

CONCLUSION

Revolving around three interconnecting topics—the esoteric, ephemeral and erotic—in O’Hara’s love poems to Vincent Warren, this thesis investigates these three detailed elements as a way of re-creating and re-conceptualizing a model of O’Hara’s gay life in the mid-twentieth century. My study discusses, under the circumstances that gay men were marginalized and hunted by the homophobic public, how and why Frank O’Hara reveals his love, feelings and thoughts to Vincent Warren in a secret way, how O’Hara re-creates the fleeting moments of love, happiness and sex and transforms the motif of “Seize the day!” into “seizing the day” in his gay *carpe diem* poetry, and finally demonstrates that O’Hara captures his erotic attempts to jump to an internal heaven and the subsequent falling back to the earth in his erotic love poems to Vincent Warren. Through my reading, I find that O’Hara is a synthesis of contradictions: the love between O’Hara and Warren is always “full of anxious pleasures and pleasurable anxiety” (*Collected Poems* 406). O’Hara enjoys the “anxious pleasures” in his relationship with Vincent Warren mostly because of the “pleasurable anxiety.” My analysis synthesizes O’Hara’s contradictions. In chapter one, O’Hara reveals his intense feelings about Vincent Warren, but the poet also conceals them in the language of camp. In chapter two, by writing “I do this I do that” poems, O’Hara emphasizes the physicality of love, the ephemerality of happiness and the urge of immediacy, but he also wants to “live forever” in his poems (*Collected Poems* 48). In chapter three, O’Hara insists so much upon being immediate, physical and sexual, but he also has the urge to transcend. This reading shows that O’Hara’s poetics memorializes the “anxious pleasures and pleasurable anxiety” of the homosexual relationship in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Indeed, the Vincent Warren poems epitomize the bittersweetness and the sweetbitterness of a

gay relationship in mid-twentieth-century America.

Most of O'Hara's love poems to Vincent Warren are indeed esoteric, ephemeral and erotic, written as they were, when the poet was still in love with Vincent Warren. Anxious about being made a victim of the gay witch-hunt in the McCarthy era, the poet uses a secret and campy language to both expose and hide his love for Vincent Warren. Facing various forms of oppression of homosexuals, O'Hara, a gay poet, transforms the ephemerality of his personal life and experience into art by writing "I do this I do that" poems to record his celebration of the immediate moment of love and its accompaniments. Jotting down all the details around him, Frank O'Hara is photographing every second of his life and experience, including his sexual experiences. "The range of the moods from sexual excitement, joy, and hope, to loneliness, delusion, despair, and cynicism, and finally to the stoical acceptance of the way things are is extraordinary" (Perloff 157). Before the end of the love affair, O'Hara's love poems to Vincent Warren are hemmed in by anxieties: anxiety about the oppression of homosexuals, anxiety about the lapse of happy moments and anxiety about the end of the relationship. Anxieties, like dangerous undercurrents, run deep in O'Hara's love poems to Vincent Warren. Although anxieties inevitably permeate the Vincent Warren poems, the poet has tasted the bittersweet happiness in this relationship. This kind of "anxious pleasures and pleasurable anxiety" turns out to be the epitome of the homosexual relationship in a non-gay culture (*Collected Poems* 406). After the relationship ends, O'Hara, though free from certain anxieties, suffers from an immense sense of loss; his love poems lack the nourishment of love. Moreover, examining a poem written after the end of the relationship, we can see that it is less esoteric, less ephemeral and less erotic as it is presented in O'Hara's "Poem [lost lost]." ¹

Because O'Hara's "Poem [lost lost]" is not collected in *The Collected Poems of*

Frank O'Hara and cannot be easily located, the poem is quoted in full here.

Poem

(after a poem by Ruth Krauss)

lost lost

where are you

lost in the shine

of my nails in the

little blue vein

inside my wrist lost

you are shining the

skin in the sun on

the front of my shoes

in my hair which is

shining with you lost

lost

lost

where are you lost

in my eyes are you

lost in the shine of my

nails in the little

blue vein inside my wrist

lost you are shining

the skin in the sun

on the front of my
shoes in my hair which
is shining with you lost
lost

lost

I want you lost
backward lost alley the
mountain top and the
looking-glass water
lost lost I want you
lost lost stones lost
shells and the roar that is
lost and the looking-glass
water

(Poems Retrieved 230-31)

As I have demonstrated in the foregoing chapters, O'Hara is a synthesis of contradictions. He often contradicts himself, presenting contradictory feelings, affections and thoughts together. In this poem, he on the one hand wants Vincent Warren back and on the other lets go of this faded love. Knowing that Vincent Warren, who used to be the major source of his happiness and inspiration, is now lost, O'Hara cries out for his ex-boyfriend: "lost lost / where are you"? People ask this kind of question in search of somebody that is already lost. The painful moment of losing seems to come to an end, for instead of saying "losing losing," O'Hara yells, "lost lost." Thus, according to this passage, O'Hara still wants Warren and himself

to get back together, even though he knows that now Warren is lost (somewhere in Montreal). When O'Hara looks at his nails, he sees the image of Warren, who is then "lost in the shine / of my nails." The poet sees the head of Vincent almost everywhere. He even sees Vincent Warren "in the / little blue vein / inside my wrist lost." The vein and the wrist create a scary suicidal image, but why not "the big red artery"? The big red artery would be even more dramatic. Red is often associated with love and passion, while blue is a color of sorrow and melancholy. The color "blue," as usual, is O'Hara's favorite color.² If blue stands for sorrow and melancholy, "little blue" shows that O'Hara is somewhat sorrowful and melancholic. It seems to me that O'Hara longs to save the faded love between Warren and himself. As for the "vein," it is where the oxygen has been taken out. If love is oxygen as people say, then the oxygen has been exhausted here. Besides, the valves in the heart, such as mitral valves, act like a backup system and keep the blood moving without flowing backward. Once the blood goes against the flow, it can cause a great disaster to the body. Likewise, there is no turning back for the poet. Hence, although Warren is in O'Hara's blood and although O'Hara wants Warren to linger for a while, the poet cannot but let go of him and then move on. Living without his then-lover is like surviving in an oxygen-less reality, and one can only hope that O'Hara will soon discover a fresh energy of love as the poet once foretells: "it must be discovered soon and disappear" (*Collected Poems* 406).

In addition, Vincent in the Vincent Warren poems is often compared to the sun or the light. Like the sun, Warren, though now far away, is still shining—shining on "the / skin in the sun on / the front of my shoes." Skin is the biggest human organ; it is everywhere on the body. The fact that O'Hara sees Warren shining everywhere on the skin is heart-rending, particularly because of the physical absence of Vincent Warren. Moreover, O'Hara does not say "you are shining on the *inside* of my

shoes,” which would probably smell, nor does he use “the *underside* of my shoes,” which is the sole, a pun on the “soul.” Instead, the poet makes it clear that Warren is shining on the *front* of his shoes. In earlier poems, O’Hara would have gone out of his way to make a pun on the sole of his shoes. Again and again, I have demonstrated in the previous chapter that O’Hara wishes to jump into this other spiritual world (as the word “soul” might imply). However, the simple fact is that the pun does not happen here. It seems to me that O’Hara somehow gives up the entry to the internal heaven and is forced to stay on the ground.

Furthermore, Warren is also shining “in my hair which is / shining with you.” Like in other Vincent Warren poems, the light that makes the hair shine also alludes to Vincent Warren. Like the sun, Warren also brings hope to O’Hara’s world. Besides, the images in the first stanza—“my nails,” “my wrist,” “the skin,” and “my hair”—are all very physical. It seems to me that O’Hara manages to keep Warren as physical as possible, even though Warren is physically absent both in the poem and in the life of the poet. O’Hara’s then-lover is now “lost / lost.”

When we get to the second stanza, we can see that it is a repetition of the first stanza with some variations. In the second stanza, the line breaks and the order of the words are slightly different. For instance, the line—“where are you lost”—is ambiguous. Because of the lack of punctuation, we cannot make sure whether the sentence goes “where are you lost?” or “where are you? lost / in my eyes.” The word “lost” becomes a floating word. Moreover, in the first stanza, O’Hara says that Warren is “lost in the shine / of my nails,” but now he doubts it, asking a question: “are you / lost in the shine of my / nails”? Is Warren lost? Or is O’Hara the one who is lost?

O’Hara expresses his contradictory wish in the third stanza. Back to the first stanza, we know that the poet wants Warren back and cries out for him—“where are

you”! In the second stanza, O’Hara questions himself—is Warren lost or is he lost? In the third stanza, O’Hara reveals that what is gone is gone, shouting “lost / I want you lost.” The poet now wants Warren lost in the “backyard,” lost in the “alley,” lost at the “mountain top,” and lost in the “looking-glass water”—lost in the places where O’Hara frequently sees Warren. Speaking of “backyard” and “alley,” it is only my speculation that “backyard” and “alley” are where the lovers used to have their “quickies.” Whenever the poet passes the backyard or goes through the alley, he can visualize the images of the past. O’Hara is so heart-broken that he even wants to get to the “mountain top” to see Warren again. In many passages of the Bible, the mountain top is where God is or where people meet God. Therefore, the mountain sounds very biblical. Besides, as I have mentioned in chapter three, O’Hara tends to glorify the beauty and holiness of Warren’s body to the point of worshipping him as god. To O’Hara, Warren is god, and his body is his temple worshipped by the poet. It is as if O’Hara tries to climb up to the mountain top to see the god who is now far away from him, but he simply cannot encounter the god. The sense of loss and disappointment is so immense that only when people lose the love of their life can they imagine such a deep sense of loss.

In terms of the “looking-glass water,” there are at least three layers of meanings in it. The multiple meanings of the image are also excruciating. To begin with, the earth is mostly covered with water. Water is everywhere, and it is as if Warren is everywhere. Our body is also mainly composed of water. We need water in order to survive, as O’Hara needs Warren in order to live on. Literally, the looking-glass water means the still water and is able to reflect people’s image like a mirror. When O’Hara looks at himself in the still water, he sees not only himself but also Warren’s image. What is more, the looking-glass water is a pun on “a glass of water.” To O’Hara, Vincent is like a glass of water, with which the poet can quench his thirst.

The looking glass could also refer to a pair of binoculars. It is as if standing at the mountain top, O'Hara looks at his god that is now far away, and O'Hara uses a pair of binoculars to bring Warren up close. In reality, Warren is gone, but in some way, O'Hara is still looking at Vincent through the looking glass to bring him closer.

Hence, although O'Hara declares that he wants Warren lost, the very fact of saying "lost / I want you lost" is a way of not losing Warren. For instance, "the shine / of my nails," "the / little blue vein," "my wrist," "the / skin in the sun," "the front of my shoes," "my hair," "my eyes," "backyard," "alley," "the / mountain top," "the / looking-glass water," "stones," "shells" and "the roar"— all these catalogs of nouns in the poem reveal that Warren's presence is ubiquitous. Actually, Vincent Warren occupies the mind of the poet: what O'Hara sees and thinks of is Warren. O'Hara even wants Vincent Warren to disappear in the "shells," for he can hear the voice of the sea from the past when he puts the seashells by his ears. The sound of the waves not only lingers but also haunts O'Hara, who seems to remember the good old days of Warren and himself. Besides, the poet can hear "the roar that is / lost." The pause between "is" and "lost" pinpoints the dark sense of loss and sorrow of the poet. In "You Are Gorgeous and I'm Coming," O'Hara says, "Vaguely I hear the purple *roar* of the torn-down Third Avenue El" (*Collected Poems* 331, my emphasis). It is as if O'Hara can hear the roar of the train from the past. Here in this poem, however, there is no train, and naturally the roar is lost. Yet, the phrase "the roar that is" somehow tells us that O'Hara can still hear the roar. Part of the poet is unwilling to let go of Warren, even though O'Hara makes up his mind to forget Warren, saying "lost lost I want you / lost lost." The sentence shows that O'Hara is indeed a synthesis of contradictions. On the one hand, O'Hara wants Warren "lost lost," but O'Hara also says, "I want you." The pause between "I want you" and "lost lost" exposes O'Hara's changing and contradictory emotion. The line breaks in this poem

are also of the shifting mindset and of both the fact that O'Hara wants to be free of Warren and the fact that O'Hara can never be free of him. The dark sense of loss is very characteristic of this poem. O'Hara uses the word "lost" six times equally and respectively in stanzas one and two; the sense of loss is deepened as the poet moves toward a final crescendo in the third stanza, where O'Hara uses the word "lost" nine times out of thirty-five words in ten lines. Even though O'Hara uses the word "lost" twenty-one times in total, the word "lost" is not strong enough to express the sense of loss of the poet and the pain in his heart. Indeed, the art of losing is hard for O'Hara to master.

In a sense, O'Hara's "Poem [lost lost]" is like Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art," a poem about loss. In "One Art," Bishop uses the alternation in a fixed form to show her struggling emotion. Since this thesis does not aim at elaborating upon Bishop's poem, I hereby quote "One Art" in one third of its entirety to demonstrate that the art of losing is hard to master.

The art of losing isn't hard to master;
 so many things seem filled with the intent
 to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster
 of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.

The art of losing isn't hard to master.

(Bishop 178)

"One Art" is a villanelle, and a villanelle contains "five tercets followed by a quatrain, all in two rhymes. The opening line is repeated at the ends of tercets two and four;

the final line of the first tercet concludes the third and the fifth. The two refrain lines are repeated at the end of the quatrain” (*Literary Terms* 298). In the light of this definition, it is clear that a villanelle is a strictly-controlled poem. The poet must control everything well in order to write a formal villanelle. However, the exact rhyme in the first stanza (*master* and *disaster*) becomes an off rhyme when it comes to the second stanza. The slant rhyme in the second stanza (*fluster* and *master*) gives us a sense that something is not quite right. Indeed, the rhyming, as well as the fixed form, is falling apart. In “One Art,” Bishop claims, “The art of losing isn’t hard to master.” The very fact of denying that the art of losing is hard to master is a way of holding on. In the last stanza of “One Art,” Bishop writes, “—Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture / I love) I shan’t have lied” (Bishop 178). The pause between “a gesture” and “I love” somehow tells us that Bishop has to pause and breathe before she can say it. Everything that Bishop wishes to control is now fallen apart. The last stanza of “One Art” is so excruciating that all of her trying to persuade herself seems in vain.

Likewise, in “Poem [lost lost],” O’Hara claims, “lost lost I want you / lost lost,” but the very fact of saying it is a way of not willing to lose Warren and a way of holding on to Warren. According to O’Hara, Warren is lost in the backyard, lost in the alley, lost at the mountain top, and the like. It is as if Warren is not lost. Vincent exists everywhere in O’Hara’s mind. A synthesis of contradictions, O’Hara both holds on to the residual memory of Warren and lets go of his hold. The struggle between holding on to Warren and giving up is especially heart-wrenching.

Returning to “Poem [lost lost],” we now see that this poem really becomes less esoteric, less ephemeral and less erotic. Before the end of the relationship, O’Hara uses a secret and campy language to both express and hide his love toward Vincent Warren at a time when people were, more often than not, homophobic. When the

love affair comes to an end, the language naturally becomes less esoteric. O'Hara stops using the language of the visual arts to show his intense feelings about Vincent Warren, let alone, praising his beloved. Moreover, O'Hara neither masquerades as Lord Byron nor plays on the name of St. Paul. O'Hara even stops dropping names. The only esoteric practice that still remains is the lack of gender identification in the addressee "you." The fact that O'Hara chooses not to use gender-signifying words can protect the poet from potential accusation against homosexuality. Thus, even though the relationship ends, O'Hara still does not identify the gender of his beloved.

As for the ephemeral element, it is replaced by the deep sense of loss. In the past, because the same-sex relationship between O'Hara and Warren was anathema in the 1950s and 1960s, homosexuals had to tolerate various forms of oppression. Due to this reason, O'Hara, aware of the ephemerality of the short-lived happiness, embraces every second of it. Every lunch, every cup of coffee and every chance to have a coke are celebrations of the present moment. Before the end of the romance, O'Hara jots down all the details around him, photographing the ephemeral moment of love, happiness and sex. Although O'Hara writes down almost all the details, the details in the Vincent Warren poems are not trifles but the evidence of his gay existence; indeed, the Vincent Warren poems epitomize a gay relationship in the 1950s and 1960s. When the love fades away, the poet loses his reason for celebration. The sense of time therefore changes as the relationship comes to an end. In "Poem [lost lost]," O'Hara does not capture the moment because the moment of the lovers is already lost. Instead of writing "I do this I do that" poems to stand against the flow of time, O'Hara writes a poem about loss. This poem is the opposite of *carpe diem* poems. Literally, *carpe diem* is to seize the day, but the day has already gone in this poem. Although O'Hara stops categorizing the everyday world around him, he still sees Vincent Warren everywhere. The poet is seizing what is already

lost, and contradictorily, he is also trying to let go of the faded love.

In “Poem [lost lost],” O’Hara still uses the paratactic style, an esoteric poetic camouflage that O’Hara frequently deploys. Literally, parataxis means putting things together without hierarchy and subordination. In “Poem V (F) W,” O’Hara beautifully puts it, “two parallel lines always meet / except mentally” (*Collected Poems* 347). The paratactic style in that poem corresponds to the ideal of the confluence of “two parallel lines.” Like two parallel lines, O’Hara and Warren meet and then become one. Here in “Poem [lost lost],” O’Hara also uses the structure of almost pure parataxis, which proves that O’Hara controls himself to move forward as if there is no turning back. The paratactic style in the last poem of the Vincent Warren sequence witnesses the separation of the parallel lines. Two parallel lines eventually separate just as O’Hara and Warren are no longer one but two independent and separate individuals. Moreover, we find no periods (rests) in “Poem [lost lost].” It seems to me that O’Hara does not wish the relationship to rest.

In terms of the erotic element, “Poem [lost lost]” does not contain any shred of homoerotic meanings. As I have argued, the body in the Vincent Warren poems is often used as a sexual diving board for O’Hara to transcend from the earth to an internal heaven, a space that the poet has trouble reaching. Now, because Warren does not stay with O’Hara any more, the sexual diving board is gone. There is no erotic imagery in “Poem [lost lost].” We do not see “the image of god” (*Collected Poems* 338). O’Hara does not praise “the perfect symmetry of your arms and legs” (*Collected Poems* 349), nor does he idealize the “golden-downed thigh” (*Collected Poems* 331). There are no “fluorescent orange tulips around the birches” (*Collected Poems* 360). The “sweaty ferns” are out of sight (*Collected Poems* 342). “Twin spheres full of fur and noise” do not appear in this poem, either (*Collected Poems* 405). No one is “coming” (*Collected Poems* 331), and consequently O’Hara’s

mouth cannot and will not be “full of suns” (*Collected Poems* 405). Sadly, “the immortal spark” eventually goes out between O’Hara and Warren (*Collected Poems* 405). O’Hara’s life thus turns dark again; hopefully, one day he can be “exposed to light” (*Collected Poems* 331).

O’Hara himself once said, “Life with its trials has a zest that a Utopia would never have” (qtd. in Gooch 83). Facing this tremendous trial of losing the love of his life, O’Hara must embark on a great journey of healing. He has to deal with the pain of losing his beloved, let go of his past love, and then move on. He must keep on going like the blood in the little blue vein, for there is no turning back.

Notes

¹ Perhaps after *A Very Special House* by Ruth Krauss, O'Hara's "Poem [lost lost]," supposedly written between 1962 and 1964, was first published in October 1967, one year after the demise of the poet, and then collected by Donald Allen in *Poems Retrieved* (1996) as a supplement to *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (1995). *Poems Retrieved*, published after most critics' studies, has further completed the oeuvre of the poet.

² We see the color blue in many of O'Hara's poems, whether they are the Vincent Warren poems or not. Blue appears in some Vincent Warren poems, such as "Joe's Jacket," "L'Amour Awaiting Passed Par Là," "To You," "Steps," etc. Blue also shows up in O'Hara's other poems, say, "In Memory of My Feelings" and "Meditations on an Emergency."