

# 'Let's take a walk': Frank O'Hara the *Flâneur*

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'Quelles bizarreries ne trouve-t-on pas dans une grande ville, quand on sait se promener et regarder?' (Baudelaire, *Petits Poèmes*, 134)

Frank O'Hara's *Art Chronicles* open with a description of what it is like to walk through the Guggenheim Museum: the 'downward stroll', he notes, is enhanced by the museum's ramp, which 'almost completely eliminates the famous gallery-going fatigue. Your back doesn't ache, your feet don't hurt, and the light on the paintings, the variety of distance chosen for them to be against or away from the wall and towards you, is usually quite judicious' (2). Such a statement not only reveals O'Hara's awareness of the gallery experience – he worked as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from 1955-66 – but also his immense preoccupation with the act of walking itself. A large number of his poems document his explorations of New York City on foot, and David Herd has drawn attention to the ways in which 'the step [...] is integral to his thinking, that in thinking he steps, that in stepping he thinks; that the term, in its recurrence in the poetry, works as a metaphor but also as a trace of gesture' (71). Although there is a distinction between walking and stepping, as Herd points out, this essay will focus on O'Hara's experience, as O'Hara writes in 'F. (Missive & Walk) I. #53' of 'strolling along' (*Collected Poems*, 3) in New York City. Jim Elledge, Geoff Ward, and Rob Mengham have previously commented on O'Hara's engagement with city life, with Mengham observing that the poet's writing is 'saturated with the sights and sounds, the street names and references to personalities of the New York of the 1950s and 1960s' (49) in his essay 'French Frank'. In the same essay, he notes that in O'Hara's *Collected Poems*, 'it is striking how often New York references are supplanted by

French references, how often the space that these poems explore seem to be simultaneously French and American, how often meditations on New York City end up being displaced by reveries about Paris. Frank O'Hara in New York is drawn constantly towards the imaginative exploration of Paris' (ibid.). Despite this, few critics have commented on the parallels between O'Hara and the quintessential *flâneur*, or city stroller, Charles Baudelaire;<sup>i</sup> Mengham instead claims Pierre Reverdy as O'Hara's 'inevitable French poet' (57). I argue that Baudelaire's *flâneur* in fact provides a productive point of comparison for O'Hara's city walker.

In considering the role of the *flâneur* in O'Hara's poetry, and how he might have adopted elements of what Mengham describes as the earlier French 'poet-as-walker' (55), it is useful to turn to Walter Benjamin. As Martina Lauster notes, the critic developed his notion of the *flâneur* 'at the height of 1920s and 1930s modernism when the "surreal" potential of the previous century's industrial urban space was explored' (139). In his study of Baudelaire, Benjamin describes how the city stroller transforms urban space into a surrogate home:

The street becomes a dwelling for the *flâneur*; he is as much at home among the façades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls. To him the shiny, enameled signs of business are at least as good a wall ornament as an oil painting is to a bourgeois in his salon. The walls are the desk against which he presses his notebooks; newstands are his libraries and the terraces of cafés are the balconies from which he looks down on his household after his work is done. (37)

The passage highlights the transitory nature of such an existence: newstands may be the *flâneur*'s 'libraries', but their content will change daily; the walls might be his desk, but he may be hustled by passersby and forced to move on. While inside 'his four walls', a 'citizen' might have a family or friends for company; outside, the *flâneur* has a crowd to contend with.

The concept of the crowd is key to understanding the *flâneur* in Baudelaire's poetry. 'Il n'est pas donné à chacun de prendre un bain dans le multitude: jouir de la foule est un art' (48), declares the speaker of 'Les Foules', Baudelaire's poem from *Petits Poèmes en prose*, published posthumously in 1869. The idea of taking 'un bain' in the multitudes of a crowd suggests total immersion, a sense of becoming one with a medley of other people. In the same poem, Baudelaire notes that 'Le poète joue de cet incomparable privilège, qu'il peut à sa guise être lui-même et autrui. Comme ces âmes errantes qui cherchent un corps, il entre, quand il veut, dans le personnage de chacun. Pour lui seul, tout est vacant' (ibid.). Entering the crowd, then, allows the stroller to take on other identities, to disguise himself, to enter into other lives as if they are his own. This desire to meld with the crowd distinguishes Baudelaire's *flâneur* from earlier portrayals of city walkers. Richard D. E. Burton notes that whereas 'the pre-1850 *flâneur* strives to understand the visual Other in his or her otherness, the *hommes des foules*, as described by Baudelaire, seeks to lose all selfhood in a quasi-mystic (or quasi-orgasmic) fusion with "la foule" considered as an undifferentiated and anonymous mass' (5). Baudelaire himself speaks of the communion with the crowd as a 'singulière ivresse' (*Petits Poèmes*, 48), suggestive both of the pleasure and sense of disorientation that come with being swept up with a large number of people.

Also crucial to an understanding of the *flâneur* is the sense that he is always observing, or on watch, rather than a participatory member of the crowd. As Katherine Golsan notes in her essay on Baudelaire and Manet, the *flâneur* 'observes without being observed [...] The *flâneur* masks this activity by the casual and idle stroll, but sees and records all' (169). He is 'attuned to modern urban life, in a new sensation of seeing' (165). Aimée Boutin also comments that the nineteenth-century French *flâneur* 'hovers on the fringes', rather than interacting, preferring to observe the 'intoxicating abundance of crowds and goods' (200). Martina Lauser summarises Benjamin's thoughts on the *flâneur* and

seeing, noting that as ‘an observer and connoisseur of market fluctuations and as someone at the same time on a reconnaissance mission in the consumer’s realm, the *flâneur* possesses the perceptiveness to register all the signs of commodification’ (140). This perception can then be used to ‘empower the twentieth-century theorist of modernity, who also has an interest in overcoming alienation, to turn into a concrete, non-theoretical vision the utopian potential inherent in industrial capitalism’ (ibid.). Baudelaire’s own poems focus relentlessly on vision and the eyes. In ‘Les Veuves’, the speaker claims that ‘Un œil expérimenté ne s’y trompe jamais’ (*Petits Poèmes*, 50) and descriptions of sight, seeing, and eyes recur throughout the poem. The widow has ‘des yeux actifs’, and the poet ‘l’épiait longtemps’; he speaks of ‘l’œil du pauvre’, while the widow ‘regardait le monde lumineux avec un œil profond’; the poet claims ‘je n’ai pas souvenir d’avoir vu sa pareille’, declaring ‘singulière vision!’ (all italics mine). Later in the poem, the speaker’s references to vision are made yet more explicit. ‘Je ne puis jamais m’empêcher de jeter un regard, sinon universellement sympathique, au moins curieux, sur la foule’, the speaker attests. Other poems, such as ‘Le vieux Saltimbanque’ and ‘Les Yeux des pauvres’, further prioritise sight and observation over action.

Like Baudelaire’s *flâneur* in Benjamin’s reading, O’Hara’s city stroller is ‘as much at home among the façades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls’ (37). Poems such as ‘The Day Lady Died’ (325) chart his activities and experiences within his urban surroundings, as well as the ease with which he explores them:

It is 12:20 in New York a Friday  
 three days after Bastille day, yes  
 it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine  
 because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton  
 at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner  
 and I don’t know the people who will feed me

I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun  
 and have a hamburger and a malted and buy

an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets  
in Ghana are doing these days

I go onto the bank  
and Miss Stillwagon (first name Linda I once heard)  
doesn't even look up my balance for once in her life  
and in the GOLDEN GREEN I get a little Verlaine  
for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard (1-15)

The poem draws attention to the act of walking, and three of the poem's stanzas begin with descriptions of movement: 'I walk', 'I go', 'I just stroll'. The indentation of the second of these, 'I go onto the bank', lends the line an impulsive feel, as if O'Hara's writing is subject to the same on-route decisions of where to turn and what to do as when he is walking. A similar effect is given by O'Hara's indication of time – '12:20', '1959', '4:19', '7:15' – which serves to propel the poem forwards, contributing to what Geoff Ward calls the 'catch-me-if-you-can capacity to dazzle' (37) that characterises much of O'Hara's writing. That the events of the poem take place 'three days after Bastille day' is also suggestive of what Mengham terms the 'Paris–New York axis' (53) that runs through the poet's work.

To consider how O'Hara's city walker may have adopted or transformed other traits of Baudelaire's *flâneur*, it is worth looking at O'Hara's poetry in relation to one of Baudelaire's most notable city poems from *Tableaux Parisiens*. 'A une passante' was first published in the review *L'Artiste* in 1855 and later collected in the second edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* in 1857. The poem, which exhibits many of the characteristics of the *flâneur*, opens onto a busy metropolis scene, and is worth citing in full:

La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait.  
Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse,  
Une femme passa, d'une main fastueuse  
Soulevant, balançant le feston et l'ourlet ;

Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue.  
Moi, je buvais, crispé comme un extravagant,  
Dans son œil, ciel livide où germe l'ouragan,  
La douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue.

Un éclair... puis la nuit! – Fugitive beauté  
 Dont le regard m'a fait soudainement renaître,  
 Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l'éternité ?

Ailleurs, bien loin d'ici ! trop tard ! *jamais* peut-être !  
 Car j'ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais,  
 O toi que j'eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais ! (1-14)

The movement and noise of the surroundings are immediately foregrounded. The opening line is particularly important in communicating the overwhelming nature of the city: 'La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait'. While the terms 'assourdissante' and 'hurlait' contribute to a sense of auditory confusion, the assonance of 'assourdissante'/'autour' and 'rue'/'hurlait' enacts the encircling nature of 'autour de moi' itself; the 'moi' of the passage immobilised between the acoustically charged vowels of the line. Aimée Boutin argues for a reading of the nineteenth-century French *flâneur* as 'attuned to the city as a concert or as cacophony' (12): here the city, with the clamor of passersby and din of the road, speaks clearly of cacophony, or sensory overload. The sense of 'tohu-bohu' (*Petits Poèmes*, 31) is contrasted to the grace of the woman in the poem, who is 'Soulevant, balançant le feston et l'ourlet' in a manner suggestive of balance and harmony: the assonance here denotes her graceful, measured gait in contrast to the disorder of the street. Just as David Herd hears O'Hara's steps in the poet's writing, so Beryl Schlossman argues that 'le rythme de la démarche féminine émerge selon le rythme ralenti de l'alexandrin et des mots à rime qui lui donne une forme ponctuelle et singulière' (17). The speaker's reference to the woman's 'jambe de statue', with the connotations of stillness and permanence intimated by 'statue', also provides a marked contrast to the fleeting moment that the poem captures.

This moment, despite the tumult of the street, is primarily visual. As Schlossman notes, 'L'événement du poème a lieu dans un instant unique, dans un seul regard' (14). As in Baudelaire's *Petits Poèmes en Prose*, emphasis is on the eye and sight: the speaker is drawn to the woman's 'œil', which is pictured dramatically as a 'ciel livide où germe l'ouragan', and it

is the woman's 'regard' that is credited with the speaker's rebirth. Passionately, he cries 'Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l'éternité?'. Significantly, he chooses to observe the woman rather than attempt any kind of meeting, confirming J. A. Hiddleston's sense of Baudelaire's *flâneur* 'as the observer who does not participate. His contact with others is visual, not tactile' (27). Baudelaire's *flâneur*, then, privileges the moment of artistic creation over human interaction or romantic experience, and is characterised most notably by his desire to observe and record rather than act.

O'Hara's *flâneur*, while sharing many of the traits of Baudelaire's city stroller, displays a greater propensity towards action and interaction. A good example of this is available in his poem 'At the Old Place':

Joe is restless and so am I, so restless.  
 Button's buddy lips frame "L G T TH O P?"  
 across the bar, "Yes!" I cry, for dancing's  
 my soul's delight. (Feet! Feet!) "Come on!"

Through the streets we skip like swallows.  
 Howard malingers. (Come on, Howard.) Ashes  
 malingers. (Come on, J.A.) Dick malingers.  
 (Come on, Dick). Alvin darts ahead. (Wait up,  
 Alvin.) Jack, Earl and Someone don't come.

Down the dark stairs drifts the steaming cha-  
 cha-cha. Through the urine and smoke we charge  
 to the floor. Wrapped in Ashes' arms I glide.

(It's heaven!) Button lindys with me. (It's  
 heaven!) Joe's two-steps, too, are incredible,  
 and then a fast rhumba with Alvin, like skipping  
 on toothpicks. And the interminable intermissions,

we have them. Jack, Earl and Someone drift  
 guiltily in. "I knew they were gay  
 the minute I laid eyes on them!" screams John.  
 How ashamed they are of us! we hope. (1-20)

While the poem does not provide as full an account of the metropolis as such works as 'Personal Poem', it nonetheless captures the heady pace of the *flâneur*'s city life and provides

certain distinct contrasts to Baudelaire's poem. While the action of 'A Une Passante' takes place among an unknown crowd, where the terms 'assourdissante' and 'hurlait' suggest sensory overload and alienation, here there is no such anonymity: the unnamed woman of Baudelaire's poem is transformed into the named figures of the poem, Joe, Button, Howard, J. A., Dick, Alvin, Jack, Earl, and Someone. James E. B. Breslin suggests that the use of such names 'creates a *tone* of intimacy while pressing upon us the *reality* of O'Hara's difference and distance from us' (269), but I argue that these names in fact contribute to the sense of O'Hara's New York as a lived-in, lively environment in contrast to the more anonymous and alienating Paris of Baudelaire. The inclusion of 'Someone' among the list of friend's names is also suggestive of friendliness – O'Hara's *flâneur* is delighted by the idea of company, even when the person is unknown to him, or when their name is forgotten. The poet's use of 'namedropping', along with his other 'côterie practices', including 'backbiting, off-the-cuff criticisms and commendation', as Geoff Ward notes, 'gives us a more completely rounded evocation of an artist's milieu than any body of verse since Alexander Pope' (61). It also gives the sense of the poet as part of a group, connected to others in his wanderings through the city.

Indeed, 'At the Old Place' seems to revolve around ideas of plurality. 'Joe is restless and so am I', the speaker notes, emphasising their similarities; 'Wrapped up in Ashes' arms I glide'; 'we'; 'us'. These relationships, characterised by shared ideas and events, differ greatly to the distance evident between Baudelaire's *flâneur* and the crowd he observes. The heterosexual (and distant) admiration of the woman in 'A Une Passante' is transformed into an inclusive homosexual (and physical) contact: 'Joe's two-steps, too, are incredible, / and then a fast rhumba with Alvin'. Rather than emphasising the visual, the poem evokes a sensory engagement with the city, its establishments and its occupants. The poem is filled with noise, for example, but rather than the anonymous crowd, it is the speaker who cries out to his friends ('Come on, Howard'); the 'urine and smoke' smells of

the city are also cherished. The emphasis on motion and mobility also contrasts notably to the immobilised speaker of Baudelaire's poem: it is difficult to imagine O'Hara's 'crispé' (*Hommage*, 26) instead of in constant movement and action as he is depicted by his friends and poems.

The poem's focus on the act of walking and moving itself is therefore unsurprising. 'Joe is restless and so am I', the poem begins, and this restlessness is translated into the dynamic movement evident in the poem. Not only is the speaker fond of dancing ('dancing's / my soul's delight', he notes, with a play on sole/soul), but the movement of the group through the street is vigorously energetic: 'Through the street we skip like swallows'. While the verb 'skip' may be suggestive of childish enthusiasm, the comparison to swallows conveys an idea of flight and freedom that, with its connotations of height, also ties in with the speaker's repeated assertions that 'It's heaven!'. The line also suggests how at home the speaker feels in his urban environment, which he is able to navigate as easily and joyfully as a swallow would the sky.<sup>ii</sup> The poem is charged with further movement: not only does the group 'skip', but they also 'charge', while Alvin 'darts' and the speaker 'glide[s]'. Howard and Ashes, in a manner more typical of the French *flâneur*, both 'maligner', while Jack, Earl, and Someone 'drift'. The otherwise fast-paced movement of the poem is captured in the repeated cry "Come on!" which serves to drive the poem forwards as well as to rally the malingering members of the group: '(Come on, Howard)', '(Come on, J.A)', '(Come on, Dick)'. David Lehman notes that 'O'Hara's natural pace was faster than anyone else's', citing O'Hara's assertion that 'If I had my way I'd go on and on and on and never go to sleep' (176), and O'Hara's enthusiasm for speed is evident in the poem through the speaker's enjoyment of the 'fast rhumba with Alvin'. The act of walking – or dancing – is also translated into the poem's repetitions. '(Feet! Feet!)' in its doubleness recalls the pace and process of walking, while 'Joe's two-steps, too' also



that walking may have painful consequences, the term 'embrace' points towards a harmony between the city stroller and the street. The rhythms of walking themselves also seem to appear in the poem, so that the lines appear to 'step out' as if feet;<sup>iii</sup> as in 'At the Old Place' the double repetition of 'walking walking' reinforces the poem's subject matter, the lines themselves becoming the feet of the poet.<sup>1</sup>

While 'Walking' indicates the important place that the act holds in O'Hara's writing, 'A Step Away from Them' illustrates not only the *flâneur's* desire to explore New York, but also his awareness of 'all the signs of commodification' in the city.<sup>2</sup> Published in O'Hara's 1964 *Lunch Poems*, the poem begins with the suggestion that taking a walk is the natural way to punctuate the working day:

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<sup>1</sup> See Anthony Libby's comment about O'Hara 'walking his poem's streets'. Anthony Libby, 'O'Hara on the Silver Range', *To Be True to a City*, p. 131.

<sup>2</sup> Martina Lauser, 'Walter Benjamin's Myth of the "Flâneur"', p. 140.

It's my lunch hour, so I go  
 for a walk among the hum-colored  
 cabs. First, down the sidewalk  
 where laborers feed their dirty  
 glistening torsos sandwiches  
 and Coco-Cola, with yellow helmets  
 on. They protect them from falling  
 bricks, I guess. Then onto the  
 avenue where skirts are flipping  
 above heels and blow up over  
 grates. The sun is hot, but the  
 cabs stir up the air. I look  
 at bargains in wristwatches. There  
 are cats playing in sawdust. (1-14)

The placement of 'go' at the end of the first line lends the poem dynamism, as does the position of 'walk' in 'sidewalk' in the third line. Through the passage, the speaker meticulously conjures his progress on foot, almost as if he is giving a step-by-step tour of his city journey: 'First, down the sidewalk', 'Then onto the / avenue'. He seems wholly familiar and at ease with his environment, unperturbed by the city's busy traffic and seething pavements. In fact, it is the natural, rather than urban, element of his surroundings that poses a problem. 'The sun is hot', he states, noting that this problem is resolved by the 'cabs', which 'stir up the air'. The sentiment – that the urban environment can only improve upon the natural one – is echoed in 'Meditations in an Emergency', where the speaker notes that 'I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally *regret* life' (197).

These urban attractions are represented in the consumerist element of 'A Step Away from Them'. 'Everything is available in New York, everything is seemingly offering itself up for the poet to write about', (57) Mengham notes in his analysis of the poem, which depicts 'laborers' guzzling sandwiches and Coca-Cola, still wearing their 'yellow helmets'. The yellow colouring also seems somehow indicative of capitalism, conjuring the bright tones of advertising and fast food restaurants, and indeed later in the poem the speaker interrupts his

browsing of 'bargains in wristwatches' for a 'cheeseburger at JULIET'S / CORNER'. Women also appear to be available for visual consumption, their bodies exposed by their skirts 'flipping / above heels and blow[n] up over / grates', although it seems unlikely that O'Hara's *flâneur* takes a sexual interest in this. Writing about nineteenth-century Parisian *flâneurs*, Rebecca Solnit notes that the 'flâneur, visually consuming goods and women while resisting the speed of industrialization and the pressure to produce, is an ambiguous figure, both resistant to and seduced by the new commercial culture' (200). I would argue that O'Hara has moved Baudelaire's earlier French *flâneur* on: rather than resisting 'the speed of industrialization', he actively embraces it, desiring faster pace and greater urban activity.

Consumerism also raises its head in O'Hara's later poem 'A Warm Day for December', where the speaker walks along '57<sup>th</sup> Street / street of joy' (1-2):

and yet I toddle along  
 past the reverential windows of Tiffany  
 with its diamond clips on paper bags  
 street of dreams painterly (7-10)

Here the stroll of the *flâneur* has slowed to a 'toddle', although the speaker is still fulfilling the *flâneur*'s habit of observation. He is caught up in crowds, and unlike Baudelaire's rapturous 'Enfin ! Seul !' and plea 'âmes de ceux que j'ai chantés, fortifiez-moi, soutenez-moi, éloignez de moi le mensonge et les vapeurs corruptrices du monde' (*Petits Poèmes*, 43-44), he enjoys the experience:

I like the people passing noisily by  
 blasting off  
 "I love you"  
 "I love you too"  
 then I open the door the sounds rush over me the people  
 but I am in the air  
 yet I follow 57<sup>th</sup>  
 meeting Roy and Bill I drink Vermouth  
 we talk about the pleasantness distractions of New York  
 you're almost there

57<sup>th</sup> Street (18-28)

The speaker takes a genuine delight in the exchanges of the crowd. The bustle of the mass is evident in the sweeping and unpunctuated line 'then I open the door the sounds rush over me the people', where the words flood the reader in imitation of the speaker's experience. As David Lehman observes, 'O'Hara loved the city as much as he loved Hollywood movies, poems, novels, friends – passionately, unreservedly, and in a way that quickened the reader's interest in the persons, places, or things mentioned'. (174) Certainly, there is a sense in which 'you're almost there / 57<sup>th</sup> Street' seems to extend an invitation to the reader, and it is worth noting that while O'Hara is drawn to the anonymous crowd, with its overheard scraps of conversation, it is ultimately to his friends that he gravitates: 'meeting Roy and Bill I drink Vermouth'.

Indeed, while the French *flâneur* is typified by his aimless wandering, fuelled by a need to find what Benjamin describes as 'the unfailing remedy for the kind of boredom that easily arises under the baleful eyes of a satiated reactionary regime' (37), O'Hara's *flâneur* more often seems to be on his way somewhere. 'Beer for Breakfast' recounts the speaker's journey 'praying to be let / into the cinema and become an influence, carried through / streets on the shoulders of Messrs Chabrol and Truffaut' (14-16), and ends with 'I go off to meet Mario and Marc at the Flore' (23). Similarly, 'Personal Poem' begins with a walk that seems aimless, although it later transpires that the speaker is meeting a friend:

Now when I walk around at lunchtime  
 I have only two charms in my pocket  
 an old Roman coin Mike Kanemitsu gave me  
 and a bolt-head that broke off a packing case (1-4)

The poem is from O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*, as is suggested by the opening line, and like 'A Step Away from Them' it documents a medley of momentary impressions and thoughts: 'if / I ever get to be a construction worker / I'd like to have a silver hat please' (13-14). While the speaker

is absorbing the various sights and sounds of New York, however, this is not an end in itself.

He eventually makes his way to Moriarty's:

[...] where I wait for  
 LeRoi and hear who wants to be a mover and  
 shaker the last five years my batting average  
 is 0.16 that's that, and LeRoi comes in  
 and tells me Miles Davis was clubbed 12  
 times last night outside BIRDLAND by a cop  
 a lady asks us for a nickel for a terrible  
 disease but we don't give her one we  
 don't like terrible diseases (15-23)

His walking has an ultimately social end, and the poem is studded with references to people and places: Mike Kanemitsu, LeRoi, and Miles Davis; Moriarty's and BIRDLAND. David Lehman notes that 'At a rapid reading, the poem seems to be simply the notations of a city stroller' (189) but that it 'concludes with the expression of a fragile happiness or better yet the unextinguished possibility of happiness' (193); it is worth noting that this happiness is due to the speaker's wondering 'if one person out of the 8,000,000 is / thinking of me' (31-32). This happiness is therefore built not only on an intimate knowledge of the city, but also of the city's multiple and varied inhabitants.

This is not to suggest that O'Hara's *flâneur* does not ever enjoy walking for walking's sake, and multiple poems suggest the pleasure and inspiration that may result from a stroll around the city. Brad Gooch cites the anecdote in which O'Hara announced at a Wagner College poetry reading that he had written his poem on the Staten Island ferry on his way to the event, much to the annoyance of his fellow reader Robert Lowell (386), and his poems record and recount this process of composing whilst travelling. 'Petit Poème en Prose', with its French title suggestive of Baudelaire's collection by the same name, is a notable example not only of O'Hara's passion for the city - 'I was back in town! / what a relief!' (1-2) - but also of his manner of creating poetry on the move. In a further play on the French title, the poem

contains both French and English phrases, mixing languages in much the same way that the poem tumbles together various reflections from the speaker's walk:

cherishing these reflections as I walked along, I came to a garbage dump  
the poured concrete dome of which  
was covered with children's inscriptions  
the most interesting of which  
was "I ate you up"  
it was not a very interesting dump  
so I pursued my "course" of thought (13-19)

The "course" of thought', knowingly placed in quotation marks, suggests both a train of thought and the actual physical course that the speaker is treading, blending the ideas of thought and travel. The poem's urban landscape is also distinctly Baudelairian, suggesting that, like T. S. Eliot, O'Hara may also have found new possibilities in Baudelaire's industrial imagery, which to Eliot suggested that 'the source of new poetry might be found in what had been regarded hitherto as the impossible, the sterile, the intractably unpoetic' (126). The speaker's joy in his surroundings is made clear by his enthusiastic travel through it. He notes 'simply to walk, walk on, did not seem nearly enough [...] so I began to hum the Beer Barrel Polka / hopping and skipping along' (427). The motion of 'walking on' is reflected in the longer line, and combined with the repetition of 'walk' suggests the distance covered by the speaker. The poem finishes by addressing the reader:

I popped into the nearest movie-house and saw two marvelous Westerns  
but, alas! this is all I remember of the magnificent poem I made on my walk  
why are you reading this poem anyway? (24-26)

The passage intimates the close relationship between composition and mobility, suggesting that O'Hara's *flâneur* associates the city with creative, as well as amicable and amorous, possibility. His address to the reader further marks him out from Baudelaire's city stroller, offering a playful point of contact to an outsider.

Frank O'Hara's engagement with New York City is fuelled primarily by his walking through it. Where Baudelaire's Baudelaire's *flâneur* exists as a detached spectator, O'Hara's is actively involved in city life; similarly, he greets Baudelaire's cry of 'Horrible vie ! Horrible ville !' (*Une Heure*, 43) with his own adoration of the New York city scene. O'Hara's *flâneur* is thus an active one, who not only records the events of the city but energetically participates in them. As Russell Ferguson notes, 'For O'Hara poetry had no meaning except in the context of a life fully lived, just as living fully for him meant always to be engaged with poetry and with art' (16). Both O'Hara's full life and his poetry were fed by his strolls around New York: it is ultimately, he writes in 'F. (Missive & Walk) I. #53' this 'feeling of being at leisure in the open / air lazy and good-tempered' (27-28) that was so essential to his creative output.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> David Herd makes a brief reference to the history of thinking of poets as 'walkers' in 'Stepping Out with Frank O'Hara', *Frank O'Hara Now*, p. 84.

<sup>ii</sup> See also Baudelaire's comment on the *flâneur*'s sense of ease in his populated urban environment: 'The crowd is his domain, just as the air is the bird's, and the water that of the fish'. In 'The Painter of Modern Life', *Selected Writings on Art and Artists* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1972), p. 399.

<sup>iii</sup> For more on Frank O'Hara's metrical feet, see David Herd, 'Stepping Out with Frank O'Hara', in *Frank O'Hara Now*, pp. 70 – 85.

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