the Bellini mirror in a melodramatic attempt to affix the love he shares with his companion to the enduring quality the artworks seem to possess in the context of the museum. For O’Hara, who spoke about love as a “temporary suspension of the usual law of human loss” (Feldman 43), the final lines are bittersweet. Earlier in the poem he worries that “if we changed we would / hate each other” and laments “everything being temporary / right where it seems so permanent” (423). O’Hara’s interest in the human desire to interpret art as a stay against disorder, instability and the unknown defines his approach to every ekphrasis he wrote. His ambivalence about presenting art in this way, both in his ekphrastic poems and in his professional work as an art critic and eventually curator, likely arose from his engagement with his contemporary art criticism, particularly that of his sometimes adversary, Clement Greenberg.

O’Hara’s oeuvre probably contains more references to art, artists and art critics than that of any other twentieth-century American poet, and certainly more than any other poet in this study. Yet, his poems are not considered at length in most of the major studies of modern ekphrasis, including those by James Heffernan and John Hollander. The omission is likely due to the fact that so many of his poems refer to artists, artworks, museums, galleries, studios and other aspects of the New York art scene that they challenge the already porous boundaries of ekphrasis in complex ways. Even in those poems that centre around a single, recognizable artwork (his “On First Seeing Larry Rivers’ Washington Crossing the Delaware at the Museum of Modern Art” and “Digression on Number 1, 1948,” for example), O’Hara “rejects the notion that [the artworks] need to be spoken for” (Glavey 788). These poems are often irreverent or playful in tone, taking an ironic or resistant approach to the expectation that the poet must attend seriously to the artwork and its thematic importance throughout the poem. Unlike Moore and Auden, O’Hara was not interested in art as a moral or ethical endeavor, nor did he use the artworks to construct allegories (“Charity Overcoming Envy”) or parables (“Musée des Beaux Arts”). In contrast to Williams’ absorption in “Pictures from Brueghel,” O’Hara’s attention often strays from the object and its semantic centrality to the poem. Finally, unlike most well-known examples of ekphrasis, many of O’Hara’s poems take contemporary, often abstract, works as their subjects rather than canonical, figurative paintings or sculptures.
O’Hara also evades both categorical approaches that critics have used to conceptualize ekphrasis: description and narration. His poems are thus not in keeping with Murray Krieger’s and Wendy Steiner’s understanding that ekphrasis mimics pictorial stasis by freezing or condensing narrative time, or with Heffernan’s definition of the genre as “dynamic and obstetric; it typically delivers from the pregnant moment of visual art its embryonically narrative impulse” (*Museum of Words* 5). Both approaches assume that the object of ekphrasis is a representational work of art. This study will examine O’Hara’s poems about abstract art to revise the critical paradigms for understanding ekphrasis by suggesting that O’Hara’s approach to the genre was influenced by Greenberg’s criticism, which O’Hara suggests betrays an anxiety about the instability of meaning in the modern world.

O’Hara is often considered the ultimate insider - “a star, the natural center of attention” (Lehman 167) - in his contemporary New York art scene, characterized by the rise of the so-called “second generation” of Abstract Expressionists. During his lifetime, he was better known for his friendships and collaborations with artists, his (sometimes scandalous) modeling for portraits and sculptures, his essays and reviews for *Evergreen Review, Horizon* and *Art News*, his “Art Chronicles” series in *Kulchur*, his monograph on Jackson Pollock and his prestigious position as Assistant (later, Associate) Curator at the Museum of Modern Art than he was for his poetry. He was notorious for his close friendships with artists including Elaine and Willem de Kooning, Larry Rivers, Helen Frankenthaler, Jane Freilicher, Grace Hartigan, Michael Goldberg, Joan Mitchell and Norman Bluhm. At O’Hara’s funeral, Rivers claimed that sixty people in New York

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3 According to Heffernan, “What ekphrasis represents in words… must be representational” (4). Though Heffernan’s intention is to discount poems about architecture, his comments also disqualify poems about abstract art, which are not discussed in his study.

4 Timothy Gray argues that the amount of attention O’Hara devoted to the careers of other artists both invigorated and encumbered them. Alex Katz stated, “[t]he frightening amount of energy he invested in our art and our lives often made me feel like a miser” (qtd. in Gray 18). Mike Goldberg related, “if you were close to him, Frank forced you to live at a terribly high intensity” (qtd. in Gray 21).

5 “The subject of more portraits of any poet since Apollinaire (Gooch 4), O’Hara’s posing for artists both literally entrenched him in the New York art scene and threatened to stunt his professional advancement. Most scandalous was the controversy surrounding Rivers’ portrait, *O’Hara Nude with Boots* (1954), which “caused a stir that followed O’Hara until the end of his life” (Gooch 796).

6 O’Hara began working at the Museum of Modern Art in 1951, selling postcards so that he could view the Matisse retrospective more often (Gooch 7). He resigned in 1953 to become an editorial associate for *Art News*, a position he held until 1955 when he was hired again by the MoMA, but this time as special assistant to Porter McCray in the International Program. In 1960 he was made Assistant Curator of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions. He was promoted to Associate Curator in 1965 and to Curator in 1966 (*Art Chronicles* 158-59).
thought of O’Hara as their “best friend” (Lehman 173). Many of his poems reference these artists and their works: He wrote many poems for and about Freilicher and Hartigan, as well as those explicitly apostrophizing other artists, such as “To Larry Rivers,” “Larry,” “Dear Jap” (for Jasper Johns), “For Bob Rauschenberg,” “Ode to Willem de Kooning” and “Ode to Michael Goldberg (‘s Birth and Other Births).” O’Hara also collaborated with many of these artists on projects that constitute “true hybrid genre[s]” (Feldman 28), such as Stones (1957), a series of lithographs with Rivers, Poem-Paintings (1960) with Bluhm and Odes (1960) with Goldberg. In a number of instances artists also based paintings on his poems, such as Hartigan’s series entitled Oranges (1952) and Mitchell’s To the Harbormaster (1957).

Much has been written about O’Hara’s personal and poetic connections to the second generation artists, following Perloff’s pioneering study, Frank O’Hara: Poet Among Painters, which examines how the poet’s aesthetic was influenced by Dada, Surrealism and his immersion in the New York art world during the rise of Abstract Expressionism. Together with Perloff’s work, incisive studies by Hazel Smith, David LeHardy-Sweet, David Lehman, Lytle Shaw, Geoff Ward and Mark Silverberg provide a comprehensive framework for situating O’Hara in relation to the avant-garde painting and poetry of post-war New York. Unlike the critical precedent for the other poets in this study, there has been more work done to historicize O’Hara’s relationship to the art and art-critical climate of his time than there has been to theorizing his approach to ekphrasis. One exception is Brian Glavey’s recent article, “Frank O’Hara Nude with Boots: Queer Ekphrasis,” which situates the poet within the aggressively anti-communist and homophobic climate of the 1950s, characterized by hostile policing of political, sexual and artistic identities. O’Hara’s resistance to Greenberg’s obsession with “clear and distinct boundaries between the arts” (794) is, according to Glavey, a rejection of the “hypermasculine artistic ethos” (793) that was an extension of broader political anxieties.

Shaw’s analysis of O’Hara’s art criticism in Frank O’Hara: The Poetics of Coterie is the most significant precursor for this study. Shaw persuasively argues that O’Hara’s ekphrastic poems are “experimental modes of criticism in which proliferating discursive registers operate as possible locations for imagining the effects and implications of painterly gesture… [The poems are] an aggressively non-professional alternative to the narrowing range of social and cultural implication afforded by the emerging language of professional formalism” (154). This study aims to extend Shaw’s project by examining the particular relationship between O’Hara and
Greenberg. O’Hara’s use of what Greenberg derided as “poetic” language in his critical works allowed the poet to construct an alternative discourse to respond not only to the content of Greenberg’s theories, but to the motivations underlying what Glavey has called the “militaristic gusto” (795) of his rhetoric. This approach is also influenced by Georges Didi-Huberman’s challenge to the “tone of certainty that prevails so often in the beautiful discipline of the history of art” (2) and David Freedberg’s interest in the repression of emotional responses to art. By focusing on Greenberg’s influence in O’Hara’s essays on Pollock (an artist of paramount importance to both), I will attempt to account for O’Hara’s resistance to description and narration of the art object, his emphasis on the seeing subject and the similarities between his ekphrastic and elegiac poems, which excavate the anxieties that even Greenberg later admitted were latent in his rhetoric.  

Since Pollock was the artist Greenberg was most invested in and wrote most about, it makes sense that O’Hara would incorporate his most considered responses to the critic in his writings about the famous Abstract Expressionist. O’Hara’s art writing about Pollock elaborates a divergent response to that of Greenberg, whose interest was in circumscribing a distinct identity for Abstract Expressionism that had to be “preserved through willful delineation and purification” (Glavey 794). Notoriously suspicious of the title figure in his poem “The Critic,” whom he deemed “the assassin / of my orchards” (48), O’Hara was less interested in a theory of Abstract Expressionism in his writings about Pollock than he was in the mutable and enigmatic qualities of his art: “It is still alive, it is part of our lives (not nationally - personally), it can be experienced without necessarily being understood completely, it can move us and remain a mystery. We are not yet art-trained to appreciate it (though we may be life-trained to)” (Standing Still and Walking 97). Like the way O’Hara sees himself in the Bellini mirror in “Favorite Painting in the Metropolitan,” he uses his ekphrastic poems about Pollock to emphasize that what one sees in art, and says about art, exposes as much about the psychology of the sayer as it does about the properties of the object. One of the pervasive issues in O’Hara’s poetry is the importance of being open to what is disquieting or anxiety-provoking without being consumed by that anxiety or attempting to evade it, rationalize it or incorporate it into an existing framework of understanding. O’Hara’s articulation of a state of expansiveness, such as in the

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7 In an interview with Weekend Australian Magazine in 1979, Greenberg discussed his aggressive rhetoric, which he said “covered up a lot of insecurities” (qtd. in Marquis Art Czar 233).
final stanza of “Digression on Number 1, 1948,” suggests his desire to be open to different forms of response, and it also emphasizes the disruptive presence of the viewer in art writing, who complicates the detached formalist gaze idealized by Greenberg and later, by his protégé Michael Fried.

O’Hara’s ekphrastic poems betray the incommensurability he perceived between the experience of viewing art and the articulation of that experience in formalist art criticism. Together with his criticism, they suggest that he perceived Greenberg’s emphasis on formal order, purity and unity as evidence of a desire to overlay this gap, to escape both the ambiguity of the initial emotional and intuitive response to art, and metonymically, to evade the most ambiguous, formless part of human existence: death. This implicit link in Greenberg’s oeuvre also sheds light on the frequent generic overlaps between ekphrasis and elegy in O’Hara’s poetry. Actual ekphrases such as “Why I Am Not A Painter,” “Digression on Number 1, 1948” and “Poem (the eyelid has its storms)” contain similar melancholic undertones as O’Hara’s elegies for artists, namely “The Day Lady Died,” “A Step Away From Them” and “Ode on Causality.” O’Hara’s ekphrases are thus less a refutation of Greenberg’s claims than an attempt to deconstruct the critic’s psychological motivations for making them - motivations that O’Hara exposes but also seems to identify with. Instead of describing or narrating the artworks, the poems provide psychological portraits of the viewer whose process of responding transforms and enriches the meanings of that object. O’Hara’s art writing and ekphrastic poems complement the criticism of his era, achieving what James E. B. Breslin has called “emotional complexity” (From Modern to Contemporary 239) by evoking the melancholic desire that great art stimulates for an ideal, consistent and unified state that is paradoxically antithetical to art, and to life.

4.2 “Towards a Newer Laocoön”: “Why I Am Not a Painter” as Anti-Ekphrasis

O’Hara’s ekphrasis of Mike Goldberg’s Sardines (1955) “Why I Am Not a Painter” - the poem used to introduce this study - is one of his most anthologized poems and a fruitful place to begin a discussion about his art writing because it takes this meta-topic as its subject. Written in 1956, the poem was first published in the Evergreen Review in an issue commemorating Pollock. This issue included the now famous photographs of the artist painting by Hans Nemuth, a biographical sketch by Greenberg, as well as O’Hara’s elegy for Pollock, the poet and playwright
V. R. “Bunny” Lang and the musician John Latouche: “A Step Away From Them.” Though critics including Anthony Libby (241), Perloff (29) and Lehman (7) have read certain O’Hara poems as “action poems,” “Why I Am Not a Painter” cautions against such an interpretation, and instead emphasizes the difference between the sister arts and thus the problem of writing about painting.

Contrary to the dominant theories of ekphrasis, “Why I Am Not a Painter” does not impress us with its evocative description - its aspiration “to the atemporal ‘eternity’ of the stopped-action painting” (Pictures of Romance 13-14), in Steiner’s terms - nor is there evidence of an attempt to narrate its meanings using “prosopopeia… envoicing [the] silent object” (Heffernan Museum of Words 6):

I am not a painter, I am a poet. Why? I think I would rather be a painter, but I am not. Well,

for instance, Mike Goldberg is starting a painting. I drop in. “Sit down and have a drink” he says. I drink; we drink. I look up. “You have SARDINES in it.” “Yes, it needed something there.” “Oh.” I go and the days go by and I drop in again. The painting is going on, and I go, and the days go by. I drop in. The painting is finished. “Where’s SARDINES?” All that’s left is just letters, “It was too much,” Mike says.

But me? One day I am thinking of a color: orange. I write a line about orange. Pretty soon it is a whole page of words, not lines. Then another page. There should be so much more, not of orange, of words, of how terrible orange is and life. Days go by. It is even in prose, I am a real poet. My poem is finished and I haven’t mentioned orange yet. It’s twelve poems, I call it ORANGES. And one day in a gallery I see Mike’s painting, called SARDINES. (261-62)
Though there is a narrative thread in this poem, it does not arise “embryonically” out of the painting but out of the speaker’s casual encounters with Goldberg. Though the painting is the repeated topic of conversation, O’Hara “is not interested in making us see it” (Glavey 789), as the speaker provides no description of its size, use of colour, forms or any other details aside from the reference to the word “SARDINES” scrawled on the canvas.

In the latter half of the poem, in which O’Hara alludes to the process of writing his early poem “Oranges: 12 Pastorals,” he emphasizes the inadequacy of language to the task of fully relating affective response: “There should be / so much more, not of orange, of / words, of how terrible orange is / and life.” Though Goldberg’s “SARDINES” and O’Hara’s “ORANGES” are similar in the way each juxtaposes a title to a work that is seemingly unrelated to that title, the difference is that O’Hara’s desire to breach the gap between the visual image and the linguistic expression of its meaning is exposed because, as Breslin has pointed out, his medium necessitates the construction of a speaking subject (From Modern to Contemporary 214). Unlike Goldberg, O’Hara cannot distance the object from the language used to describe or to explain it; even as he attempts to represent a single, abstract image - “a color: orange” - it becomes transformed through a pun into concrete objects, “oranges,” and again by its typographic properties as a title - “ORANGES” - into “just letters.” What becomes apparent to the speaker by the end of the poem is that the object in poetry is always already “just letters.” “Orange” is thus “terrible” because, like “life” and like Goldberg’s painting in the present poem, it represents an experience that cannot be contained or framed in a way that separates it from the voice of “I.”

As many critics have pointed out, the self in O’Hara’s poems never crystallizes into a stable and consistent construct, but is always in the process of being constructed in each poem. In “Why I Am Not a Painter,” the pronoun “I” is used eighteen times in twenty-nine lines, yet the poet offers no “stable self for us to become intimate with. The self… is, then, at once transparent and opaque - perhaps his deepest contradiction… we can never step back, surround, and frame him - he is always ‘bursting forth’” (Ibid 224). In this poem, the “me” is almost constantly in motion (“I go,” “I drop in”), and even in the final stanza, in which the speaker tries to pin himself down as a subject (“But me?”), he is displaced into another poem, and then into “twelve poems.” Given the proliferation of the “I” pronoun and O’Hara’s interest in what is “in” the studio, the painting and the poem, it is possible that he alludes to Pollock’s famous statement about his
artistic process: “When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through” (qtd. in O’Hara Jackson Pollock 32). For Pollock as for Goldberg, ultimately the painting has “a life of its own,” at which point subject and object become separated. O’Hara’s poem ends by emphasizing this separation of Goldberg from the painting (Breslin From Modern to Contemporary 214), as he recalls “see[ing] it in a gallery,” perhaps literally framed and certainly detached from the voice of “Mike” who answered O’Hara’s questions earlier in the poem. As in most of O’Hara’s ekphrastic poems, there is a keen awareness that any representation of the artwork is never objective, never detached from the voice and persona of the speaker who views it. Goldberg’s painting can only be the object of the poem, depicted by the poem’s inevitable subject: a speaker with interests, motivations and desires. O’Hara’s implicit juxtaposition of the primary reds and yellows of Sardines with a meditation on their composite “orange” is perhaps a metaphor for the inevitable entanglement of subject and object in the ekphrastic poem.

“Why I Am Not a Painter” investigates what it means for a subject to write about viewing visual art. As the poem is explicitly about the difference between the literary and visual arts, it is likely that O’Hara was in part responding to Greenberg’s foundational tenet of “medium specificity” in his essays of the period. An extension of Gotthold Lessing’s 1766 treatise, Greenberg’s “Towards a Newer Laocoon” (1940) aggressively declares that in the modern period “[t]he arts, then, have been hunted back to their mediums, and there they have been isolated, concentrated and defined. It is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself” (1: 32). By 1956, Greenberg’s emphasis on the “purity” of abstract painting as one of these “isolated” mediums was an established trope of his criticism. “Why I Am Not a Painter” nods heartily in agreement (tongue firmly in cheek) with Greenberg’s premise about the separation between painting and poetry, while suggesting that this difference is what unites poetry and art criticism.
In the poem, O’Hara sustains Greenberg’s insistence on medium specificity, but does so in order to interrogate why his explicitly poet-speaker proposes it. O’Hara states “I am not a painter,” suggesting that he will not be the prototypical “word-painter” of ekphrasis either, because this might occlude the inevitably subjective quality of his observations. What the poem does instead is call attention to this gap, to the fact that there are aspects of the speaker’s psychology that remain elusive, which loom peripherally in the “words” he has not written, the words that express “how terrible orange is / and life.” He refuses to construct a linguistic “frame” of meaning through which the reader can imaginatively see the painting, because for him the important frame is that of the constructed speaker who represents this experience. For O’Hara, this fact of the writing “I” is what unites criticism and poetry, and poetry’s self-reflexivity is what it can offer to art criticism - the idea that responses to art also tell us something about the self who is doing the responding, perhaps more than they tell us about the art in question. O’Hara’s responses to art criticism were especially invested in disrupting the persona created by the rhetoric of formalist art criticism.

4.3 Representing “Frictions”: O’Hara and Greenberg on Art and Nature

As someone with little formal training in the field, O’Hara found that his credibility as an art critic largely derived from his immersion in the artistic circles of New York City. His familiarity with artists, and the ease with which he seemed to understand and articulate their works, was apparently what gave him an edge over many more traditionally qualified candidates at the MoMA. Many scholars such as Perloff (86), Lehman (1) and Micah Mattix (18) continue the comparison to Apollinaire that began in O’Hara’s lifetime; Perloff characterizes the writing of

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8 Shaw has indicated the poet’s resistance to medium specificity as an aesthetic principle, arguing that “[O’Hara’s] interdisciplinarity is... not simply a matter of having championed work that collapsed disciplinary boundaries (Rauschenberg’s, Joe Brainard’s, and Jasper Johns’) but perhaps more importantly a matter of his own poetry having enacted this collapse” (158). One could also point to his hybrid works with visual artists as the most obvious evidence of this proposition.

9 According to the painter John Button, though many were opposed to O’Hara’s position and subsequent promotions, “they had curators who were good scholars, curators who could shake the hands of patrons, and curators who could be snooty at parties. But they had no one who was at home among the newly emerging artists and was also ‘presentable.’ Frank needed a job. The Museum needed Frank. So he entered the establishment art world and brought to it his own non-establishment style” (qtd. in Feldman 26).
both by the “absence of theoretical discourse and, except in rare cases, close technical analysis, counterbalanced by an astonishing ability to recognize greatness” (86-87). O’Hara had many detractors in his lifetime who lambasted his criticism for the same Apollinairian qualities that Perloff and others have extolled. Greenberg, who referred to this criticism as “pseudo poetry” (qtd. in Shaw 151), was among O’Hara’s harshest critics, perhaps because O’Hara used his art criticism to expose the kinds of uncertainties that Greenberg used his to bury.

By 1956, the year of Pollock’s death, two competing trends of art criticism had emerged, battling over the definitive interpretation of Abstract Expressionism and diverging in their reactions to the new “second generation” artists, who were fusing “pure” abstraction with figuration, language and popular icons. These trends were represented by the competing publications of *Arts*, whose editor Hilton Kramer privileged the formal analysis and judgments about taste that came increasingly to be associated with Greenberg’s essays, and *Art News*, whose columnists included O’Hara, Harold Rosenberg, and Parker Tyler. These latter critics were also published poets and their essays were accordingly derided by Kramer and Greenberg as too “poetic,” too interested in emotional response and descriptions based on association and analogy over objective formal concerns. In the first chapter of this study, the rivalry between *Arts* and *Art News* was alluded to in terms of the infamous feud between Greenberg and Rosenberg, who respectively came to stand for the divergent approaches of these publications. This feud represented as much a disagreement in theory as it did about rhetoric, about the way in which one’s response to a work of art gets translated into critical prose. The two publications became the terrain for an art-historical turf war that pitted “critical” against “literary” language. In his column of September 1959, Kramer claims that Rosenberg and Tyler were responsible “for transforming the literary style of *Art News* into a comedy of bad poetry and intellectual pretense” (56). A few months later, *Arts* published “An Exchange on Art Criticism,” which debated Sonya Rudikoff’s position in “t[aking] exception to the ‘poetic’ language frequently employed in art criticism today” (28). In this exchange, Rudikoff explicitly disparaged “*Art News*’ series on ‘how X paints a picture, makes a mosaic, etc.’” (Sandler and Rudikoff 29) - a series to which O’Hara had contributed a piece on Fairfield Porter in 1955.

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10 A number of these artists, including O’Hara’s friends Hartigan and Rivers, showed early works in a 1950 exhibition mounted by Meyer Schapiro and (surprisingly) Greenberg (Gooch 177).
When O’Hara’s *Jackson Pollock* appeared in 1959, Kramer was quick to dismiss the “poetaster” as a “pseudo-Apollinaire” (qtd. in Gooch 341). Similarly, in his seething essay “How Art Writing Earns its Bad Name,” Greenberg cites the book as an example of “the abortion, not of discourse, but of intuition and imagination” (4: 144). Greenberg’s analogy rings ironic, since one would assume that “intuition and imagination” would be at the forefront of a poet’s contribution to critical discourse; perhaps instead, his obstetric metaphor indicates anxiety about the kinds of unsettling discoveries “intuition and imagination” could actually deliver from the more formal style that defined Greenberg’s own criticism.

Nothing in the biographies of O’Hara or Greenberg suggests that the two were friends, but their social and professional circles overlapped to such an extent that they were inevitable acquaintances and professional colleagues. Along with other artists and critics in the 1950s, they both frequented the Eighth Street Club (“the Club”), the San Remo and especially, the Cedar Tavern (“the Cedar”), the notorious watering hole for Abstract Expressionists. Both were guests at many of the same parties, gallery functions and panel discussions, and both wrote art criticism about many of the same contemporary artists. Their ideas about art also dovetailed in significant ways: Both agreed on Pollock’s centrality to American art, both (initially, in O’Hara’s case) reacted negatively to Andy Warhol and Pop art, and both turned to sculpture and wrote extensively about David Smith in their late careers. O’Hara evidently admired Greenberg, naming him as influential in his Pollock monograph and later appointing him to a panel of critics to work on a Pollock retrospective at the MoMA, but O’Hara also took issue with the reductive tendencies of the critic’s formalist theories and with his authoritarian rhetoric. By the mid-1950s, O’Hara, like any critic writing about American abstract art, had to contend with Greenberg, whose many articles and reviews for *The Nation, Partisan Review* and *Arts* were integral to the fulfillment of his bold claims at the end of the 1940s about “the coming global supremacy, of American abstract painting” (Lehman 302).

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11 In a letter to John Ashbery relaying this review, O’Hara writes that his monograph was deemed “‘hopeless’ or something by Hilton Kramer which is nice since he is so loathsome in every way that I would hate to suffer under his approval” (qtd. in Gooch 342).

12 O’Hara appointed five critics that he thought would be “pentagonally opposed”: Greenberg, Rosenberg, Barnett Newman, Alfonso Ossorio and Warhol (qtd. in Gooch 399).
O’Hara’s critical engagement with Greenberg began as early as his first article about the visual arts: “Nature and New Painting,” published in *Folder* in its 1954-55 issue.¹³ On January 21, 1955, a few months before Greenberg’s important article “American-Type Painting” appeared, O’Hara, Greenberg, Kramer and Alfred Barr participated in a panel discussion at the Club to debate O’Hara’s essay. Though no transcript of the exchange exists, the occasion is fascinating because the essay engages with Greenberg’s understanding of content or “nature,” and with his related dismissal of some of the second-generation artists who had “returned” to representation in their works. I am not the first to point out this connection to Greenberg in general terms,¹⁴ but to my knowledge no critic has read O’Hara’s essay as a direct response to Greenberg’s similarly titled “The Role of Nature in Modern Painting” (1949), and specifically, to the way that Greenberg’s redefinition of “nature” functions to defensively overshadow what is transient and thus unsettling about this concept. In his essay, O’Hara’s overtly stated purpose is to oppose Greenberg’s declaration at a Hansa Gallery lecture that “any other mode [than abstraction in our time is]… necessarily minor” (*Standing Still and Walking* 43) and James Fitzsimmons’ remark that some of the “younger painters” had “lost heart and abandoned abstract-expressionism in cowardly fashion to return to representational work” (Ibid 43-44). His underlying purpose is to implicate Greenberg’s definition of “nature” as symptomatic of a formalist anxiety about disorder.

Greenberg’s essay distinguishes his understanding of the relationship between art and life (“nature”) from that of (implicitly) Roger Fry, and attempts to distance formalism from accusations about its detachment from political reality. Both critics privilege abstract art for its emphasis on form over content, “the realization of painting as a physical medium, with the new recognition… of the two-dimensionality of the picture plane” (*Greenberg* 2: 271). Like Fry, Greenberg opposes abstract art to representational, but then extends Fry’s hazy conception of the value of abstraction¹⁵ to insist that abstract art is integrally connected to “nature.” According to Greenberg, “nature” similarly mirrors the division of form and content that Fry mapped onto

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¹³ *Folder* was a literary and arts magazine edited by Daisy Aldan and Richard Miller. Four issues were published between 1953-59, with poems, plays and visual art by New York writers and artists. Each issue included one original artwork.

¹⁴ Glavey has argued that this essay refutes the critic’s policing of aesthetic “boundaries” in his early essays “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” and “Towards a Newer Laocoon” (794).

¹⁵ See p. 38-41.
abstract versus representational art. “Nature” is dichotomized between its superficial appearance and the underlying forms of these appearances, “the internal logic by which objects are organized in nature” (2: 273). “Advanced” art is thus more entrenched in “life” or “nature” than those paintings that represent scenes, objects or people, because it excavates the invisible, permanent structures beneath these transient scenes and makes them explicit.

By proposing that “advanced” art is inversely related to nature, Greenberg attempts not only to link art and life, thus evading questions about art’s ethical obligation to participate in political life, but to elevate abstract art through a definition of nature that presumes that these lines, shapes, colours and forms represent essential and enduring formal principles from this life. Most significant for O’Hara is the premise that nature is fundamentally static, as well as the conflation of formal principles with abstract values. Greenberg begins his essay by stating, “[o]ne of the important problems of contemporary art criticism is to ascertain how cubism… arrived at its characteristic forms of purity and unity” (2: 271). Paradoxically, though Greenberg emphasizes a connection between art and life, he ultimately re-entrenches the distinction between what Fry calls “actual” versus “imaginative” life by assuming that the formal, aesthetic principles he perceives in abstract art are derivative of a conscientiously ordered world. In short, he adopts a Judeo-Christian framework in which god is essentially a master artist, whose “internal logic” is perceived by modern (“advanced”) artists who continue his process of creation on the canvas. 16 Greenberg ends his essay by indicating that this “logic” also extends to human nature: “The best modern painting… remains naturalistic in its core, despite all appearances to the contrary. It refers to the structure of the given world both outside and inside human beings” (275). 17

Greenberg’s emphasis on visual order and its relation to an understanding of society and selfhood as fundamentally ordered and unchanging is the interpretation O’Hara grapples with in “Nature and New Painting.” O’Hara begins by acknowledging the “prestige” of the very word

16 Despite the fact that he “pursued a militantly secular life,” Greenberg’s biographer, Alice Goldfarb Marquis, sees the rigidity of his aesthetic standards as an indication that he “could not escape the moral penumbra of the traditional Jewish world built around a faith that strictly sequestered the sanctioned from the forbidden” (260).

17 It is noteworthy that the formalist tradition, as it developed between Fry in the 1920s and Greenberg in the 1950s, emerged during a historical period that saw the rise of fascist theories and regimes. Though formalism is defined by its separation from politics, Greenberg’s obsession with the values of purity, unity and order is reminiscent of recurring preoccupations of fascism. The epilogue of Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” and Slavoj Žižek’s The Sublime Object of Ideology, for example, both link formalist aesthetics and the idea of a detached observer to fascist ideology.
‘nature,’” admitting, “Well, great painting does make one feel like God” (41). Whereas Greenberg positions Mondrian as one of the most “successful” painters because his paintings “refer… to the integrity of objects in nature” (2: 275), O’Hara argues that “To think that late Mondrian is ‘painting about painting’ is a grievous error; great art… is seldom about art, though frequently its insights are so compelling and so pervasive they can be applied to art as well as to their subject” (41).\(^{18}\) The “subject” of art in this context can refer to what is represented, but also to the actual “subject” who creates it and the “subject” who apprehends it. In this essay, it is the subject of criticism, the authoritative voice who orders the experience of viewing art, which interests O’Hara.

O’Hara questions criticism that treats art as a problem to be solved. “[O]ur best contemporary art critics,” according to O’Hara, “are preoccupied with assessing, surveying, tallying, and rating - with history and with the history of painters, less with the achievements of the paintings themselves and our response to them. The last two decades have been filled with baroque art-to-art cant” (42).\(^{19}\) This impulse to “assess” and “survey” is less a response to art than a way to delimit the kinds of responses that are possible - “responses” explicitly equated with the “achievements” of individual works. As Greenberg collapses Fry’s binary of art/nature to posit that “nature” is the site of the binary between form and content, O’Hara extends it to the realm of response:

Had it not been for the adventurous spirit of American abstract-expressionism, we should have been given over to a cult of mechanics, of know-how, of push-and-pull spatial organization which, as a means of formal knowledge, is essential perhaps, but which cannot be confused with creation, that word we use for a perception which is staggeringly original to us. Painting exists in time as precariously as a voyage or a ballet and it is dangerous not to respond (43).

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\(^{18}\) Greenberg’s article discusses Mondrian’s works as the most successful examples of “outright abstract painting” because they display “a feeling for the unity of the picture as an object” (2: 275). O’Hara’s comments may also point to the irony that Greenberg’s earlier writings undercut the rigidity of his later formalist theories. Greenberg’s 1945 review of a Mondrian exhibition, for example, asserts that “Mondrian committed the unforgiveable error of asserting that one mode of art, that of pure, abstract relations, would be absolutely superior to all others in the future” (2: 16). O’Hara cites this review in *Jackson Pollock*.

\(^{19}\) The irony that O’Hara here adopts an authoritative rhetoric like that of Greenberg - using a list of verbs, repetitive diction, long and punctuated sentences and inflammatory statements - was probably not lost on the poet. He juxtaposes these types of assertions with references to paintings “full of nerves and senses” (45) with “chaotic brushwork and whirling impasto” (45) and to phrases like “deliciousness of painting over the deliciousness of skillful representation” (47), which mitigate the effect of the more severe rhetoric.
If Greenberg is correct that human nature includes principles of order and “formal knowledge” (or perhaps, O’Hara would add, the desire for them), it also includes an “adventurous spirit” of “creation” and thus elements of disorder.

O’Hara’s defence of Hartigan emphasizes the importance of disorder in modern art. He asserts that she has “put behind her the exclusively esthetic concerns of her abstractions, her new canvases erupting with images and influences hitherto repressed…[She is] essentially a painter of heterogeneous pictures which bring together wildly discordant images” (45). It is “dangerous,” he suggests, to ignore or deem as “minor” or “cowardly” the new painting of artists like Hartigan, Rivers, Robert De Niro and Elaine de Kooning because these artists bring into conflict the “formal knowledge” of abstraction with “wild” and “discordant” images that expose a more contradictory and dynamic understanding of “nature.” These disparate images are disruptive because they challenge the idea that the structural logic of nature is consistent and permanent. Hartigan’s “heterogeneous” works bring together “wildly discordant images” to provide “insight into their functional relationship (their ‘being together in the world’)” (45). This “functional relationship” is O’Hara’s revision of Greenberg’s “internal logic,” and he argues that Hartigan exposes the dynamic quality of these structuring principles, which are configured and reconfigured as the “functional relationships” change between objects and people. Hartigan’s paintings demonstrate the inversions and transformations that challenge the assumption of an inherent distinction between underlying truth and false appearance: “the sombre Massacre with its elegantly serious contortions gives way to the tragic Masquerade where the individual identities are being destroyed by costumes which imprison them, and to the Grand Street Brides, who face without bitterness the glassy shallowness of American life which is their showcase” (45).

O’Hara complicates Greenberg’s assertion of a singular “Role of Nature in Modern Painting” by emphasizing that “nature” is a contradictory category that includes principles of both order and disorder, and which is constantly in flux. The premise that one could objectively speak about form apart from content likely struck O’Hara as strange. He may even have had in mind Pollock’s infamous response to Hans Hofmann’s critique of his work, “You do not work from nature”: “I am nature” (qtd. in Cappucci 89). The important distinction is thus not between form and content, but the murky line between what may “objectively” be seen in the world and how
the viewer’s motivations and desires shape this perception. The second generation painters are important, argues O’Hara, because of their ability to see these interrelated perceptions as generative: “In these three painters [De Niro, de Kooning, Hartigan] we find the dual play of response to nature and desire for plastic organization setting up a friction which may be the dramatic meaning of the pictures” (45). This “friction” between responding to nature and desiring formal order takes place within the self, both that of the artist and, more importantly for O’Hara’s purposes, also that of the critic. As someone for whom “contradiction [was] the proper condition for ‘seeing’” (Perloff 21), this “friction” between perception and desire was for O’Hara one of the powerful ways that art could challenge and transform the self who apprehends it.

Greenberg’s emphasis on the relationship between a permanent formal structure and the changing appearances of nature is not only countered by O’Hara’s reading of Hartigan’s paintings, but by his citation of Keats, which suggests how poetic language and forms can be particularly useful in evoking the contradictory experience of responding to art. He quotes perhaps the most famous poetic instance of inversion - the celebrated chiasmus in Keats’ notional ekphrasis, “Ode on a Grecian Urn”:

Yet, when Keats wrote, ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’ - it is a grievous error to think that he was writing about writing poetry. His insight into the structure of human sensibility… is no more merely against the ugliness of lying than Mondrian is against paintings which do not affirm the horizontal and vertical (in his work). That is too narrow an application. From the impressionists through the cubists to the present, art has been involved with nature. (41)

By collapsing the difference between “art” and “nature” to argue that the structural “logic” is the same, Greenberg commits the same “grievous error,” to O’Hara’s mind, as those critics who think that Keats meant to dissolve the distinction between beauty and truth. O’Hara reads the urn’s chiasmus ironically as the projected meaning that the speaker wants the urn to represent. It is thus a “grievous error” to think that the chiasmus represents some objective truth about the creation of art. O’Hara suggests that it is the desire of Keats’ speaker to equate “beauty” or ordered aesthetic forms with some permanent “truth” about the world that he literally reads on the urn’s surface. The speaker, to adopt Didi-Huberman’s appraisal of art criticism, desires the “certainty that the representation functions unitarily, that… it is able to translate all concepts into images, all images into concepts. That in the end everything lines up and fits together perfectly in
the discourse of knowledge” (3). What one can surmise about the “sensibility” of this speaker is his ardent desire for consistent states of certainty, permanence, order, purity and unity that are at odds with art’s concurrent “involve[ment]” with a contradictory “nature.”

“Nature and New Painting” exposes and questions the anxiety inherent in what O’Hara presents as Greenberg’s defensive rhetoric. In his art criticism, and also in his ekphrastic poems, O’Hara confronts this anxiety to elucidate its sources, which he presents as the fear of what cannot be comprehensively known or fully articulated in language. O’Hara suggests that this fear is contiguous with more generalized anxiety about instability, transience, human vulnerability and ultimately, death, all of which art can evoke as a reflection of the humans who make it.

In his ekphrasis “Poem (The eyelid has its storms),” O’Hara exemplifies the vulnerability, violence and discord that can define the process of looking at a powerful work of art. Donald Allen points out in his notes that the manuscript of the poem has “Pollock / Masson” (535) written on it, and thus that it is often read as an ekphrasis of an unnamed work by Pollock, who reportedly admired André Masson’s sand paintings:

The eyelid has its storms. There is the opaque fish-scale green of it after swimming in the sea and then suddenly wrenching violence, strangled lashes, and a barbed wire of sand falls to the shore. (223)

The references to “sand,” “fish” and “violence” recall Masson’s best known sand painting, *Battle of Fishes* (1926), owned by the MoMA since 1937, but the colours evoked in the phrases “fish-scale green” and “grey lips” (from the second stanza), as well as the descriptions of multiple and tangled lines - “strangled lashes” and “barbed / wire” - likely allude to an all-over painting of Pollock’s in a palette of greens and greys, like his *Untitled (Green Silver)* of 1949.

As a poem about looking at abstract art, this ekphrasis represents an experience that is very different than that suggested by a Greenberg essay, which emphasizes control in both its assured prose style and its dispassionate depiction of the art object. In contrast, O’Hara describes being caught in an ocean wave in the middle of a “storm” as a metaphor for an aesthetic experience that “wrench[es]” away one’s perceived control. The experience is also defined by various assaults to the eye, as the second stanza uses the metaphor of “itching under a plague of / allergies and tears, memories of the first soothing oint- / ment press the cornea to desperate
extremity” and the third relates an excruciating anecdote about a man who wants to buy “one hazel eye and a jar of socket ointment” for his ailing mother who “has a lid that’s black from boredom… do you have a little cuticle scissors?” (223). It is possible that this poem offers a private joke about Greenberg’s frequent bragging about his great “eye,” and at the very least, it unsettles the critic’s frequent association of visual perception with rational, objective truth. Alice Goldfarb Marquis recounts that the critic “recoiled from the emotional baggage borne by Surrealism or Expressionism and wavered between a complicated theory and plain gut reaction, his ‘eye,’ to support the cool abstract art to which he was instinctively drawn” (Art Czar 143). If O’Hara’s poem is read as an ekphrasis of Pollock’s Eyes in the Heat (1946), the dig at Greenberg becomes even sharper.

“Poem (The eyelid has its storms)” is, to borrow a phrase from Grace Hartigan, about “how to be open but not violated, how not to panic” (qtd. in Ward 81). In the context of O’Hara’s response to Greenberg, it is about how to look at a work of art that may evoke suggestions of disharmony, chaos and even violence, and to write about it without obscuring its disquieting or inexplicable aspects. The poem attempts to balance the uncertainty of this experience with the necessary order needed to represent it. Formally, its loose sonnet structure is paired with frequent enjambment and abrupt semantic shifts to mimic the contradictory endeavour of representing the disturbing process of viewing the artwork. In O’Hara’s own terms, it represents the “friction” on the eye’s surface between a disruptive response to art and the will to order that experience.

4.4 “Passionate Formalism” in the Pollock Monograph

Jackson Pollock, O’Hara’s most sustained critical work on the artist, is also his most considered and explicit response to Greenberg’s formalism. Whereas Greenberg spoke of modern art as invested in a “process of self-purification,” of “mak[ing] explicit certain constant factors of pictorial art that the past left implicit” (Art and Culture 208; 210), O’Hara was interested in a

20 Greenberg admitted that as a young critic he had read very little art history but recalled, “I was so sure of my eye at that time… I thought I’d bet my eye against whatever” (qtd. in Marquis 92).
21 O’Hara’s monograph was published as part of George Braziller’s “Great American Artist” series, which also included Lloyd Goodrich’s Winslow Homer (1959) and Albert P. Ryder (1959), E. C. Goossen’s Stuart Davis (1959) and Thomas B. Hess’ Willem de Kooning (1959).
different axis of exposure: He suggests that Greenberg’s insistence that abstract art uncovers a stable, rational foundation of formal principles actually indicates an anxiety about depths of meaning and states of uncertainty. For O’Hara, what distinguishes great art is its disruptive potential to the viewer’s habitual mode of seeing, and in turn, to the way the viewer experiences her own subjectivity. As in “Why I Am Not a Painter,” this disruption is characterized by the dissolving of the boundary between subject and object, and the sense that the significance of the object remains somewhat ambiguous. The ekphrasis inserted within the monograph, “Digression on Number 1, 1948,” portrays an arresting confrontation with the Pollock painting as an experience that changes the speaker’s habitual way of characterizing himself as a subject.

Drawing on Rosenberg’s theory, O’Hara explains in the monograph that “action painting” occurs when the artist achieves a state of “clarity,” which O’Hara associates with a painting’s “qualities of passion and lyrical desperation, unmasked and uninhibited” and with its ability to “speak with unimpeded force and unveiled honesty” (22). The proliferation of the prefix “un” in O’Hara’s account suggests that the experience of viewing this art exposes one to an affectively charged state that can be uplifting but also threatening due to its deconstructive potential.

For many viewers, the Cubist and abstract art treated by formalist theory seems at least equally concerned with the modernist issues of fragmentation, disintegration and the difficulty of representation than it is with principles of formal organization and unified, synchronically meaningful images. Formalism by definition blocks the consideration that this movement emerged during a time that saw two world wars, widespread economic depression, and political and ideological upheaval. O’Hara’s commentary suggests his recognition that by 1959, at the height of Greenberg’s influence, the residue of this collective trauma was an established but implicit trope of formalist criticism. The authoritarian rhetoric and insistence on separating “aesthetic” from “political” concerns belies a defensive approach to viewing art that similarly separates emotional from intellectual response. In a poem contemporaneous with the monograph, “To Hell With It,” O’Hara identifies with the desire to escape emotional response by interpreting artworks as “things that don’t change, / photographs, / monuments” (275). He laments, “How I hate subject matter! melancholy intruding on the vigorous heart” (275).

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22 In “Biographia Letteraria” (written circa 1961), O’Hara writes (ostensibly) one-line biographical notes about a number of critics, artists and historical figures such as Gertrude Stein, Philip Roth, Teresa of Avila, Archibald
O’Hara’s ekphrastic poems repeatedly link the perception of great art to feelings of both hopefulness and melancholy. He suggests that great art taps into, and momentarily fulfills, the human desire for order and permanence through its complex forms, but it also makes the self-conscious viewer aware of the incongruity between her desire and the facts of mortal life. The inclusion of “Digression on Number 1, 1948” within the prose monograph attempts to offset the way that the conventions of criticism, particularly those of formalism, function to diminish and deny emotional response, particularly melancholy. The awareness of loss in O’Hara’s ekphrastic poems (to varying degrees) accounts for their generic overlaps with his elegies, including the two he wrote for Pollock: “A Step Away from Them” and “Ode on Causality.” The frequent yoking of art with loss in both ekphrasis and elegy was O’Hara’s most intimate identification with the anxiety he perceived in Greenberg’s portrayal of great art as a bastion of stable order and enduring value.

Unlike many of the other painters O’Hara wrote about in his ekphrastic poems - de Kooning, Rivers, Freilicher, Hartigan, Bluhm and Goldberg - Pollock was not a friend.\textsuperscript{23} By 1950, Pollock was the first major artist to achieve fame as an Abstract Expressionist after he appeared in a \textit{Life} spread in 1949.\textsuperscript{24} Though O’Hara revered him as a kind of hero, the artist was also notorious in their New York circle for his alcoholism and his “explosions of fist-fighting or shouting” (Gooch 204) at the Cedar when he came to Manhattan once a week for his psychiatric sessions. O’Hara’s biographer, Brad Gooch, reports that Pollock’s angry confrontations at least once involved calling O’Hara a “fag,”\textsuperscript{25} emphasizing that he was “enough of a menace that O’Hara fled the MacLeish and Grover Whalen. The note on Greenberg is the shortest - “Of Orphic?” (464) - and it suggests the critic’s near-religious obsession with art as a form distinct and separate from “subject matter.”

\textsuperscript{23} O’Hara was, however, well acquainted with Pollock’s wife Lee Krasner, with whom he grew closer after the painter’s tragic death in 1956.

\textsuperscript{24} Published in August 1949, the \textit{Life} spread on Pollock contained photographs by Arnold Newman and a statement by Greenberg turned provocative headline: “Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?” The editors received over 500 letters in response, more than any other article that year (Toynton xii-xiii).

\textsuperscript{25} This incident was later recorded in O’Hara’s play co-written with Rivers, \textit{Kenneth Koch: A Tragedy}. The character of Pollock refers to the authors as “those fags,” but also hints at the irony of his homophobia when he “ambiguously tells Kenneth, ‘My wife is a lousy lay, but you’re the worst’” (qtd. in Silverberg 3).
Cedar one night when he heard that Pollock was on a drunken rampage” (204). Silverberg has pointed out that like the Abstract Expressionists, the New York School of poets was “predominantly a men’s club - but unlike the painters, they were mostly gay men, and their work, like that of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, [was] in part a response to the typical 1950s macho, heterosexual swagger of Abstract Expressionism” (3). Yet, it is also true that O’Hara’s admiration of Pollock’s paintings seemed to temper his recollections of the artist’s offensive personality: “If Jackson Pollock tore the door off the men’s room in the Cedar it was something he just did and was interesting, not an annoyance. You couldn’t see into it anyway, and besides there was then a sense of genius” (qtd. in Gooch 204). O’Hara’s generous appraisal is likely also linked to the fact that Pollock’s career fuelled much of his professional success. His first major curatorial triumph at the MoMA was its exhibit for the fourth biennial in São Paulo, which opened in 1957 and included a retrospective of Pollock that toured Europe afterward. O’Hara was given a “free hand” with the selections, and wrote to John Ashbery that it was “thrilling to work on. How great he is!” (qtd. in Gooch 295). His interest in Pollock’s work endured until the end of his life. One of his final coups for the MoMA before his untimely death was securing permission from Krasner to mount a second, and major, retrospective of Pollock’s work scheduled for March of 1967. At the time of his death, O’Hara was at work on this exhibition and had also expressed interest in writing a commissioned critical biography of Pollock - a project that Greenberg had worked on for years and had failed to publish (Marquis Art Czar 184-85).

Though deeply indebted to Greenberg’s criticism, O’Hara’s monograph was also integral to widening the divide between formalist and “poetic” criticism in its time. Though the book sold well and was praised by Krasner, it was subject to what Gooch calls a “wrist-slapping from the critical establishment” (342), in almost all cases for what reviewers deemed the “poetic” quality

26 Pollock’s “rampage[s]” were not confined to Manhattan. Upon seeing a sculpture by Rivers on Leo Castelli’s driveway in East Hampton, Pollock tried to run it down with his car because he found it “too realistic” (Gooch 222).
27 The exhibition was a more inclusive adaptation of Sam Hunter’s retrospective of Pollock in the winter of 1956-57, during which O’Hara wrote “Digression on Number 1, 1948” after seeing the eponymous painting at the show.
28 Among the items with O’Hara when he died was a copy of an article by Pollock’s psychoanalyst about “the role of the analyst vis-à-vis the artist genius” (Gooch 469).
29 Contemporary critics continue this trend, as Lehman deems the monograph’s style “poetic rather than analytical” (179) and Geoff Ward refers to the “Art Chronicles” as “a kind of prose poetry” (37).
of the writing. The most vicious reviews came from those critics at *Arts*, with Kramer decrying O’Hara’s “phony poetics” and insinuating that this style represented a compromise of his critical integrity in its apparent alignment with the interests of the MoMA. Though Greenberg further polarized formalist from “poetic” criticism by disparaging *Jackson Pollock* in “How Art Writing Earns its Bad Name,” the monograph was particularly influenced by Greenberg, the only critic outside of the *Art News* circle named in its acknowledgements. Greenberg is listed second, after only Krasner, and is included among those whose “help in assembling the present material… whether through conversation or critical writings, directly or indirectly, has been so great” (7). In Greenberg’s case, the influence was likely of the “indirect” variety: Of the twenty-two sources listed in the monograph’s “Selected Bibliography,” thirteen are reviews, articles and essays by Greenberg - the only author to be listed more than once.

O’Hara’s citations of Greenberg are notable for their chronology, as they span from his early reviews in *The Nation* in the 1940s to his well-known essay “American-Type Painting” (1955) to a biographical sketch in *Evergreen Review* (1957), in which three of O’Hara’s poems also appeared. A sequential reading of these sources suggests that O’Hara was aware of marked shifts that occurred in Greenberg’s writings about Pollock between his short early reviews that focus on particular works and his theoretical polemic, “American-Type Painting.” The monograph also diverges from the prevailing formalist view that the “unevenness” (qtd. in Cappucci 96) of Pollock’s late works signalled a decline in his talents. The many early writings that O’Hara refers to are also significant in their stylistic contrast to “American-Type Painting,” the only critical piece cited after 1952.

30 Aline Saarinen’s review in *The New York Times Book Review* exemplifies the lukewarm reception of the book: “Frank O’Hara is adulating, emphatic and unrestrained, perhaps as is inevitable with a poet!.. His praise is so extravagant it loses its effectiveness. But, somehow, something of the fervor, the dedication, the lyricism, the serious purpose and the undeniable quality of Pollock’s art come through this purple, poetic prose” (qtd. in Gooch 341). George Heard Hamilton for *Art Journal* referred to O’Hara’s writing as “just a bit intense” (Ibid). Shaw also points to Serge Guilbaut’s dismissal of O’Hara’s criticism, included among the “cacophony of articles devoted to breathless discourses of stylistic influence” (qtd. 12) in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*.

31 Kramer noted, “I think future historians will find it significant that the ‘poetic’ school of criticism, particularly as it concerns Abstract Expressionist painting, came forward at precisely the same moment that collectors and museums began buying the pictures” (qtd. in Gooch 341-42).

32 The others named (in order after Krasner and Greenberg) are “Harold Rosenberg, James Schuyler, Robert Motherwell, Sam Hunter and Thomas B. Hess” (7).
In general, the six reviews O’Hara cites from The Nation contain more speculative statements about the meanings of Pollock’s work than does the 1955 essay, and they suggest that the reductive qualities of Greenberg’s later formalism emerged as a way to cope with this initial uncertainty. Following the short review of Pollock’s exhibition at “Art of This Century” in the April 1946 issue of The Nation, Greenberg refers to the “infinity of dramatic movement and variety” in the paintings, and ends the review by indicating his “hesitateness to attempt a more thorough analysis of his art” because he was “still learning from Pollock” (2: 75). In a February 1947 issue, he ends another review by undercutting his own declarative statement: “Pollock points a way beyond the easel… to the mural, perhaps - or perhaps not. I cannot tell” (2: 125). Greenberg’s tentative appraisals in these reviews are juxtaposed to the way the artist is increasingly depicted as one who controls uncertainty and instability, particularly in relation to emotions. For example, in the first review mentioned above, Greenberg discusses abstraction as an extension of Cubism, and specifically, of Cubism understood as “a vehicle of emotion… It is a means, not of inhibiting emotion, but of controlling and so exploiting it” (3: 72). Pollock is the Cubist-heir par excellence, who has the “ability to create a genuinely violent and extravagant art without losing stylistic control. His emotion starts out pictorially” (2: 75). The trajectory of these reviews from the 1940s include both admissions of uncertainty about the effect and purpose of the paintings and very declarative statements about Pollock’s ability to control emotion by creating affective situations ordered through aesthetic forms. Ultimately, this emphasis on emotion is effaced altogether to posit that the artist’s control is over his artistic medium - the canvas and paint - to which formal principles of colour, shape and line can be applied.

In “Jackson Pollock’s New Style” (1952), cited in O’Hara’s bibliography, Greenberg’s rhetorical style becomes more declarative and confident as the depiction of the painting as a “vehicle of [controlling] emotion” shifts to an emphasis on its control of formal properties. Pollock’s works between 1947-50 are deemed the “result of the fusion, as it were, of dispersed particles of pigment into a more physical as well as aesthetic unity - whence the air-tight and monumental order of his best paintings of that time” (3: 106). The notes of hesitation and uncertainty in the earlier reviews are replaced in his later articles by emphatic assertions, which the rhetoric of “American-Type Painting” epitomizes: “There is good and bad in abstract expressionism, and

33 See also The Nation’s 24 Jan. 1948 issue, in which Greenberg leaves the “quality of two… pictures, Sea Change and Full Fathom Five… to be decided” by other critics (2: 203).
once one can tell the difference he discovers that the good owes its realization to a severer discipline than can be found elsewhere in contemporary painting” (3: 218). Greenberg’s earlier interest in the control of disordered emotions reaches its full transformation in this essay as a comprehensive theory of modernist painting premised on the reduction of conventions: “it has turned out to have a greater number of expendable conventions imbedded in it, or these at least have proven harder to isolate and detach. As long as such conventions survive and can be isolated they continue to be attacked” (3: 217). This statement betrays a highly defensive reaction to any suggestion of expressed affect in the work. Though Greenberg insists that the modernist artist’s process is defined by an emotionally neutral, non-programmatic state of formal problem solving (3: 220), his diction indicates a latent hostility: Pollock “twisted this space to its own measure and vehemence,” he has the “capacity to bind the canvas rectangle,” and he “wanted to control the oscillation between an emphatic physical surface and the suggestion of depth beneath it” (3: 225; my emphasis). Shaw also highlights O’Hara’s objection to the “form of [Greenberg’s] judgments,” “the ‘measured pace’ that is supposed to ensure the objectivity of terms like major and minor. It is precisely this authority-conferring tone that O’Hara puts into question” (5). It is revealing to read both Greenberg’s interpretations, and his rhetorical strategies that insist on Pollock’s “control,” as projections of his own desire for a world of disorder restrained.

A number of critics have made the case that O’Hara adds little to the critical debates about Pollock’s work, and it is true that his writings do not formulate a cohesive theory in the way that Greenberg’s do. Rather, he uses “poetic” language and devices as deconstructive tools, turning Greenberg’s approach to modern art on the critic himself by making explicit what the essays leave implicit. Like Greenberg’s early praise of Pollock’s “infinity of dramatic movement and variety,” O’Hara opens his monograph by comparing the artist to Boris Pasternak, “capable of sustaining more than one [truth] in the span of [his] activity” (11). He goes on to lament that artists who are able to achieve this are often critiqued for having

‘no coherent, unifying style’… Such criticism is panoramic and non-specific. It tends to sum up, not divulge. This is a very useful method if the truth is one, but where there is a

34 O’Hara’s description also resonates with Keats’ concept of “negative capability” in which one is “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Selected Letters 60).
multiplicity of truths it is delimited and misleading, most often involving a preference for one truth above another, and thus contributing to the avoidance of cultural acknowledgement. If there is unity in the total oeuvre of Pollock, it is formed by a drastic self-knowledge which permeates each of his periods and underlies each change of interest, each search. (11-12)

Greenberg frequently appraised the work of artists based on their consistency of “style,” especially that of Pollock, whose later work he critiqued for its inconsistency. Greenberg’s rhetoric parallels this mandate for consistency in its authoritarian, even tone and its conventional diction and encompassing theoretical framework. In a sense, the so-called “purple prose” (Perloff 91) of O’Hara’s monograph is characterized by its inconsistency of style, in terms of its vacillating tone, its abrupt switch from prose to verse and back, and its attention to individual works at the expense of a “coherent, unifying” theory about Pollock’s work as a whole.

O’Hara’s interpretation of Pollock’s Guardians of the Secret (1943) recalls Greenberg’s earlier emphasis on the use of form to “control” and “exploit” emotion, but diverges by positing the juxtaposition of these forces: the painting is “a celebration… a marvel of spatial confinement and passionate formalism, formalism brought to the point of Expressionistic defensiveness” (18). This idea of “passionate formalism” sounds like an oxymoron, but it suggests that even painters who exhibit a cool, exclusive interest in formal concerns imply their “passion” through their “defensiveness” against movements like Expressionism that emphasize this engagement. O’Hara emphasizes the “passionate” valence of his critical voice in the monograph, which in his words was “pretty feverish” (qtd. in Gooch 342).

Writing about Greenberg and Fried, Shaw argues that the formalist emphasis on medium specificity extended to its conception of the genre of art criticism, from which “poetic criticism” was not only excluded, but seen as “the primary threat to the legibility of a modernist art critical vocabulary” (144). The threat that poetic language represented was at least in part its introduction of what Fried would call a “theatrical” or self-conscious relationship to viewing (Absorption and Theatricality) into the purely optical experience of an artwork. O’Hara’s most

35 For example, in his article on Jacques Lipchitz’s sculpture in 1954, Greenberg deems that “[h]is recent course has been haphazard, with no one direction leading into the next; and he has been unable to develop a style, a principle of inner consistency and control” (3: 185). One of David Smith’s “shortcomings” (3: 278), according to Greenberg, was his “tend[ency] to violate presumable unity of style within single pieces” (3: 277).
“theatrical,” and literally his most “poetic,” maneuver in the monograph is the insertion of “Digression on Number 1, 1948” amidst his discussion of Pollock’s “classical period” of 1947-50. As the poem appears two pages before he treats the eponymous work in prose, it functions to introduce the given work, but also to disrupt his own critical narrative as he begins to discuss the group of paintings that Greenberg frequently homogenized as the greatest achievement of Pollock’s career. The ekphrasis punctuates the resistance O’Hara emphasizes in this section to generalizing theories - perhaps as he himself felt generically compelled to make them. He begins the section defensively, denying the summative expectation of his subtitle by stating that despite the “intense activity” of this period, Pollock’s “works never became categorical or doctrinaire. Each is an individual, a single experience” (22-23). The poem is inserted abruptly, elucidating his own “individual… single experience” of the work when he first saw it at the 1956-57 MoMA exhibition:

I am ill today but I am not too ill. I am not ill at all. It is a perfect day, warm for winter, cold for fall.

A fine day for seeing. I see ceramics, during lunch hour, by Miró, and I see the sea by Léger; light, complicated Metzingers and a rude awakening by Brauner, a little table by Picasso, pink.

I am tired today but I am not too tired. I am not tired at all. There is the Pollock, white, harm will not fall, his perfect hand

and the many short voyages. They’ll never fence the silver range. Stars are out and there is sea enough beneath the glistening earth to bear me toward the future which is not so dark. I see. (260)

The sudden transition from prose to poetry in the monograph is reflected in the ekphrasis by the marked shift in the third stanza, which juxtaposes the speaker’s rather mundane and disinterested
thoughts on his meander through the MoMA to his sudden absorption in the Pollock painting. Up until the thirteenth line, the structure of the lines and syntax is measured and repetitive, relying greatly on parallel clauses and sentences that emphasize the speaker’s balanced, even slightly bored, state of mind and body. The speaker begins describing “the Pollock, white” using the same grammatical structure he had used to depict “a little table by Picasso, pink,” but his calculated pacing and brief, highly controlled mode of description is disrupted as he suddenly changes to a metaphoric register - “harm / will not fall” - and the line enjambst across the third and fourth stanzas. Whereas the initial catalog of works by Miró, Léger, Metzingers and Picasso includes descriptions of manifest and thematic content (“the sea,” “a rude awakening”), formal qualities of medium, colour and shade (“ceramics,” “pink,” “Light”) and brief evaluative commentary (“complicated”), the Pollock initiates a reaction that interrupts the speaker’s disinterested account, indicated by the collapse between his subjective, psychological state and his depiction of the work. The speaker increasingly moves away from the painting’s objective attributes (“white,” the allusion to the many lines made by his “perfect hand”), as it is transformed into an imagined correlative for the psychological landscape of the speaker and the expansive nature of his response.

Whereas the previous art is listed as a catalog of visual forms that are “see[n]” by a speaker who emphasizes his separation as subject (the pronoun “I” is used eight times before line thirteen), the Pollock lacks this bounded quality: “They’ll / never fence the silver range.” The implicit antecedent for this pronoun is probably critics, like those he refers to in the monograph who wish to “sum up” and “delimit” rather than “divulge” a multiplicity of “truth[s].” This line likely also references Greenberg’s characterization of Pollock’s “all-over” paintings as a “system of uniform motifs” that “look[s] as though it could be continued indefinitely beyond the frame” (3: 225). But whereas Greenberg emphasizes this effect as a “control[led]” illusion between “an emphatic physical surface and the suggestion of depth beneath it” (3: 225), O’Hara suggests that this effect is not contained by the “surface” of the painting, but bleeds into the visual and psychological experience of the viewer. In O’Hara’s rendering, the painting extends infinitely to become the universe on all sides of the viewer, who perceives the depth of the “sea… beneath the glistening earth,” and the reach of distant “Stars.” It also extends to include the emotional valences of this viewer, for whom the painting becomes a vehicle of affective transport to a brighter, imagined “future.”
Greenberg’s sole emphasis on “sight,” which allows the critic to distance himself and control his response to the object, is one of the major formalist threads taken up by Fried in the following decade. In the monograph, O’Hara emphasizes how Pollock disrupts the idea of “sight” as an objective phenomenon that can be contained and separated from the self of the viewer:

At one time it was thought that the “all-over” paintings of Pollock represented an infinitely extensible field of force which could continue out into all four areas of space surrounding its boundaries. This is true of sight, but his work is not about sight. It is about what we see, about what we can see. In the works of this period we are not concerned with possibility, but actuality. (25-26)

The distinction O’Hara makes between the hypothetical (“which could continue”) and “actuality” (“what we can see”) hinges on the issue of “represent[ation].” For O’Hara, the Pollock painting does not “represent” a hypothetical concept of infinitely unbounded sight because it engages the viewer in a response that breaks down the distance needed to “represent” it in the first place. The painting is not a contained manifestation of a metaphysical principle that can be visually or linguistically represented, but instead, O’Hara’s response to seeing it collapses the space that separates him from the object as an object. As such, it is not “about” anything outside the viewing subject, but is “about what we see, about what we can see,” as any portrayal of the painting becomes integrated with the internal world and the imaginative faculties of the viewing subject.

The contrast between O’Hara’s representation of the other art objects and that of Number 1, 1948 highlights his extreme absorption in Pollock’s painting. It is this emphasis on viewer response that allows for a comparison between O’Hara and Fried, who extended Greenberg’s formalism in large part by theorizing about the relationship between the viewer, whom he called the “beholder,” and the work of art. Though O’Hara would not have encountered Fried’s writings (Fried did not begin publishing art criticism until the year of the poet’s death), the value-laden distinctions Fried makes between “theatre” versus “absorption” are useful to an analysis of O’Hara’s ekphrasis because they formalize the implicit resistance in Greenberg’s writings to the idea that responses engage a thinking, feeling, embodied subject. In “Art and Objecthood” (1967), Fried’s best-known essay, he contrasts modernist paintings to “literalist” art by Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Tony Smith, among others. In contrast to the former, which works to “defeat or suspend its own objecthood” so as to be purely “pictorial” (Art and Objecthood 151),
literalist art betrays its medium by creating the condition of “theatre,” by presenting itself to the viewer as “an object in a situation - one that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder…” [it] makes the beholder a subject and the piece in question… an object” (153-54). Fried’s distaste for the idea of art as an “object” stems from his implicit ideal that great art suspends one’s usual position as a subject, as in the sublime presence of a god. In fact, Fried’s conclusion is more sermon than criticism: “We are all literalists most or all of our lives. Presentness is grace” (168). O’Hara’s ekphrasis, in contrast, suggests the impossibility of this suspension.

The experience of viewing the Pollock is a “digression” from the speaker’s usual way of being as depicted throughout the earlier stanzas in the poem, but instead of a Friedian “suspension” of subjectivity, the speaker’s state is defined by an expansion of subjectivity facilitated by his affective engagement with the painting. O’Hara’s response lies somewhere between Fried’s polarities of “absorption” and “theatre,” as it violates the unconsciousness of viewing required for the former and the necessary “distance between object and subject” (Morris qtd. in Fried 154) for the latter. The expansion of the speaker’s self-consciousness is signalled by the sublime imagery of “stars” and especially, of “sea,” which puns on the “see” of the poem’s final word (Mattix 82) and in doing so points to its own metaphoric associations with the mind. The poem’s last phrase, “I see,” also suggests the relationship between optical sight and cognitive insight at stake in the poem. The multiple puns on “sea” / “see” emphasize the difficulty of separating objective from subjective perception and further complicate Fried’s distinction between experiences of “absorption” versus those of “theatre.”

If the desire to evade or to suspend subjectivity is implicit in formalist ideology, O’Hara’s ekphrasis suggests that it may be motivated by an anxiety about mortal life. In the final stanza, when Pollock’s painting is imagined “to bear me toward the future / which is not so dark,” the speaker’s earlier and seemingly indifferent references to feeling “ill” and “tired” retrospectively become clues that expose a depressed state of mind and body. Paul R. Cappucci is one of the few critics to pick up on these intimations of melancholy, conjecturing that the poet’s “identification with this painting suggests something of his own ‘dark’ feelings and experiences on this day” (83).36 Yet, these undefined “dark” feelings juxtaposed to those of hope also suggest the

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36 As further evidence for this proposition, Cappucci links the reference to Pollock’s “perfect hand” in the poem to O’Hara’s description of the handprints on the periphery of the painting as “the seemingly bloodstained hands of the painter” that function as “a postscript to a terrible experience” (83).
speaker’s identification with the formalist desire to see art as a stay against what is troubling about life. From “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939) onward, Greenberg often contrasted pessimistic assessments about the regressive intellectual state of America’s middle classes to idealistic evaluations of modernist art. O’Hara cites an early review in which Greenberg states that the “avant-garde… believes that history is creative, always evolving novelty out of itself. And where there is novelty there is hope” (2: 15). In “American-Type Painting,” the purpose of modern art is to “maintain the irreplaceability and renew the vitality of art in the face of a society bent on rationalizing everything” (Art and Culture 208).

O’Hara’s emphasis on the perceived difference between the present and future also anticipates Fried’s investment in delineating the beholder’s relationship to time. Fried accuses literalist art for its “preoccupation with time – more precisely, with the duration of the experience... [T]he sense which… theater addresses is a sense of temporality, of time both passing and to come” (Art and Objecthood 166-67), whereas modernist art immerses the beholder in a “continuous and entire presentness… that one experiences as a kind of instantaneousness”(167). Much like Kriege r’s and Steiner’s theory that the ekphrastic poem desires to mimic the frozen stasis of visual art, Fried suggests that the experience of viewing “authentic” (167) art transports the viewer, if only momentarily, outside of time, and contingently, out of his own mortality.

O’Hara’s reference to a “dark” present contrasted with hope for a brighter future in “Digression on Number 1, 1948” betrays this anxiety that undergirds Fried’s scathing dismissal of literalist art.

In contrast to Fried, who praises modernist art for allowing the beholder to evade or suspend his own subjectivity and implicitly its mortal limitations, O’Hara’s response to Pollock’s work indicates his identification with formalist anxiety about things we cannot control and with the desire to see in art the power to transcend the impermanent. Without introduction or visual separation from the criticism, “Digression on Number 1, 1948” punctures the monograph as a challenge to the conventional rhetorical and semantic boundaries of art criticism. Its placement mimics what O’Hara perceives as the challenge of Pollock’s painting to the assumption that meaning can always be contained, controlled and articulated. In the prose section of the monograph, O’Hara elaborates on the metonymic connection between the threat of aesthetic disorder and that of death, situating Pollock’s work in a more pervasive cultural sense of uncertainty and loss in the hostile political climate of the late 1950s:
It is not surprising that faced with universal destruction, as we are told, our art should at last speak with unimpeded force and unveiled honesty to a future which well may be nonexistent, in a last effort of recognition which is the justification of being… Pollock’s works of this nature… are painfully beautiful celebrations of what will disappear, or has disappeared already, from his world, of what may be destroyed at any moment. (22)

Whereas Greenberg and Fried create a progressive narrative of modern art, in which artists innovate new forms in response to those of the past, O’Hara suggests that this axis operates regressively as well, and thus that the affective power of Pollock’s painting is due, at least in part, to its anticipation or confirmation of loss.

4.5 “Neurotic Coherence” in O’Hara’s Use of Ekphrasis and Elegy

The connection O’Hara makes between great art and collective loss suggests an affinity between his ekphrastic and elegiac poems, particularly when the latter takes an artist as its subject. “The Day Lady Died” (325), O’Hara’s well-known elegy for Billie Holiday, uses a similar strategy as “Digression on Number 1, 1948” in its final lines. As O’Hara recalls a Holiday performance at the “5 SPOT,” he articulates a similar expansive state as in the ekphrasis. Mirroring the structural and tonal shift in “Digression on Number 1, 1948,” this state is formally enacted through the juxtaposition of the everydayness of the speaker’s experience - “It is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine” - to the speaker’s sudden, absorbing recollection of Holiday as “she whispered a song along the keyboard / to Mal Waldron.” The lack of punctuation after the poem’s final phrase - “and everyone and I stopped breathing” - conflates the power of great art to ‘take one’s breath away’ with the literal breathlessness of death. The elegy slips into the ekphrastic mode in these final lines, paying tribute to Holiday by recalling the haunting effect of her voice, which punctuates the speaker’s shock and grief as he stares at “a NEW YORK POST with her face on it / and I am sweating a lot by now.” Though the generic overlap between elegy and ekphrasis is highly pronounced in this example, it is characteristic of many of O’Hara’s elegies for artists, such as those written for Pollock: “A Step Away From Them” and “Ode on Causality.”

O’Hara’s elegies, like his ekphrastic poems, often work against the conventional imperatives of the genre, particularly in terms of tone, the frequency of digression and their ambiguous forms of
consolation. In “The Unfinished,” subtitled “in memory of Bunny Lang,” O’Hara elucidates his conflicted attitude about writing elegy by comparing it to the making of a “pomander”: “so he takes an orange and sticks / a lot of cloves in it and then he looks at it and realizes / that he’s killed the orange” (318). The metaphor, in Alan Feldman’s terms, “stands for the ill-advised desire to enshrine and preserve one’s emotions, particularly one’s grief… [B]y taking something living, something in process, something unfinished and turning it into a product or history, the result is more than likely to be false and dead” (115). O’Hara’s anxiety about elegies parallels his concern about the type of art criticism that seeks to “sum up, not divulge.” Notably, he associates the “living” quality of art with “orange,” recalling his earlier poems “Why I Am Not a Painter” and “Oranges: 12 Pastorals.” The resistance of modern art, and Pollock’s paintings in particular, to the summative impulse (analogized as the making of a “pomander” in “The Unfinished”) was for O’Hara its most crucial contribution, and what he attempted to replicate in his elegies.

In “A Step Away From Them,” among the best-known of his “lunch hour” poems, O’Hara elegizes Lang, Latouche and Pollock (all three died in 1956). The elegy is revealed through the unfolding of the trope of a mid-day walk, which provides continuity between the otherwise fragmentary observations of colour (“yellow helmets”), sound (“A blonde chorus girl clicks… Everything / suddenly honks”), familiar tastes (“Coca-Cola,” “cheeseburger,” “chocolate malted”), tactile impressions (the “hot” sun and “blow[ing] smoke”) and the interjection that marks the poem as elegy: “First / Bunny died, then John Latouche, / then Jackson Pollock.” The rhetorical question that follows is paradoxical in its confirmation of conflicting answers: “But is the / earth as full as life was full, of them?” (258). Like O’Hara’s interpretation of Pollock’s paintings, which mourn for what “has disappeared…from the world” yet point the way toward “a future which is not so dark,” these lines lament the vacuity of a world without the named artists, yet they are placed between so many other lines that celebrate the vibrancy and “full[ness]” of life in New York City and that mitigate any intimation of loss.

The ambivalence about the elegiac impulse that characterizes “A Step Away From Them” is also prevalent in the elegy O’Hara wrote for Pollock, “Ode on Causality,” originally entitled “Ode at the Grave of Jackson Pollock” (Gooch 295). The decision to designate the poem an ode signals

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37 Richard Howard’s inadvertent retitling of the poem “Ode on Casualty” (Feldman 76) highlights the title’s hidden pun, as the relationship between the two terms was especially pertinent to the alcohol-induced car crash that killed Pollock and his passenger, Edith Metzger.
its resistance to summative impulses, or to the desire to designate “causality,” particularly as it concerns the project of writing an elegy. Whereas “The Day Lady Died” overlays the tragedy of Holiday’s death with the power of her art and “A Step Away From Them” finds consolation in the vitality of the present world, “Ode on Causality” apostrophizes Pollock as a muse figure whose artistic energy transcends his bodily existence. O’Hara retreats from the longing to use elegy to effect, or even meditate on, the transformation of the living, moving life of Pollock into dead “product or history,” in Feldman’s terms. As such, he does not focus on any particular piece of art, but instead constructs a narrative of his own artistic process that is guided and invigorated by that of Pollock. The poem’s first lines chastise the reader who seeks an assertion of aesthetic order to make sense of death:

There is the sense of neurotic coherence
you think maybe poetry is too important and you like that
suddenly everyone’s supposed to be veined, like marble
it isn’t that simple but it’s simple enough…

Maude lays down her doll, red wagon and her turtle
takes my hand and comes with us, shows the bronze JACKSON POLLOCK
gazelling on the rock of her demeanor as a child, says running
away hand in hand “he isn’t under there, he’s out in the woods” beyond

and like that child at your grave make me be distant and imaginative
make my lines thin as ice, then swell like pythons
the color of Aurora when she first brought fire to the Arctic in a sled
a sexual bliss inscribe upon the page of whatever energy I burn for art
and do not watch over my life, but read and read through copper earth

not to fall at all, but disappear or burn! seizing a grave by throat
which is the look of earth, its ambiguity of light and sound
the thickness in a look of lust, the air within the eye
the gasp of a moving hand as maps change and faces become vacant
it’s noble to refuse to be added up or divided, finality of kings (302).

O’Hara’s initial address to the reader in the formally distinct first stanza acknowledges the need for summation and closure in elegy, but also suggests that what can be provided is only “a sense of neurotic coherence.” This oxymoron calls attention to the (admittedly too “simple”) truth that the kind of consolation that makes conclusive statements about the life, and art, of someone contributes to a corpus (pun intended) in which the elegized person is canonized as a static
statue, “veined, like marble.” When O’Hara switches to a different stanzaic structure, using longer, more visually condensed lines, he also shifts from a polemic about poetry addressed to his reader to an apostrophe or prayer addressed to Pollock, as he looks to the artist for guidance about how to produce art that “refuse[s] to be added up or divided.”

The anecdote about Maude that begins the second stanza is odd in its religious overtones (styling the buried Pollock as a resurrected Christ figure in the woods) and also in its implicit comparison between the “distant and imaginative” young girl and the notorious public personality of the “macho” and aggressive Pollock. Opposites are everywhere brought together in this poem, in “lines” that are “thin as ice, then swell like pythons,” in the reference to “br[ing]ing fire to the Arctic” and in the refusal “to be added up or divided.” Lehardy-Sweet has suggested that transformations between opposing states of being are integral to this poem, in its “movement from personal death to public commemoration, experience to art, and back again” (221), as he quotes two of the poem’s final lines, “what goes up must come / down, what dooms must do, standing still and walking in New York” (303). Yet, these transformations are not predictable or complete, but open to further changes that prevent them from reaching any sense of “coherence” or “finality,” in the poem’s terms. O’Hara applies the laws of physics to the artistic process, substituting the initial, cool imperative for poetry in which “suddenly everyone’s supposed to be veined, like marble” for the heated, unpredictable products of “whatever energy I burn for art.” He imagines meaning in terms of an energy transfer between the world and himself, and the poem and his reader, who must “read and read through copper earth / not to fall at all, but disappear or burn” and thus continue the process of transformation. Maude’s assurance that Pollock “isn’t under there, he’s out in the woods” is elaborated by O’Hara into a carpe diem celebration of responses to art (particularly those, as in his case, that beget new art), which allow one to “seiz[e] a grave by the throat.” This frenzied insistence on living is “the look of earth,” in O’Hara’s estimation, defined by its “ambiguity of light and sound,” its myriad of enigmatic impressions in perpetual motion as time advances and “maps change and faces become vacant.”

As the poem transitions between elegy and ode, from the sombre assessment of the first few lines to the ecstatic exclamations of the third and fourth stanzas, the scope of Pollock’s influence is

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38 O’Hara’s references to “fire” and the “energy I burn for art” likely also allude to Walter Pater’s philosophy: “To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life” (qtd. in Perloff 3).
apparent but largely diffuse. While one can highlight O’Hara’s apostrophe to the artist, “make my lines thin as ice, then swell like pythons,” which seems to receive its answer in the poem’s own “lines” that shift from “thin” double-spaced manifestations to the “sw[ollen]” clusters of quatrains, the locus of influence is largely unspecific throughout the rest of the poem. Whereas Greenberg criticized the “muddiness” (1: 165) of hybrid forms within and between mediums, it is precisely this ambiguity of what Glavey describes as “one art bleeding into the next under the overwhelming influence of heightened emotions undermining the difference between identification and desire” (799) that renders this poem a particularly effective tribute to Pollock.

The confusion between “identify[ing]” objective elements in art with one’s subjective “desire” to see something is for O’Hara an inevitable and productive mode of responding to great art, which for him must challenge one’s usual sense of control and knowledge of how to respond. When O’Hara warns in the poem, “do not watch over my life, but read and read through copper earth,” he asks his reader to interpret his life through his multi-faceted and sometimes contradictory art. What O’Hara seeks to gain, and implicitly invites his reader to gain, from Pollock’s memory is less a comprehensive framework for interpreting art than what he calls a “passionate formalism” - a vehement openness to art’s power over our everyday, rational modes of thinking and being in the world. His elegy for Pollock is ultimately a kind of “muddy” ekphrasis, in which Pollock’s art provides, says O’Hara, the “energy I burn for art,” which is transformed through a complicated causality into the form of the poem.
The centrality of Jackson Pollock’s paintings to Frank O’Hara’s conception of modern art was certainly not an idiosyncratic anomaly, but a result of the intellectual climate of New York City in mid-century. This narrative that privileged Pollock as the primary Abstract Expressionist was a function of the writings of the New York critics, both those at *Art News*, including O’Hara, Harold Rosenberg and Thomas B. Hess, and those at *Arts*, including Hilton Kramer and Clement Greenberg. Though critics now identify that multiple theoretical strains were operating to explain the art of the period, its indubitable spokesman was Greenberg, whose version of formalism became the historical and pedagogical standard until at least the late 1970s. The way that Greenberg looked at Pollock’s work (including the blind spots that limited this looking) was “utterly determinative for [the careers] of both men” (Jones xxvi). For the poets (and later, for the art critics) who reacted to Greenberg’s essentialist iteration of formalism, this looking was integrally related to the confident and authoritative subjectivity he developed through his prose.

Like Marianne Moore, W. H. Auden and William Carlos Williams, O’Hara gestures in his ekphrastic poems toward the omissions, repressions and complications inherent in the formalist theory of modern art. Though there were dissenting voices in art critical circles,¹ they were largely unheeded until the 1980s, when scholars including Rosalind E. Krauss, T. J. Clark and others began to use structuralist, poststructuralist and materialist analyses to consider what Greenberg’s “amnesiac method” (Jones 4) had left out of art history. As O’Hara emphasizes, one of these exclusions was the dimension of emotional and intuitive responses to abstract art. The type of subjectivity that Greenberg develops in his writing is founded, as Caroline Jones argues, on an extreme emphasis on the cool observation of the visual properties of art, which are cohesively examined, explained and evaluated with reference only to the history of art forms. There is a contextually poignant reason for Greenberg’s critical voice and his enduring popularity, according to Jones, who claims that he created and represented “the kind of subject

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¹ Serge Guilbaut has noted a number of works published in the 1970s by Dore Ashton, Max Kozloff, Eva Cockroft, Jane de Hart Mathews, and David and Cecile Shapiro that “bear witness to efforts to achieve a more critical understanding of the period… But these few voices have cried in the wilderness, all but drowned out by an endless cacophony of articles devoted to breathless discussions of stylistic influences on this or that artist extending back to the beginning of time” (8-9).
who could make sense of a modern urban existence” (xv). This model of subjectivity was premised on the idea that a particular type of seeing could produce a cohesive and confident modern subject:

Throughout Greenberg’s criticism, the ‘eye’ is a transparent substitute for the ‘I’ (the Ich, the ego, the moi), purified and channeled in such a way that the encumbrances of the socialized self (family, tradition, religion, politics, ideology) appear to be stripped away. This ‘efficiency’ (to use his own word) is not a private condition … [His] redoubtable eye was more than just a hard-won independence from the unthinking mass, as the Kant-wielding critic argued to his death… [Instead,] the transcendent ‘eye’ is part of this subject’s interiorization of the visibility… [T]he gaze constructed by Greenberg’s prose became a free-floating Eye whose synecdochic links to mental experience and physical reality became attenuated in the extreme. (7-9)

This Emersonian trope of the “eye” became for Greenberg a way to limit the intrusion of uncertainties into his criticism and into the worldview it implied. As Bois notes in his article, “Whose Formalism?,” the descriptions of Pollock’s work that undergird much of Greenberg’s formalism actually overlook many of the art’s aesthetic features. Instead, Greenberg “edited out anything too dangerously close to a scatological smearing of matter” (10), including what Krauss called the “heterogeneity of trash” that the artist “dumped” onto the surface of Full Fathom Five (qtd. in Bois 10). Greenberg’s evident discomfort with these types of incongruities in Abstract Expressionism gave the next generation of critics, especially Bois and Krauss, a foothold for their postmodern reassessments of formalism.

In Formless: A User’s Guide, Bois and Krauss draw on Georges Bataille’s concept of the formless (“informe”) as an “operation of slippage” (15) that challenges and unsettles the certainty of cohesive interpretations of art. In the epigraph that follows their title page, Bois and Krauss quote Bataille’s Vision of Excess:

[Formless] is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape… On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit. (n. pag.)
The interest in the opposition between the will to organize meaning (exemplified by Greenberg’s formalism) and the urge to disrupt, delay or deconstruct this order (perpetuated by the formless), aligns Krauss and Bois with their contemporary Jorie Graham, a poet for whom the negotiation of these forces is a central concern in the lyric poem.

Bonnie Costello says the same of Graham as she said of Moore in the proposition that began this study: “ecphrasis is her chief rhetorical strategy” (14). The ubiquitous presence of the visual arts in Graham’s poetry makes sense given her biography. She grew up in Italy with her mother, the sculptor Beverly Stoll Pepper, worked for Michelangelo Antonioni on his film Zabriskie Point (1970) when she was a teenager, and later attended New York University as a film major, intending to become a director. Painting is a particular obsession, especially in her early collections, which treat artists from the Italian “Old Masters” (Masaccio, Piero della Francesca and Luca Signorelli), to the Austrian Gustav Klimt, to the modernist Americans, Mark Rothko and Pollock. Graham’s “Pollock and Canvas” is especially intriguing in the context of this study because it pressures the limits of ekphrasis by neglecting to identify or describe any specific paintings and by refusing to depict the composition of these paintings as entirely within the artist’s control. As such, Graham suggests how ekphrasis itself has become implicated in the formalist conception of how one should look at and speak about art. Her poem is a meditation on Pollock’s drip method and implicitly, on the limits and problems of Greenberg’s formalist interpretation of this method. By the time of the poem’s publication in The End of Beauty (1987), Greenberg had come under fire for both his criticism and for the well-publicized scandal, instigated by an exposé published by Krauss, about his alteration of David Smith sculptures.²

The tension between the conflicting desires to make and undo meaning is The End of Beauty’s central theme. Of writing the collection, Graham recalled that the “the suction of closure was enormous – the desire to wrap it up into the ownable meaning… doing away with it wasn’t as easy as I had imagined” (qtd. in Gardner Regions of Unlikeness 219). Graham frequently imposes efforts to delay, suspend, or deconstruct meaning, and nowhere is this more apparent than in “Pollock and Canvas,” the longest poem of the collection.

² Krauss published “Changing the Work of David Smith” in 1974, alleging that Greenberg had committed “an aggressive act against the sprawling, contradictory vitality of his work as Smith himself conceived it - and left it” (32).
Pollock’s fascination is for Graham his revolutionary drip method. That he severed the connection between his hand (via the brush) and the canvas was symbolic for her of the admission of the unknown and uncontrollable into his paintings. In an interview with Thomas Gardner, she says, “I really feel that what Pollock was trying to do was open up… the gap between the end of his gesture and the beginning of the painting. I love to imagine that one-inch gap between the end of the brush and the beginning of the canvas on the floor” (Ibid 215). Part I of the poem establishes the importance of this imagined space:

when

he leaned down through the space
which separated him from it,
down through the way and the life,
and the garment of minutes (and sey that I
give hir) and the garment of light (hert body and
minde) parting the past from the future with his leaning,
a flare, a tiny quick
freedom…

what he chose—can you understand
this—what he chose (go forthe
in hast)
what he chose
through the see-no-evil, through the eye for
the eye,
choosing to no longer let the brushtip touch,
at any point,
the still ground,
was to not be trans-
formed but to linger
in the hollow, the about to be (81-82).

Graham’s frenetic description of Pollock’s method is interrupted by fragments from the fisher king myth and from paraphrased scripture, as she mimics the deconstruction of symbolic orders that she saw Pollock perpetuating. The space between brush and canvas is equated with

3 Graham’s emphasis on the disruptive potential of the “gap” or what is “formless,” to use Krauss’ and Bois’ term, is reminiscent of the way psychoanalytic critics, following Jacques Lacan, have described the Real: ‘‘the real is the impossible’’… [it is] that which is lacking in the symbolic order, the ineliminable residue of all articulation, the foreclosed element, which may be approached, but never grasped: the umbilical cord of the symbolic” (Lacan 280).
possibility, with “the about to be,” which in Graham’s poem is signalled by ellipses, dashes, white space (particularly in Part 2) and the blanks (“_____”) that she inserts where nouns should be in Part I.\(^4\) These strategies, like Pollock’s drip method, work against the urge to create a finished art object or a clear meaning. As Helen Vendler points out in “Jorie Graham: The Moment of Excess,” Pollock’s method allowed for the admission of “chance” (50) into the work:

Where does the end
begin?
where does the lifting off of hands become
love,
letting the made wade out into danger,
letting the form slur out into flaw, in-
conclusiveness? (86)

The need to pinpoint endings and conclusions is frustrated by the potential “danger” of the formless or “flaw” and by the delay perpetuated by enjambment (“in- // conclusiveness”). For Graham, the struggle is no longer to pull order from chaos, as the fisher king myth, and Eliot’s use of it in *The Wasteland*, posited: “We used to think that shape, a finished thing, was a corpse / that would sprout—Easter in every heart—what do we / think // now?” (88). Rather, Pollock’s method is privileged as a way to work against the momentum toward formal and narrative closure:

. . . . . The moment
a figure appears on the canvas, she said,
the story begins, the story begins the error sets in,
the error the boredom, she said, the story talking louder
than the paint, she said (89).

Graham depicts a crucial loss that occurs in the process of translating a visual art object into the “story” in language that we desire to tell about it. The transgressive potential of abstract art lies in its evasion of the figuration that prompts these explanations, though Graham also suggests that the human urge to create “stor[ies]” is not so easily deterred. Her use of anadiplosis, the

\(^4\) Thomas J. Otten has elucidated this strategy in Graham’s work in his article “Jorie Graham’s –s.”
rhetorical scheme that repeats the last word of the previous clause, exemplifies the forward thrust of narrative that exacerbates its own “error” as it continues. The repetition of “she said” also implicates the speaker of the “story” as the inevitable perpetrator of this “error” and “boredom” that overwhelm the art object. This repetition and the feminine pronoun suggest both Graham’s awareness of her culpability as speaker, but also her attempts to disrupt the narrative as it arrives. Pollock’s method, through its admission of what is “formless,” proves valuable in exemplifying the need to complicate the connection between the self and the work of art. In Graham’s case, this self is the speaker of her poems. Through Pollock’s example, she finds a means of addressing the problematic subjectivity that Greenberg’s way of looking demanded.

In its preoccupation with the space of possibility between brush and canvas, “Pollock and Canvas” echoes later criticism of Greenberg’s interpretation of the artist. As Bois puts it, “in abandoning the brush Pollock had severed the bodily link between gesture and touch (that is, had said farewell, so to speak, to the autographic brushstroke that had marked the birth of the modernist tradition beginning with Impressionism)” (10). The “autographic brushstroke” provided the literal connections between artists and their paintings that premised the methodology of art historians and critics until the twentieth century. In this sense, Greenberg’s theory was conservative, as this connection was integral to his understanding of modern art as a product of the artist’s intellectual engagement with the formal accomplishments of previous works, the results of which created each work’s admissible meanings. This view of the artistic self as logical, critical and consistent is what traditionally unified the individual works and the oeuvre of artists. This ordered model of selfhood is also the one that Greenberg creates in his criticism, though for Graham, it is only part of the picture.

In “Pollock and Canvas” the self of the painter and his intentioned control over his work gets interrupted by his method, which tempers this self with the “formless,” or what Graham calls “flaw,” “in/ // conclusiveness,” “maya” (83), “what is / not beauty” (84) and “nothing” (88). In her interview with Gardner, she reflects on the word “nothing” (the word also used by Bataille in his explanation of the formless) in the line, “What we want is to paint nothing how can one paint nothing?” (88). Graham elaborates on the use of “the positive sense of the word. As in Stevens’s ‘the nothing that is there’” (214). Whereas Bois and Krauss focus on the materialist manifestations of the formless (the four categories they present are horizontality, base materialism, pulsation and entropy), Graham’s conception of the formless or “nothing” is also
metaphysical: It is what has not been consciously admitted into the western conception of subjectivity. She codes this “nothing” as “the female principle, the unconscious,” which is “collective” in opposition to the “ego” or “higher masculinity of the head” that is privileged in western thought (Ibid 235). Graham aligns herself with Pollock in attempting to defer completed forms by using strategies that invite “flaw” and the “nothing,” while acknowledging that the self works to ensure the evasiveness of this formless. This opposition is dramatized in Part II through the metaphor of casting a fishing line: “3 / And here is the hook before it has landed, before it’s deep in the current, / 4 / the hovering—keeping the hands off—the gap alive” (83). In this section, the “current” or water is also the “maya,” the female presence that the “hero” seeks to catch: “the netting of chance her body / 27 / as the young god stole down through the suffering to come up with a meaning a / form” (86). The numbered sections that divide the lines here stall the “meaning” from being “caught” in the narrative that the poet and reader unconsciously fish for, so to speak. Yet the numerical order also signals the inevitable accumulation of this narrative in time.

The way that one approaches and interprets art overlaps with the experience of selfhood in Graham’s poem because the conception of selfhood is also dominated by the same desire for narrative coherence. For Greenberg, this coherence was bought at the expense of the many conflicting political, social, historical and even inconvenient formal threads that could not be tucked neatly into his finished critical tapestry. Bois and Krauss claim that the rigidity of this theoretical framework was required in service of the “ontological project” that defined his version of modernism: “once art was liberated from the constraints of representation, it had to justify its existence as the search for its own essence” (25). This ontology of art was, as Jones has argued, also of the modernist subject that Greenberg sought to become. It was defined by “the suction of closure,” in Graham’s terms, which attempts to overlay the “nothing” with imposed form. In Pollock’s work, Graham portrays the potential for this “feminine” consciousness to surface: “this girl this girl // rising in the mind in place of the mind” (88). As Vendler has noted, the tension of the “dualism” depicted in “Pollock and Canvas,” as well as the conjunction joining the two nouns of the title, align it with the five “Self-Portrait” poems in the collection (The Given and the Made 106). In these poems, Graham continues to resist the limits of the ekphrastic genre and to further the connection she draws between art and selfhood by making the ontological implications of modernism her explicit subject.
*The End of Beauty* contains five identifiable “Self-Portrait” poems defined by a tension between two mythological or biblical characters, all but one of which are heterosexual couples. The poems are “Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them,” “Self-Portrait as Both Parties,” “Self-Portrait as Apollo and Daphne,” “Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay” and “Self-Portrait as Demeter and Persephone.” None develop a first-person speaker at all: They are all written in the third person, which Vendler attributes as a critique of the “apparently unproblematic access to the self afforded by the traditional lyric ‘I’ [that] suggests that there is only one conceivable self-portrait, not the successive ones afforded by, for instance, a triangulation of the self through myth” (*The Given and the Made* 113). The mythic emphasis suggests the collective, cultural frameworks for the motivations and desires that compose our identities, in opposition to the Romantic ideal for the lyric “I,” which assumes that the experience of subjectivity is essential and unique to the individual and especially, to the artist.

Though these “Self-Portrait” poems are not strictly ekphrastic in that they do not refer at all to the visual arts except in metaphorical terms, they do signal - through their titles and through their continuation of the same engagement with issues of order and disorder as “Pollock and Canvas” - their overlap with the genre. Each “Self-Portrait” poem dramatizes a gap between one self and another: There is the space between Eve’s outstretched hand and Adam’s move to accept the illicit apple, between Orpheus and his gaze backward to Eurydice, between Apollo and the chased Daphne, between Penelope and her suitors as she unweaves the shroud and finally, between Demeter and the seasonally absent Persephone. The male characters and Demeter represent for Graham the desire to close the gap (Orpheus looking back to Eurydice, Apollo chasing Daphne), to reach an ending (the suitors hurrying Penelope to finish the shroud while Odysseus journeys home, Demeter desiring Persephone’s return) or to maintain an existence without secrets or mystery (Adam). These “masculine” characters represent the “self-consciousness” of “hero[es],” in Graham’s terms, who are defined by the limitations of their “imperial, incredibly moving, yet absurd belief that one could seize, in language, the nothing. (And yet that desire is, I think, I hope, also fully represented in the poems)” (qtd. in Gardner *Regions of Unlikeness* 225).

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5 “Orpheus and Eurydice” could also be included in this list as a continuation of the same myth in “Self-Portrait as Both Parties,” which it directly follows in the collection. Its inconsistent titling can perhaps be attributed to the fact that it uses the first person “I” pronoun, which the others avoid.
In contrast, the female characters (except Demeter) desire to keep this gap in play, to cultivate mystery over knowledge, process over ending, the “nothing” over the “finished thing.” “Self-Portrait as Apollo and Daphne” conveys most compellingly the importance Graham places on maintaining tension between the desire to create meaningful forms and the threatening disorder of the formless:

9
She stopped she turned,
she would not be the end towards which he was ceaselessly tending,
she would not give shape to his hurry by being
its destination,
it was wrong this progress, it was a quick iridescence
on the back of some other thing, unimaginable, a flash on the wing of…

10
The sun would rise and the mind would rise
and the will would rise and the eyes—The eyes—:
the whole of the story like a transcript of sight,
of the distance between them, the small gap he would close. (32-33)

The description of narrative as a “transcript of sight” is premised on the idea that both function in service of the desire for semantic closure. Contrary to many theories of ekphrasis, the visual for Graham does not necessarily represent what is outside of language, but rather the territory to chase and capture those unknowns (like Daphne) that make one feel alienated from the world, in order ultimately to gain mastery in the form of articulated knowledge. Daphne’s transformation into a laurel tree is presented as a sacrifice to maintain the needed “distance” in perpetuity: “No she would go under, she would leave him in the freedom // his autograph all over it, slipping, trying to notch it” (33). This reference to “freedom” alludes back to Eve’s desire in “Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them”: “So it was to have freedom she did it but like a secret thought. / A thought of him the light couldn’t touch” (4). Whereas Daphne’s sacrifice protects her otherness from Apollo’s expansionist agenda, Eve risks her life in paradise to create this separate space of the other in the first place. “Freedom” in both poems works against totalizing and transparent narratives of order that would seek to absorb or deny any experience of otherness that would threaten the integrity of that order. Eve and Daphne represent the necessity of keeping the
“gap” open, to use Graham’s metaphor, and of challenging the mode of western selfhood that Greenberg’s writing so epitomizes.

Graham’s “Self-Portrait” poems are intriguing in the context of this study because they address concerns about the modernist conception of self that were also important to Krauss and Bois in their evaluations of Greenberg’s criticism. They are also of interest because they are far from an anomaly in postmodern literature. Poems with “Self Portrait” or some synonym in the title are surprisingly ubiquitous in the poetry of the past fifty years and share a number of common traits: they are recognizably lyric poems; they are spoken by a single voice, though many, like those of Graham, are neither dramatic nor confessional in the conventional senses (i.e. they do not provide descriptive portraits of an obvious character or of the poet’s recognizable autobiographic self); and importantly, as the titles suggest, they are especially invested in the idea of selfhood and its meaning or function in the lyric, in art criticism and in the modern world more broadly.

“Self Portrait” poems have been especially prevalent since John Ashbery’s acclaimed 1975 ekphrasis in *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, the collection that won the Triple Crown of poetic prizes: the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Ashbery’s poem seems increasingly to have popularized the “Self Portrait” poem as a contemporary sub-genre of ekphrasis, since it meditates on the canonical painting by Parmagianino. It also makes explicit the issue at stake in most of the “Self Portrait” poems that follow it: the interrogation of the concept of selfhood, and specifically, the deconstruction of the model of selfhood particularly associated with lyric poems of the Romantic tradition, epitomized by John Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” The irony of many of these contemporary “Self Portrait” poems is that they contain very little (if any) reference to their author, but instead often point to the precarious and precious position of the “I” as it exists in the lyric tradition and in American culture. As ekphrasis by definition generally requires the presence and voice of a viewer who engages with the work of art, these “Self Portrait” poems function to interrogate the stability and purpose of this responsive speaker.

The choice of ekphrastic subject in Ashbery’s poem, Parmagianino’s small painting of his own image distorted by a convex mirror, suggests his approach to the concept of self in his difficult, long poem. Ashbery first uses the portrait to suggest or encapsulate the concept of an essential self or “soul,” in his words. “The soul establishes itself,” he says, but this idea is soon deflated:
The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,  
Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,  
Has no secret, is small, and it fits  
Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention. (475)

Ashbery exposes what Jacques Derrida, in *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, calls “the destiny of the self-portrait” (2), which is the lack or “blindness” at its centre (this “blindness” can also be read as another articulation of Graham’s “nothing” or Bataille’s “formless”). In the paradox of the second line quoted above, Ashbery undoes the assumption that a work of art can represent or construct a self or “soul,” and goes so far as to suggest the pathetic truth that the concept of the self is not rooted in people or even in the things people make, like art, but is only the product of “our moment of attention.” In the poem, “our” presumably includes the speaker and the reader who imaginatively views the painting, but of course, this pronoun “our” is as unstable as the idea of the “soul” in the portrait: If we accept that Parmagianino’s self construct is an illusion created by the portrait, then so too is that of the speaker in the poem. The unusual length of Ashbery’s ekphrasis (fourteen pages of tiny type in the Library of America edition) formally complicates the usual visual compactness that has come to be associated with the modern lyric, especially ekphrasis, and its less interrogative approach to selfhood.

Following Ashbery, many major poets of the past forty years have published “Self Portrait” poems, though most are not linked explicitly to any work of portraiture. These poems are numerous and varied, written by poets including James Merrill, John Yau, Chase Twitchell, Jennifer Tongue, Edward Hirsch, Susan Mitchell and David Roderick (see Appendix 1 for a cursory list of these poems). Even those written in the first person often display some degree of confusion about written or verbal representations of selfhood; in the words of A.K. Ramanujan, “I resemble everyone / but myself” (1803). Others approach the issue through humour, as Merrill does in “Self-Portrait in Tyvek Windbreaker,” in which identity turns out to be just a compilation of conformist propaganda. In Roderick’s poems “Self-Portrait as David Lynch” and “Self-Portrait as David Hockney” the “self,” as in Graham’s poems, is explicitly another (though limited to those who share his given name). That the depiction of the self in these “Self Portrait” poems is often paradoxical, both a stable, essentialized distillation of the individual and a fluid and malleable construction, suggests that poets are responding in various ways to the precarious status of identity in a culture that increasingly uses words and images to create or to substitute for this selfhood.
In her recent work, Marjorie Perloff has proposed a theory that suggests an alternate evolution for ekphrasis in contemporary poetry than that of the “Self Portrait” poems elaborated above. “Poetry on the Brink: Reinventing the Lyric” begins by establishing that lyrics have become the most conservative and uninteresting forms of contemporary poetry. The institutional allegiances of most poets currently writing, she argues, have resulted in such an overload of poetic output, which “inevitably ensures moderation and safety” (par. 1).6 Though she refers to the “formulaic approach” of these poems, her underlying concern with them seems to be the transparent reliance on the assumption of a stable and knowable self who speaks in the first person and whose authenticity is solidified by the apparent congruence with the historical person of the poet. The result is, in Perloff’s words, to “designat[e] the lyric speaker as a particularly sensitive person who really feels the pain” (par. 1) and who encapsulates “the voice of feeling unique to lyric” (par. 16). Though Perloff does not cite any examples of ekphrasis, one could venture that those commissioned by the burgeoning genre of museum-sponsored anthologies would be highly suspect in her eyes. In fact, ekphrasis literalizes what Perloff has critiqued elsewhere as the “poetry of the ‘well-wrought urn,’” the poem as “self-enclosed, autotelic, spatialized artifact” (Poetic License 2). Museum anthologies often commission poets to write for them, according to Barbara K. Fischer, and as such the collections “rely on a rhapsodic and idealized view of aesthetic perception that [Pierre] Bourdieu usefully summarizes as the ‘charismatic ideology’ – the belief that we experience art as a descent of grace, an immediate and intuitive moment of rapture” (11). Fischer cites Robert Haydon’s poem about Monet’s Water Lilies that opens Transforming Vision, sponsored by the Art Institute of Chicago, as an example of this sublime experience of art:

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Today as the news from Selma and Saigon
poisons the air like fallout,
    I come again to see
the serene great picture that I love

[...]

O light beheld as through refracting tears.
Here is the aura of that world
```

6 The poem she singles out for censure is Natasha Trethewey’s “Hot Combs.”
each of us has lost.
Here is the shadow of its joy. (qtd. in Fischer 15).

Gazing at Monet’s great work, the poet exemplifies the type of speaker that Perloff critiques in her article, a “particularly sensitive person” who seeks refuge from the harsh political realities of his world in the sanctuary of art, where he deeply “feels” an opaque sense of loss.

In relation to the “Self Portrait” poems previously discussed, Perloff’s argument is interesting in that it privileges poetry that explicitly distances its speaker from the “self” of the poet. The generic diamond that Perloff finds among the rough of most contemporary lyrics is what she coins a poetics of “appropriation” (par. 15). Gleaned from strategies used in Conceptualism in the visual arts, poets cite, sample, recycle, reframe, (mis)translate or mash together the language of other writers from various literary, popular or digital genres. In *Unoriginal Genius*, Perloff distinguishes the poetry of “appropriation,” or the citation of the words of other people, from what she calls “the poet’s own words, invented for this express purpose” (3), associated with what is conventionally recognized as the lyric tradition, particularly that stemming from the Romantic poets and the ideology of originality, expression and individual genius. Yet, the poems Perloff cites seem to be valued because they are able to pull off a kind of paradox in creating the impression of being the “poet’s own words” even though they are not; they are able to construct what reads as an intimate and engaging lyric speaker, but they also use formal strategies to distance themselves from the idea that an authentic selfhood can actually exist in the poem, and perhaps in the world. In short, this “appropriation” has a similar purpose as many of the “Self Portrait” poems discussed above, though it uses a vastly divergent methodology.

As with many critics of the avant-garde (like Greenberg, for example) there is an attempt in Perloff’s article to privilege art that dissociates the self of the artist, her historical experience, and especially her emotional experience, from the art itself. Even in the example of an “appropriation” poem that does deal with obviously biographical subject matter - Susan Howe’s elegy for her husband in the first section of *That This* - the emotional presence of Howe is

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7 Her examples include 1) John Cage’s “Writing for the First Time Through Howl” (1986), in which Cage edits and rearranges Allen Ginsberg’s poem, 2) Susan Howe’s poem “Frolic Architecture” (2010), composed from cut and pasted fragments from the diaries of Hannah Edwards Wetmore, sister of Jonathan Edwards and 3) Srikanth Reddy’s *Voyager* (2011), which erases most of the memoir of the late UN Secretary General and former Nazi officer Kurt Waldheim to construct the text of the poem.
displaced by the use of citation to the diaries of Sarah Edwards. Perloff highlights this poem as an example of “the power of other people’s words to generate profound emotion” (par. 21) - more authentic emotion than the poet’s own, original utterance, it would seem. Her article ends with the assertion that “[i]ncreasingly, the ‘true voice of feeling’ is the one you discover with an inspired, if sometimes accidental click [of the mouse]” (par. 35). She suggests the historical necessity of speaking through the voices of others in order to paradoxically create a “true” or authentic lyric voice. This need arises from overdependence on the western concept of a stable, essential self, especially represented by the poetic tradition stemming from the Romantics. It was also epitomized by critics like Greenberg, whose writings relied, as this Coda has suggested, on the assumption of himself as this particular kind of subject.

These cursory comments about ekphrasis in the contemporary period have suggested three vastly different evolutions of the genre, more loosely understood here as poems that reference, allude to, or are in some way influenced by the visual arts. A middle ground between the short, “conservative” (to use Perloff’s term) lyrics in museum anthologies and the “appropriation” poems that use strategies from (but contain no references to) Conceptual visual art, “Self Portrait” poems interrogate the understanding of lyric selfhood that the former relies upon and that the latter dispenses with. As a contemporary subgenre of ekphrasis, “Self Portrait” poems expose, at the very least, the continuing fascination with the intellectually and emotionally “sensitive” speaker as a representation of selfhood, even as we acknowledge that the idea of the self may only be an illusion, a conglomeration of citations from others, or the transient product of “our moment of attention.”
Conclusion

Many poets, including some in this study, have not been reticent about their suspicion of critics. Moore apostrophizes the critic in “To A Steam Roller,” flatly accusing, “You crush all the particles down / into close conformity, and then walk back and forth on them” (92). O’Hara adds, “I cannot possibly think of you other than you are: / the assassin of my orchards.” (48). The preceding chapters have looked to the poets themselves for cues about how to read their verse, hopefully side-stepping at least some of the destruction Moore and O’Hara suggest was imminent in the endeavour. These chapters have attempted to show that the poetry of Moore, Auden, Williams and O’Hara was motivated not only by the poets’ solitary meditations on art objects, but also by criticism, and in fact, especially by the type of authoritarian criticism that Moore and O’Hara so mistrusted. These ideas, evaluations and theories about the visual arts permeated their experiences as viewers and writers of art in their ekphrastic poems.

If a consistent thematic thread is discernible throughout this study amidst its discussions of literary and art criticism, the visual arts and ekphrasis, it is that writing about art is a tricky business. Though the preceding chapters have suggested that ekphrasis is a hybrid genre, situated at the nebulous frontier separating art from criticism, the Coda has gestured to a new subgenre of ekphrasis, “Self Portrait” poems, which poets use to challenge the model of selfhood that has permeated art writing in many forms, including that of ekphrasis. These “Self Portrait” poems unravel the expectation that a stable and critical self is the speaker or author of the ekphrastic poem - an expectation that the present argument has admittedly relied upon throughout. In short, the Coda demonstrates that more recent ekphrasis has already escaped the framework for understanding it that has been elaborated here. That ekphrasis is a product of the aesthetic and cultural dialogues that poets participate in is the overarching conclusion of this study and, fittingly, its inevitable undoing.
Works Consulted


---. "Mr. Roger Fry and the Artistic Vision." The Dial 71.1 (July 1921): 100-06. Print.


Appendices

Appendix 1: Cursory List of “Self Portrait” Poems, 1974 - 2013

<table>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>“Self-Portrait at 44”</td>
<td>Linda Pastan</td>
<td>The Five Stages of Grief (1978)</td>
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<td>“Self-Portrait”</td>
<td>Charles Wright</td>
<td>The Southern Cross (1981)</td>
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<td>“Self-Portrait” (5 poems)</td>
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<td>Poetry (Oct. 1997)</td>
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<td>“Portrait of the Artist with Hart Crane”</td>
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<td>“Portrait of the Artist with Li Po”</td>
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<td>“Self-Portrait with Stage Fright”</td>
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<td>Poetry (Aug. 1986)</td>
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<td>“Self-Portrait”</td>
<td>Barry Armitage</td>
<td>Poetry (Feb. 1987)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them”</td>
<td>Jorie Graham</td>
<td>The End of Beauty (1987)</td>
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<td>“Self-Portrait as Both Parties,” “Self-Portrait as Apollo and Daphne”</td>
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<td>“Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay”</td>
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<td>“Self-Portrait”</td>
<td>Nina Cassian</td>
<td>American Poetry Review (Jan./Feb. 1990)</td>
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<td>“Self-Portrait in Tyvek Windbreaker”</td>
<td>James Merrill</td>
<td>The New Yorker (1992)</td>
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<td>David Berman</td>
<td><em>Actual Air: Poems</em> (1999)</td>
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<td>David Wojahn</td>
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<td>“Self Portrait”</td>
<td>Chase Twitchell</td>
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<td>Jennifer Tonge</td>
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<td>Linda Norton</td>
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Many thanks to the Rosenbach Museum and Library for permission to quote material from their Marianne Moore Archive and to include the image of Moore’s typescript of “Museums” (Figure 1).

Rights were granted by the Mary Evans Picture Library (acting on behalf of the Illustrated London News) to reprint the image of the fish-shaped glass bottle referenced in chapter one.