

Re-imagining the “Beautiful History”: Frank O'Hara and Larry Rivers

...[T]he reasons for loving a poem by Allen Ginsberg are the same reasons for loving a poem by John Ashbery, or by Kenneth Koch, or by Gregory Corso, just as the reasons for loving a painting by Franz Kline are the same for one by Michael Goldberg: they are all distinct, individual responses to distinct, individual meaningfulness—which varies so widely in scope, in drama, in contact, that the engaged person is reeling *at last* from contact with his own life, contact which the rest of society tries to teach him to back away from like a sick leopard who doesn't know which trainer has his best interests at heart.

Frank O'Hara

“Larry Rivers: *The Next to Last Confederate Soldier*”

They say your walls should look no different than your work, but that is only a feeble prediction of the future. We know the ego is the true maker of history, and if it isn't, it should be no concern of yours.... Youth wants to burn the museums. We are in them—now what? Better destroy the odors of the zoo. How can we paint the elephants and hippopotamuses? How are we to fill the large empty canvas at the end of the large empty loft? You do have a loft, don't you, man?

Larry Rivers and Frank O'Hara

“How to Proceed in the Arts”

In our contemporary setting, when present day prophets proclaim that print is dead and the image is about to predominate over the verbal, clarifying and even replacing the verbal, I would like to look at a postmodern example of the convergence of the verbal and the visual. I will focus on one of the poems by Frank O'Hara in which he verbally and explicitly deals with the visual arts. As a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, O'Hara dealt professionally with the visual arts and learned the linguistic codes, language, and aesthetics of the visual arts. His ekphrastic poetry, often written in a seemingly spontaneous and unrevised manner, uses the language and imagery of the plastic arts. My purpose here, however, is not to repeat the claims often made for ekphrastic writings. I do not attempt to address the jovial comradeship of these two “sister arts,” nor to explore the poem as a rhetorical attempt at mimesis, verbally reproducing the painting, nor to probe the antagonism or renegotiations that are present between the two texts.¹ O'Hara's goal was not to verbalize the silent painting, as ekphrastic texts are often claimed to do, but to call into question the historical perspectives and myths of truth. In poems such as “On Looking at *La Grande Jatte*, the Czar Wept Anew,” “About Courbet,” and “On seeing Larry Rivers' *Washington Crosses the Delaware* at the Museum of Modern Art,” O'Hara deconstructs the iconography and myths of history, only to reinvent and re-image them by juxtaposing them with constructions of his own identity. I will focus on the poem “On Seeing Larry Rivers' *Washington Crosses the Delaware* at the Museum of Modern Art” in which O'Hara participates in the visual distortions of the iconic figure George Washington that are present in Rivers' painting. My purpose is to see how both texts redefine inherited history in order to disrupt the current status quo—in other words, to see how they

confront our understanding of the present by questioning, to borrow the words of the poem, the “beautiful history.”

To do this, we must first situate both O’Hara and Rivers within their aesthetic and socio-political contexts. O’Hara and a loosely knit group of other poets including John Ashbery, James Schuyler, and Kenneth Koch are often referred to as the New York School of Poets, and, as a group, their writings were less influenced by poetry than the visual arts, first the work of the Abstract Expressionists and later the Pop Artists. As these poets gravitated to the vibrant urban environment of New York City in the late forties, they encountered a group of established abstract painters including Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollack, Franz Kline, and Robert Motherwell who were rebelling against the aesthetic standards established by their European and American predecessors. Besides nurturing an aesthetic rebellion, as Dore Ashton points out, these painters fostered the political implications of their work. They challenged the cultural and ideological values that were gaining predominance after World War II, during the tranquilized presidency of Eisenhower, and they also expressed their own sense of fear and hopelessness in the emerging cold-war culture (44-51). These poets and painters lived in New York in the early 1950s, during the red scare when Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Unamerican Activities Committee were witch-hunting for communists and attempting to purge art of politics. The writers and artists “interpreted the act of making art during troubled times as a political gesture, [and] their embracing of the values represented by Existentialism and Surrealism also signaled a defiant attitude toward American social mores” (Auslander 10). O’Hara’s ekphrastic poetry foregrounds the lyric as a confluence of aesthetic and political concerns, since—for O’Hara, like the abstract expressionists—the aesthetic is always political and the political is always intensely personal.

The Abstract Expressionists emphasized the surface of their paintings. Their non-referential or non-representational paintings refused to point to an external physical environment outside of the paintings themselves. Instead, their focus was on the surface of the paintings, where the qualities of the paint and the canvas resided and their own gestural strokes were recorded. The paintings, even as they refused to establish a one-to-one correspondence with external elements, foregrounded their own polyreferential surfaces. O’Hara and the New York Poets were similarly “self-conscious” in their poetry. They too focussed on the relationship between the surface of their writings and their own artistic involvement and processes during the writing of poems. The surface images reflect and express a concern for subjectivity, and the poems—like the abstract paintings—are capable of containing a variety of references simultaneously. O’Hara in notes to his poem “Second Avenue” states,

...the verbal elements [of the poem] are not too interesting to discuss although they are intended consciously to keep the surface of the poem high and dry, not wet, reflective and self-conscious. Perhaps the obscurity comes in here, in the relationship between the surface and the meaning, but I like it that way since the one is the other (you have to use words) and I hope the poem to *be* the subject, not just about it. (40)

In her study of O'Hara's poetry in relationship to painting, Marjorie Perloff has noted how O'Hara's use of shifting pronouns and enjambment in his poems contribute to their multiple references and even contradictory meanings (135). The polyreferentiality of O'Hara's ekphrastic poetry, including "On Seeing Larry Rivers' *Washington Crosses the Delaware* at the Museum of Modern Art," serves to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct versions of history while pointing to the presence of the speaking voice and—by implication—the readers.

Besides the Abstract Expressionists, O'Hara and the New York School poets were also influenced by emerging Pop Artists, such as Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, and Claes Oldenburg. The appeal of the Pop Artists was, at least in part, because their work was not abstract but representational. They often used images from popular culture for ironic and humorous purposes, thus suggesting the value of those images for cultural critique by insisting on their referentiality even as those everyday images were given non-referential characteristics by being lifted out of their original context and recontextualized. As Philip Auslander points out, O'Hara and the New York poets began writing during "a moment of transition: the moment when the sensibility of the New York School [of painters such as Pollack, de Kooning, Kline, and others] as a cultural conjuncture was shifting from the high seriousness and commitment to emotional expression through abstraction characteristic of Abstract Expressionism to the playfulness, ironic stance, and interest in mass culture and the language of representation characteristic of Pop Art" (32).² O'Hara's poems, especially his ekphrastic writings, are a confluence of the abstract and the figurative in which multiple and even contradictory perspectives and figurations are suggested. In the 1954 essay entitled "Nature and New Painting," O'Hara discusses the work of artists Jane Freilicher, Grace Hartigan, and Larry Rivers, among others, commenting on the need to understand and define "nature" and "painting" within their historical context.³ O'Hara believed that postmodern experiences were particularly internalized, giving them a new emotional intensity. This personalized experience, made inevitable by the pressures of urban life, broke down the barriers between abstraction and representation, between the artist and his or her art work: "In past times there was nature and there was human nature; because of the ferocity of modern life, man and nature have become one. A scientist can be an earthquake. A poet can be a plague" (42). Among the many comments about Hartigan's work in the essay, O'Hara points to the presence of the artist in her own work: "the artist is of necessity present as narrator, in much the same way that Franz Kline is present in his work as the medium of its violence" (44). As we shall see, the presence and identity of the artist and the audience are integral issues to O'Hara and his poetics in "On Seeing Larry Rivers' *Washington Crosses the Delaware* at the Museum of Modern Art," particularly as O'Hara perceived the identity of individuals to be under threat: he draws attention, for example, to the "tragic [painting by Hartigan called] *Masquerade* where the individual identities are being destroyed by costumes which imprison them" (45).⁴

Both Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art influenced Rivers, like O'Hara. Besides being friends with many of the same poets and painters that O'Hara knew, Rivers did portraits of both Freilicher and Hartigan and numerous portraits of O'Hara. O'Hara and Rivers, furthermore, collaborated on a series of twelve lithographs, called *Stones*, that were done

from 1957-58, shortly after O'Hara completed his poem about Rivers' painting *Washington Crosses the Delaware*. Rivers' epic painting (approximately 7 feet by 9 feet) completed in 1953, in the midst of the McCarthy era, is itself part pastiche and part recuperation of Emmanuel Leutze's famous painting of 1851, also called *Washington Crosses the Delaware*.⁵ Sam Hunter refers to the theatricality of Leutze's painting and its "classicizing, Napoleonic poses and beneficent beams of sunlight breaking through heavy clouds overhead, their forbidding nature echoed in the churning, icy river below" (16). Done in the tradition of the great history paintings, Rivers' painting was groundbreaking in the fifties because it presents Rivers' rejection of abstractions and pioneering insistence on returning to figuration.⁶ Rivers' painting, with its fracturing, distortions, blurring, and repetition of images, resists the one dimensional narrativity of the earlier painting and insists on fragmenting and redefining the historical moment that Leutze depicts, suggesting multiple perspectives on that inherited myth and even constructing new and multiple narratives whose meanings move well beyond Washington's military feat in the 1770's and into the present. As Rivers' himself says in an interview with O'Hara,

...I was energetic and egomaniacal and what is even more: important, cocky, and angry enough to want to do something no one in the New York art world could doubt was *disgusting, dead, and absurd*. So, what could be dopier than a painting dedicated to a national cliché—Washington Crossing the Delaware. The last painting that dealt with George and the rebels is hanging in the Met and was painted by a coarse German nineteenth century academician named Leutze who really loved Napoleon more than anyone and thought crossing a river on a late December afternoon was just another excuse for a general to assume a heroic, slightly tragic pose. He practically put you in the rowboat with George. What could have inspired him I'll never know. What *I* saw in the crossing was quite different. I saw the moment as nerve-racking and uncomfortable. I couldn't picture anyone getting into a chilly river around Christmas time with anything resembling hand-on-chest heroics. (O'Hara "Larry Rivers" 112)

Rivers, then, saw his painting as a confrontation with established aesthetic codes: it was a response to both Leutze and the epic painterly tradition, as well as a response to the contemporary aesthetic preference for abstract expressionist works. Rivers, though, was also aware of the painting as a comment on the current political situation. Hunter quotes Rivers as saying about the painting, "And I did it in the year Joe McCarthy was at his height. I even have some letters somewhere saying that Joe McCarthy would take me as a patriot. I mean, the absurdity of history is that I might be seen as a kind of loyal, patriotic person although I took drugs and engaged in homosexual activities. In other words, what I was saying is that America as you know it wasn't true" (18). Though we may disagree with his view of what constitutes America, Rivers saw his painting as an intervention in political and aesthetic debates and as an attempt to reformulate the view of America and the aesthetic process.

Rivers, however, went even further. According to his own concept of the painting, he was trying to revise and challenge views of nationality and personal identity:

I wanted to make a work of art that included some aspect of national life, and so I chose Washington Crossing the Delaware.... The only thing was that Washington

Crossing the Delaware was always the dopiest, funniest thing in American life. Year after year, as a kid in school, you see these amateurish plays are completely absurd but you know they represent patriotism—love of country, so here I am choosing something that everybody has this funny duality about. It was also a way for me to stick out my thumb at other people. I suddenly carved out a little corner for myself. It seems to be something in my nature—I seem to fall on things that have a double edge.... (59)

Rivers' painting can be formally analyzed with the double edge of his political and aesthetic goals in mind. The painting with its disparate and blurry groups of figures "floating" on the surface of the canvas with no clear relationship set up between the various groups creates a sense of movement and insubstantiality, as if the partially completed, sketched characters were more dreamlike than real. They seem to move in and out of the river, sometimes being distinct and at other times sinking beneath the surface of the murky water. The blurred faces lack a sense of individuality; the central figure of Washington, for example, has a head divided into two planes, the water-gray forehead and the sunset-orange, rusty face.⁷ His left leg is covered up to the knee with a boot while his right leg appears to be bootless. Similarly, his arms are not presented as icons of power: the outline of his right arm and hand are suggested by a few tentative strokes, while the left arm is unseen because of the bulk of his coat. Even more, the right hand seems to have the third finger extended in an obscene gesture, unbecoming of the "historical" Washington, and the general's genitals are both exposed and hidden as they are lightly sketched in beneath his white pants. Moreover, the angle of his boat suggests a movement downward, as if sinking. This painting as a political commentary, suggests a history based on restless, disjointed, and unstable social constructions that yearn for purpose but express none. Hunter states "Despite the emphasis placed on Rivers' visual sources for *Washington Crosses the Delaware*, however, its deeper significance lay with such formal matters as paint application, arrangement of figures on the fields and the blurring of various body parts and characters.... The overall effect is of strange, pulsating motion achieved by the interplay of forms and colors that keep the eye sweeping over the surface of the canvas, restlessly seeking a focal point and forever frustrated in that anticipated, irresistible effort" (18). It is that frustration and restlessness in response to the "historical cliché" that leads to the revision of history, "exposure" of Washington, and the gradual "sinking" of the "Washington" icon. Helen Harrison observes, "As Rivers depicts the crossing, the characters are isolated individuals fearfully making their way through a hostile, treacherous landscape. The commander in chief himself, in no way recalling a posturing figurehead in a Cecil B. DeMille vignette, stands alone in the boat, tense with anxiety" (35).

O'Hara's ekphrastic poem about the painting about the earlier painting moves beyond Rivers' "bringing together of historical—or established—painting and personal innovation" (Hunter 18) by depicting the interrelationship between the historical and the personal, by exploring how the subjective and the immediate define the historical, and how the past is continuously being socially constructed.⁸ The poem supports Michael Davidson's view that the meaning and understanding of history as it is expressed in poetry changed during the movement from the modern to the postmodern eras, from "a

concept of history as atemporal, cyclic and tradition-bound to a concept of history as reflective and personal” (71). O’Hara’s poem reads as follows:

Now that our hero has come back to us
in his white pants and we know his nose
trembling like a flag under fire,
we see the calm cold river is supporting
our forces, the beautiful history.

To be more revolutionary than a nun
is our desire, to be secular and intimate
as, when sighting a redcoat, you smile
and pull the trigger. Anxieties
and animosities, flaming and feeding

on theoretical considerations and
the jealous spiritualities of the abstract,
the robot? they’re smoke, billows above
the physical event. They have burned up.
See how free we are! as a nation of persons.

Dear father of our country, so alive
you must have lied incessantly to be
immediate, here are your bones crossed
on my breast like a rusty flintlock,
a pirate’s flag, bravely specific

and ever so light in the misty glare
of crossing by water in winter to a shore
other than that the bridge reaches for.
Don’t shoot until, the white of freedom glinting
on your gun barrel, you see the general fear.

O’Hara’s poem subverts even the common practices of ekphrastic writings: rather than embodying in words a static moment depicting a hero’s triumph, as ekphrastic poems have often done, O’Hara, like Rivers, challenges the narrative that Leutze memorializes, and O’Hara undermines the authority of the icon “Washington.” Rather than attempting to inspire and initiate action—and specifically patriotic action—among his reading audience as they respond to the achievements and success of this “Washington,” O’Hara points to the multiplicity of temporal planes which constitute and inform history and the ambiguously defined self in the present moment. Patriotism itself becomes a suspect social construction. O’Hara, following the lead of Rivers’ painting, calls into question the elements of glorification that often exist in classical painting and ekphrastic literature: O’Hara refuses to follow literary and artistic traditions for depicting and defining heroic behavior. Washington’s stature in American culture and history are countered in the

poem by a General Washington who remains unnamed in the body of the poem and poignantly lacks heroic qualities:

Now that our hero has come back to us
in his white pants and we know his nose
trembling like a flag under fire,
we see the calm cold river is supporting
our forces, the beautiful history.

Without attempting a comprehensive analysis of the poem at this time, we can focus instead on those features of the poem that are most pertinent to our discussion. O'Hara's returning anti-hero emerges not triumphantly but frightened and quaking in his clean white pants, unsullied by conflict. Humorously, only his nose is recognizable (rather than his genitalia, as in the painting). The assonance and alliteration in the first stanza—while functioning to bring together the terms “hero,” “know,” “nose,” and “cold”—are both humorous and revealing of the disjointed understanding and appearance of a hero. The poem puns, of course, in the final line of the stanza, suggesting not only that our military troops but also our mental efforts (“forces”) have created this “beautiful history” that is so different from the actual event, the un-beautiful history of war. The Washington that returns to us, in fact, is characterized not by honesty (as passed down through the story of Washington and the cherry tree) but by lies and fear: “Don't shoot until, the white of freedom glinting / on your gun barrel, you see the general fear.” O'Hara similarly reworks another cliché, also from the American Revolution (“Don't shoot until you see the whites of their eyes!”), and again relies on polyreferentiality. The term “general” can refer to General Washington, but it can also refer to the “general” population in which case O'Hara once more is pointing at us and our fear.

The second and third stanzas of the poem, appropriately enough, do not focus on Washington and his military maneuver. Instead, they examine “our forces” and fears, exploring the desires and ambitions of the first person plural speaker and the readers. The poem focuses on our need to revise and rewrite history, our need to be iconoclastic: “To be more revolutionary than a nun / is our desire.” O'Hara, though, points to the fact that this personal construction of history, though masking itself in spiritual terms (“a nun”) is quite “secular,” consisting—in part—of “the jealous spiritualities of the abstract,” and is based upon destruction, the tearing down of other views. O'Hara does this through an ambiguous use of pronouns: he states that our desires to be—or at least to present the illusion of being—revolutionary, secular, and intimate are based on action: “as, when sighting a redcoat, you smile / and pull the trigger.” Who is this “you”? Is it General Washington? Or is it one individual among the general population, one person among the “nation of persons”—the “we”? The very presence of both possibilities simultaneously creates the temporal confusion that is at the center of the poem. In the later view, “our forces” that shape history must also destroy, “pull the trigger.” Our forces that support the “beautiful history” are themselves supported by destruction that can at times be directed at self: “Don't shoot until, the white of freedom glinting / on your gun barrel, you see the general fear.” Even more, this destruction is based upon “Anxieties / and animosities, flaming and feeding // on theoretical considerations and /

the jealous spiritualities of the abstract.” These struggles and worries supported by insubstantial abstractions and theories dehumanize us (“the robot”), and as they burn themselves out, the speaker ironically asserts our illusions of freedom: “See how free we are!” On these burnt fields of destruction, we are free to use “our forces” to reconstruct and revision history and ourselves. The final couplet of the poem, however, with its ambiguous use of the word “general,” also suggests that freedom may direct the destruction onto us. The fragmentation of the sentences and the heavy enjambment between lines and stanzas serve to isolate phrases and clauses, making them initially seem independent, only to later reveal them as being related. This fragmentation and enjambment mirror the relationship of freedom and dependence between the individual and community, “a nation of persons,” even as they lead to a blurring of the icon. In the conclusion of another of his poems, “In Memory of my Feelings,” O’Hara points to a similar relationship between aesthetics, history, destruction, and multiple selves.⁹

And yet
 I have forgotten my loves, and chiefly that one, the cancerous
 statue which my body could no longer contain,
against my will
 against my love
 become art,
 I could not change it into history
 and so remember it,
and I have lost what is always and everywhere
 present, the scene of my selves, the occasion of these ruses,
 which I myself and singly must now kill
 and save the serpent in their midst.

O’Hara’s poem “On Seeing Larry Rivers’ . . .” distances us from the historical figure of George Washington, by referring to him by name only once, and then only in the title when referring to a painting seen in a museum. This distancing effect, similar to Shelley’s strategy in “Ozymandias,” separates us from the historical Washington by replacing his presence with a series of caricatured images of “our hero . . . come back to us / in his white pants . . . and his nose / trembling like a flag under fire . . .” When Washington is directly though namelessly addressed in the poem, in the fourth stanza, it is Washington as the mythologized emblem of honesty, bravery, and leadership—“Dear father of our country so alive / you must have lied incessantly to be / immediate.” O’Hara, in fact, even when directly addressing our “Dear father,” removes the historical Washington so far from the surface of the poem that what we are left with is not so much his absence, as Davidson asserts, but a series of images that point to the insurmountable barrier between the past and the present. The speaker can only subjectively create or re-image the figure of Washington. His very attempt to merge his twentieth century self with the eighteenth century leader—“our forces,” “our desire,” “our country”—foregrounds his awareness that the facts surrounding the historical figure are not “immediate” and are unrecoverable: “they’re smoke, billows above / the physical event. They have burned up.” Again, though, O’Hara’s choice of pronouns has multiple references. “They’re smoke” could also refer to our “Anxieties / and animosities” that

have re-imagined the “beautiful history.” Our own attempts at historicizing may have consumed themselves and “burned up.” The speaker, in the heat of this fire, confronts the necessity of rejecting the inherited images and re-imagining “Washington” in our present time, since Washington is “so alive / you must have lied incessantly to be / immediate.” This immediacy and necessity, then, foster an illusory act of personal freedom and assertion of self—“See how free we are! as a nation of persons”—and a recognition that the only way “our hero has come back to us” is by figuratively carrying his image to our own self, by the interaction of the patriotic mythologies with our own present lived experiences: “here are your bones crossed / on my breast like a rusty flintlock, / a pirate’s flag.” The speaker, though, is torn between destruction and recreation. The icon of Washington, described like the Jolly Roger with “your bones crossed” like “a pirate’s flag,” becomes a symbol of our need to steal and pillage from the past and a symbol of our “unlawful” appropriation of myths and images. Yet the potential for self-destruction is present “like a rusty flintlock” at his heart, a gun that becomes even more ominous in the final couplet when it is aimed at both “Washington” and ourselves. The historical George Washington becomes an icon that must be re-imagined over and over again as the speaker constructs and destroys himself. This conflation of the personal and the historic suggest that all interpretations are limited and not final. For the heroic icon to “come back to us,” we cannot simply repeat the inherited narratives. We must “be more revolutionary than a nun,” and we must keep “crossing by water in winter to a shore / other than that the bridge reaches for.”

O’Hara’s interest in this ekphrastic poem is not in the historical narratives as they have been mythologized but in the ways in which those mythologies interact with present lived experiences: “here are your bones crossed / on my breast like a rusty flintlock, / a pirate’s flag.” This poem, as well as many of O’Hara’s other ekphrastic poems, is notable for the ways in which the historical story of the originary painting is distorted, fragmented, and often abruptly discarded as it is juxtaposed piecemeal with and into the equally fragmented reconstructions of the speaker’s own present self. The beauty of history, for O’Hara, lies not in the old stories we tell and retell, but in the ways in which he can manipulate those stories to construct (and disrupt) his own subjectivity and identity. Through the medium of his ekphrastic poems, O’Hara rejects invented History, only to reinvent history and then destroy it again and again as he continues to re-image himself.

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¹ A justifiable case could be made that O’Hara misreads Rivers’ painting and that the poem and the painting are, indeed, in conflict. Also, a comprehensive ekphrastic study could include a third text, Kenneth Koch’s play *George Washington Crossing the Delaware*, also “based” on Rivers’ painting, and even a fourth text, Alex Katz’s mixed media artwork for the first production of Koch’s play.

² Auslander also points out the political implications of Pop Art by quoting Jean-Francois Lyotard: “There is more revolution, even if it is not much, in American Pop art than in the discourse of the Communist Party” (29-30).

³ Brad Gooch points out that O’Hara’s gravitation toward visual artists began in the late forties and early fifties, as seen in his relationship and writings about first Jane Freilicher and later Grace Hartigan (177-213). O’Hara seems to have taken Freilicher as both friend and muse, dedicating his *Meditations in an Emergency* to her and writing a number of poems about her and/or her artwork. Included in O’Hara’s *Collected Poems* and *Poems Retrieved* are such poems as “Interior (With Jane),” “A Sonnet for Jane Freilicher,” “Jane Awake,” “Jane at Twelve,” “A Terrestrial Cuckoo,” “Vernissage Jane Freilicher,” “Jane Bathing,” “Chez Jane,” “Poem about Jane,” “To Jane: And in Imitation of Coleridge,” and “To Jane, Some Air,” among many others. As Freilicher’s role as muse was fading, Grace Hartigan became O’Hara’s new muse, as she began a series of paintings based on the twelve poems by O’Hara called “Oranges.” Poems about her and her artwork also proliferated in O’Hara’s writing, including “Portrait of Grace,” “For Grace, After a Party,” “Christmas Card to Grace Hartigan,” and “Grace and George, An Eclogue,” among others.

⁴ In “Larry Rivers: *The Next to Last Confederate Soldier*,” O’Hara addresses his concern with identity by stating that Rivers “is an enigma, and he is fascinating. While he lends identity to his audience, he refuses to adopt that identity for the comfort of the audience” (96).

⁵ Rivers’ painting was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art but was partially destroyed by fire in 1958. Rivers subsequently did a second version of the painting that differs considerably from the first.

⁶ It may be interesting to note that River’s painting was itself an example of the confluence of the verbal and visual, since the painting is also based on a literary source, Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. Rivers stated, “It was like getting into the ring with Tolstoy” (Hunter 59).

⁷ Hunter notes that “Washington’s head is a free copy of the fiercely grimacing central equestrian figure in Rubens’ drawing after the lost Leonardo, *Battle of Anghiari*...” (24). Also, Rivers and Brightman’s *Drawings and Digressions* includes preliminary studies for the painting. One of those studies presents the figure of Washington with just a blank oval shape for a head (69).

⁸ It is interesting to note that Rivers and O’Hara’s continued to parallel and reflect each other up to O’Hara’s death. Rivers’ himself seems to mirror O’Hara’s concern with the influence of our present subjectivity on our understanding of the past. In the twelfth painting in the series *Dying and Dead Veteran*, completed in 1961, four years after O’Hara’s “Delaware” poem was published, Rivers presents “the duality of historical and present time in their depiction of the living and the dead veterans” (Hunter 29).

⁹ O’Hara dedicated this poem to Grace Hartigan.