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The poet-paradox: A model of the psychological moment of composition in lyric poetry

Abstract
This paper attempts to develop a psychological model of the act of composition for a lyric poet. From reviewing a range of descriptions of the experience of poetic composition and creative states of mind, we address a major paradox for this kind of creative expression: on the one hand the lyric voice is a personal one, while on the other such writing seems to demand a turning-away from the personal ego. This paper takes its impulse in part from TS Eliot's dictum that the best poetry must be impersonal, and extends this to the question of how such a position for the poet might be described psychologically. We suggest that a mental state somewhere between intention and the unconscious, a state of 'unintention', can be cultivated and in fact has been cultivated by lyric poets. We explore some aspects of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to further detail both the paradox at the core of lyric poetry and the possible mental positioning of the poet. We take a poem by Frank O'Hara to show how the balancing-act of this state of mind is expressed in this lyric poem, especially in its opening stanza.
Keywords: creativity, lyric, psychology

In the following discussion of the act of poetic composition, taking a poem by Frank O'Hara as a case study, we intend to delineate the importance of a mental stance that might be called 'unintention', which results from a preparedness to react to the lyric impulse, a preparedness that is established in the first instance by a generalised intention (including elements such as upbringing, work, education, life experience and experience in poetic practice). The term intention encompasses a broad educated and vocational preparedness or availability towards the impulse to write, along with the more immediate meaning of purpose and awareness brought to a task. The philosopher of consciousness and language, John Searle, describes intentionality as 'states that have the mind-to-world direction of fit' (Searle 2004: 120). By 'unintention', we mean to indicate a shift into a paradoxical kind of intention, one that is outside awareness, but still available to be exploited by the poet. 'Un(conscious)intention' might be the more extended version of this term. Like André Breton and the Surrealists (and before them, Freud), we find it necessary to adopt a term by which we mean to indicate not conscious thought nor unconscious thought which occurs 'in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern' (Breton 1924) but a state of mind somewhere outside, beyond, above or slightly below both consciousness and unconsciousness, participating in impulses from both directions.

In his description of the unconscious, Breton had taken his lead from Freud, who had also described in some detail certain states of mind peculiarly amenable to new associations and fresh insights. In his *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), at a point where he outlined the method of free association, Freud quoted an observation made by Schiller in a 1788 letter:

> Reason makes too close an examination of the ideas as they come pouring in … a thought may seem trivial or very fantastic; but it may be made important by another thought that comes after it … where there is a creative mind, Reason – so it seems to me – relaxes its watch upon the gates, and the ideas rush in pell-mell, and only then does it look them through and examine them in a mass. – You critics, or whatever else you may call yourselves, are ashamed and frightened of the momentary and transient extravagances which are to be found in all truly creative minds. (Freud 1991: 177)

Freud assured his readers that with a little practice almost anyone could train themselves to retain this state of mind (amenable to free association) for increasing lengths of time. For Freud, this mental stance was the means towards analysis, not a purpose in itself. Importantly, for this discussion, Freud considered it as a method of self-observation, whereby the ego is removed from the mental life, and ideas arise 'of their own free will' as 'involuntary ideas' (176). It is this well known, much discussed, and sometimes fruitfully creative state of mind distinct from waking consciousness and preconsciousness, that we wish to tease out in this article in such a way that its characteristic qualities, especially in regards to the presence of the self, might become more clear. This state of mind itself becomes the point and purpose of its own experience.

There is little doubt that much thinking, problem solving and insight arrive in our conscious minds as a result of unconscious processes. Freud devoted many pages of his *Interpretation of Dreams* to demonstrating this, and since then many psychologists, philosophers and neuroscientists have continued to resort to notions of the unconscious as a source of conscious thoughts because 'we have found no other way to explain some forms of [our] behaviour' (Searle 2004: 174). Most recently Iain McGilchrist's magisterial study of the brain, *The Master and His Emissary* (2009), arrives at the following conclusion after nearly two hundred pages of close argument and detailed reviews of consciousness research in neuroscience: 'Why should *we* not be our unconscious, as well as our conscious, selves? … we have to widen our concept of who *we* are to include our unconscious selves' (McGilchrist 2009: 188). Many accounts of the process of creative thinking in the arts and the sciences point to what Velmans and others call an *incubation period*, 'characterized by the *absence* of conscious effort' prior to a leap of imagination (Velmans 1991: 664; see also Bowers 1984; Thomson 1966; Platt & Baker 1969; Gray 2004). This leap of imagination manifests as unselfconscious and apparently spontaneous insight or connection.

The peculiar focus of a state of unintention occurs, we suggest, along with the usual self-awareness of normal intention, for it occurs from within a stance of availability to unconscious prompts that can bring thoughts into being. In the case of the poet, what arises will be crucially coloured by each poet's own life history and equally by the strange, uncanny and lyrically creative opportunities language itself throws up – for the poet is placed precisely between experience and language. Borrowing Wittgenstein's phrase (his observations of philosophy can often seem equally applicable to poetry) the poet uncovers 'bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language' (Wittgenstein 2001: 41; #119). The limits of language are no more than the

bringing to awareness of the deep strangeness of language otherwise passed over as ordinary – the poet's work being 'a distrust of grammar' (Wittgenstein 1961: 106).

Key to this aspect of lyric composition is what we call the *poet-paradox*: the notion that the self can be most vividly represented (and heard) only when the poet is both present and not present – through that peculiar focus of a mental state where the poet is least self-conscious while also most deeply themselves. This notion of the necessity for the poet not to be conscious of their 'personality' accords with TS Eliot's exhortation, 'It [Poetry] is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality' (Eliot 1965: 21). If we claim that our aim here is to explore aspects of the psychology of this paradoxical mental state, it would imply that it is possible to develop a psychology of states of mind outside the personal self – or that our normal understanding of 'self' is too narrow. This notion that the personal self is only one aspect of a broader less consciously accessible self has been at the base of most psychological inquiry since Freud's (and Jung's) interventions, and has increased in intensity with neuroscience's interest in consciousness in the past twenty years, as noted above (see Gray, McGilchrist, and others).

The choice of lyric poetry is made because it is presumed that the lyric poet is most likely to be writing from personal impulse, at least in the initial act, and because we take the position that most contemporary poetry continues to be lyric. Australian critic, academic and poet, David McCooey, has offered a description of the dominant modern poetic mode: 'Lyricism is what we associate most commonly with poetry: musicality; brevity; intensity; the drive to epiphany or insight; and an emphasis on thought, feeling and subjectivity' (McCooey 2005: 69). His description puts aside Australian poetry inflected by the language movement (Michael Farrell, Peter Minter, possibly Claire Gaskin and Gig Ryan), ecologically driven poetry (John Kinsella, Mark O'Connor, Coral Hull) and the more socio-political public poetry of Pi O, Lisa Bellear and Tony Birch among other approaches to poetry, but nevertheless his depiction stands as a sketch of a commonly dominant form poetry takes as evidenced in national anthologies, and the common assumptions we encounter about poetry. In general it is an emotional state that the lyric poet is attempting to record for readers. *Emotion* is usually regarded as strong, instinctive or intuitive; and feeling is itself a late fourteenth century metaphoric extension of *feel*, which comes from Old Norse *fãlma* or Old English *fêlan*, meaning to grope or explore by touch. An emotion then might be regarded as a psychic reaching-out for (the feel of) the world. Thoughts or ideas ('epiphany or insight') might also be conceived as emotions of the mind, and be included in these emotional states. Indeed, Nietzsche made this connection when he noted in *The Gay Science* (1882) that 'thoughts are the shadows of our feelings – always darker, emptier, simpler' (Nietzsche 1974: 203).

It seems a natural progression to ask from this, why do people mentally reach-out for the *feel* of the world, creating for themselves pervading and sometimes baffling emotional states, and why do poets have the compulsion to express this impulse in the ways they do? There are of course many answers to these questions, among them philosophical, scientific, mathematical, evolutionary and psychological answers. Lyric poets, we suggest, are not only reaching-out for the feel of the world, but trying to convincingly *enact* this reaching-out from within the confines of language. Our contention is that poetry – language tested at the boundaries of what it usually expresses – would be less powerful, less convincing, when a poet is too present, that is, too aware of themselves, or writing as themselves and not through themselves. Each lyric poet must learn, one way or another, to access and prolong a hyperconscious state where poetry's creative resonance and expressive suggestiveness can operate.

This is not a new idea or a new observation, and Eliot is not the only writer to allude to what we are calling the poet-paradox, as is clear from the above introduction. Donald Barthelme is another who identifies what he calls a prolonged state of 'not-knowing' (Barthelme 1997) as the basis for uncovering the trick of going ahead with a piece of creative writing without consciously knowing where it will go. Rimbaud held that the poet need not understand what they are truly writing about, in a letter to Paul Demeny in May, 1871: 'a song is so seldom a work, that is to say, a thought sung and understood by the singer. For *I* is someone else. If the brass wakes up a trumpet, it is not its fault' (Barthelme 1997: 305). In *Opium – The Diary of a Cure*, Jean Cocteau declared, 'Once a poet wakes up, he is stupid, I mean intelligent. "Where am I?" he asks. Notes written by a poet who is awake are not worth much...' (Cocteau 1980: 90). Cocteau is acutely aware of the requirement of the poet to be stupidly intelligent, in the sense that the poet must both hold to and relinquish all prior knowledge. We wish to explore a little further the nature of this paradoxical starting-point for lyric poetry, and suggest that perhaps it can be manipulated and prolonged by the writer who wishes to identify, isolate and exploit this mental state.

Hyperconscious praxis: passive acts

The varying degrees to which a state of unintention exists among poets (as well as between poems) cannot be defined or determined in exact terms. Its presence and effects will depend upon, among other things, subject matter, personality, mood, circumstances and environment at the time of composition. What is argued here is that this peculiar state of psychic focus exists to some degree, usually a great degree, at the moment of lyric composition, and a poet is more likely to express deeper, keener feelings and thoughts – and more likely to work creatively with language – when both least and most self-conscious, that is, when to some extent *absent* in their presence. This is not the same as practicing a skill until it comes automatically, and it is not simply passively recording what arises to the mind as the Suurealists did with their 'automatic' writing. We suggest it is a territory or stance of the mind, somewhere between active and passive, personal and objective, waking and sleep, reason and fantasy – experienced fleetingly by many people, but one that the lyric poet attempts (or is compelled) to prolong.

The term unconscious similarlycannot be clearly defined, but remains a concept with a strong modern tradition in psychoanalysis (including Lacan's theorization of the unconscious being structured like a language, even if it is to the conscious self a foreign language), in critical theories such as feminism and post-colonialism, not to mention the critical method of deconstruction founded upon the conviction that every text exposes its own unconscious contradictions through *aporia*, and among those who are part of CK Williams' contemporary 'universe of quanta' in discussions of the psychology of composition. The notion of unintention is made possible by acceptance of an unconscious.

A poet's psyche shifts between states of consciousness, self-consciousness and un-self-consciousness in the moments of composition. These shifts in mental state are perhaps common among all people. The difference between poet and non-poet might be that while the latter may experience these moments of non-being, of '*I* is someone else', they do not dwell upon them or have a desire to express them at length in poetry. The American literary scholar, Bo Earle, opens his 2006 study of modernity in poetry with an epitaph from Hegel: 'Tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts [the negative] into being' (Hegel quoted in Earle 2003: 19). This enigmatic statement,

especially in the context of lyric poetry, foregrounds a negative or passive (in Keats' terms, 'submissive'), receptive quality for that mental state that the poet deliberately tarries within. It is, as we will argue below, a receptivity that can be prolonged even when among others, in traffic, or climbing a mountain. Bo Earle describes this state as a self-dispersal, which is simultaneously a self-retrieval (Earle 2003: 1022). Australian author and journalist, Martin Flanagan has articulated this paradoxical state as a description of the writer's praxis:

> The creative path is dark, groping, essentially mysterious. If you are listening to any voice other than your own, you're lost, or, what is more likely, are yet to cross the threshold that marks the beginning: the loss of self-consciousness and, in its place, the detached exploration of self. (Flanagan 1995: 7)

Flanagan writes of an intentional acceptance of 'listening', 'loss', of darkness and detachment, overlaying the act of writing with a paradoxical passivity. This active attention to a passive mental state is important to accomplishing lyric writing.

The extraordinary praxis of Frank O'Hara

This state may be achievable by varying means: meditation, or sitting in quiet reflection, walking (Wordsworth, Basho), listening to music, climbing hills (Coleridge), taking drugs or alcohol (too many examples of this), dreams (Coleridge, Stevenson, Breton, Walwicz), or else it might come through some startling and inexplicable impulse.

It might be instructive to look at an individual case, especially one that may suggest the extreme or the extraordinary, so that we might perceive the range and degree of its presence more concretely.

The known and apparent praxis of Frank O'Hara (1926-1966) seems at first to suggest an exception to the rule of the waking trance or poetic state, as he is known to have often composed while talking to friends or walking the New York streets. We have chosen O'Hara to examine because of this extraordinary approach to composition, so that we might see that even here, and perhaps especially here, there may be a hyperconscious state identifiable. We take O'Hara to be a modern lyricist. His many shorter and even longer poems are suffused with musicality, intensity, a drive to epiphany and an emphasis on thought, feeling and subjectivity.

As his close friend and fellow-poet Kenneth Koch recalls, O'Hara had the ability 'to write a poem when other people were talking, or to even get up in the middle of a conversation, get his typewriter, and write a poem, sometimes participating in the conversation while doing so' (Koch 1996: 20). Alluding to one of the titles of an O'Hara book, Koch suggests: 'He was always thinking, meditating "in an emergency"' (26). In a similar account, his poems arise from the jumble of social occasions:

> Able to write while friends were present, he would put a Rachmaninoff piano concerto on the record player, amble over to the typewriter, and bang out a poem. He liked the whole idea of occasional poetry, the idea that poems could be occasioned by circumstance. Anything could qualify as an event. (Lehman 1998: 169).

He was intent upon his casual approach to writing, which rejected earlier Romantic and post-Romantic models of the poet. In his mock manifesto, 'Personism', written 'in about half an hour' (Lehman 1998: 185) O'Hara declared: *You just go on your nerve*. And in an interview with Edward Lucie-Smith, he said, 'the avant-garde … are *bored* by other people's ideas … tired of looking at something that looks like something else' (Lehman 1998: 379). O'Hara wanted, perhaps needed to write in a way that was not like anyone else, producing poems immersed in and emerging from particular contexts. His work was different in many ways from his close allies in the New York School of Poetry. O'Hara, Ashbery and Koch admired Rimbaud, Apollinaire and Mayakovsky because they too broke with what preceded them, they too were *original*, they too were bored with other people's ideas. O'Hara's insistent immersion in the blur of a present social moment might at first seem antithetical to the 'detachment', the 'loss', the 'tarrying' in the negative.

What can we make of his praxis then for the role of unintention? Can we say that O'Hara was so relaxed in company, his attitude to his poetry so relaxed, his intentional preparedness so broadly established, that he was able to write no matter what the circumstances? For O'Hara, perhaps sitting around in cafes or friends' lounge rooms, talking and joking, eating and drinking, was the same for him as Wordsworth's solitary wandering, Bukowski's drunken solitude in boarding-house rooms or Rimbaud's soul 'made monstrous' (Rimbaud 1966: 307). Creativity is of course not necessarily indicated by glassy-eyed solitude or trance-like states. Perhaps it is possible that O'Hara, after years of composing on the run, had such self-knowledge that his access to his creative state switched on at the least likely times; that his intention was so powerfully established that the unintentional arose without inhibition, when: 'In the process of imagining, all the self-regarding data of ordinary life seem to vanish' (Bromwich 1993: 825). It is apparent that O'Hara was a regular drinker, if not an alcoholic, and perhaps alcohol also enabled him to move easily into a state of unintention. We hope to show, regardless of the motivation or chemistry of his mental states, that something like the lyric process of unintention is revealed in the lines of his poem, 'Sleeping on the Wing'.

In his review of O'Hara's *Selected Poems*, Koch remarks on the immediacy of O'Hara's compositions and how this might itself be a means to express the unconscious:

> In catching a feeling in the process of coming into being, or as it first explodes into a thousand refractions, one can hope to reveal some of the truth that lies hidden in our unconscious, in all the things we have known or felt but can't be aware of simultaneously. (Koch 1996: 25)

The choice of the verb 'catching' suggests alertness and preparedness, as well as passivity and receptiveness.

It may be that O'Hara in fact needed to be among people in order to become unselfconscious; it was possibly the only way he knew to achieve this state; conversation and noise perhaps offered protection to and promotion of his focal state. The fact that O'Hara worked in such a spontaneous manner, no matter where he was, allows us to 'see' his method, including evidence of his mental stance as he composes. As already suggested, unintention may be that peculiar psychic state where life can be experienced and reflected upon at the same time because the individual is between experience and reflection, where, as O'Hara put it, 'space is disappearing and your singularity' (O'Hara 1995: 102).

'Sleeping on the Wing' is one example of his spontaneous composition. This poem came about as a result of a challenge to O'Hara's supposed ability to write at will. His biographer Gooch quotes James Schuyler:

> 'One Saturday noon I was having coffee with Frank and Joe Le Sueur, and Joe and I began to twit him about his ability to write a poem any time, any place,' wrote Schuyler… 'Frank gave us a look – both hot and cold – got up, went into his bedroom and wrote "Sleeping on the Wing", a beauty, in a matter of minutes'. (Gooch 1993: 273)

The sceptic recognises the possibility that the poem was already in the bedroom, written over a period of days or weeks prior to the challenge, but at the same time, given O'Hara's praxis, his finely tuned 'intentional preparedness' we can just as easily believe he did write the poem there and then. The poem in fact seems to directly address the act of creation. 'Sleeping on the Wing' was composed in December 1955, when O'Hara was 29.

Sleeping on the Wing

Perhaps it is to avoid some great sadness
as in Restoration tragedy the hero cries
"Sleep!
O for a long sound sleep and so forget it!"
that one flies, soaring above the shoreless city,
veering upward from the pavement as a
pigeon
does when a car honks or a door slams, the
door
of dream, life perpetuated in parti-colored
loves
and beautiful lies all in different languages.

Fear drops away too, like the cement, and you
are over the Atlantic. Where is Spain? Where
is
who? The Civil War was fought to free the
slaves,
was it? A sudden down-draught reminds you
of gravity
and your position in respect to human love.
But
here is where the gods are, speculating,
bemused.
Once you are helpless, you are free, can you
believe
that? Never to waken to the sad struggle of a
face?
To travel always over some impersonal
vastness,
to be out of, forever, neither in nor for!

The eyes roll asleep as if turned by the wind
and the lids flutter open slightly like a wing.
The world is an iceberg, so much is invisible!

and was and is, and yet the form, it may be
sleeping
too. Those features etched in the ice of
someone
loved who died, you are a sculptor dreaming
of space
and speed, your hand alone could have done
this.
Curiosity, the passionate hand of desire. Dead,
or sleeping? Is there speed enough? And,
swooping,
you relinquish all that you have made your
own,
the kingdom of your self sailing, for you must
awake
and breathe your warmth in this beloved
image
whether it's dead or merely disappearing,
as space is disappearing and your singularity.
(O'Hara 1995: 102-3)

Even the title suggests the paradoxical nature of a state of unintention, that is of being both asleep and awake (flying/observing and flying/dreaming) at the same time. The term 'on the wing' is readily interpreted as writing, along the lines of O'Hara's 'just go on your nerve'. The poem can also be read as a treatise on 'soaring above the shoreless city,/ veering upward from the pavement'. The distancing of the self from a sordid world and its people, and hence from self-consciousness, works as a self-instruction for O'Hara to set for himself the mood state in which a poem can be written on demand, taking flight 'as a pigeon/does when a car honks or a door slams'. The enjambment that has *does* at the beginning of a line, suggests that O'Hara the poet actively flies as (or with) this pigeon startled into flight by loud and sudden quotidian noises, noises that O'Hara might have heard through his window, noises coming up from the street at the moment of writing in that bedroom.

The poet, like the pigeon, is set to fly by this ordinary noise, a slam of the 'door/of dream', a Janus phrase that hovers between daily events and the unconscious to suggest an existence somewhere between sleep and waking; never crossing over entirely into the surreal, for even here in this strange phrase there is the possibility of a wry comment on the passing of the American Dream (Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, a play drenched in dreams and ideas of America's failed dream had been lauded as a hit in 1949 and returned as a Hollywood film in 1951). O'Hara writes 'dream', not 'the dream' or 'a dream': dream as a state of mind.

The poet 'flies' not just as a dream-flyer might fly exultantly, but, with the rhyme on 'lies' there is the suggestion of awareness of a world in conflict over the truth. This image of flying was one he resorted to more than once in warming to a poetic mode. Two years later, in 1957, O'Hara wrote, in the poem 'In Memory of My Feelings', 'I rise into the cool skies/and gaze on at the imponderable world' (O'Hara 1993: 242) perhaps returning to a notion of the poem as flight from the 'imponderable' world of 'lies'. In the more abstract language of 'Sleeping on the Wing' O'Hara writes that with this flight 'fear drops away too'. Fear of what? Fear, like dream, stands as a mental state, a place to enter, rise above, or hover over. Fear drops away 'like the cement, and you'. Though syntactically the sentence moves on, rhythmically and sonically

the line offers the internal rhyme with 'too' and a tripartite structure that reaches its climax with the suggestion that 'you' *drop away* 'too': your sense of self, self-consciousness, perhaps the fear engendered by self-consciousness. Again, it would seem the poem is a self-instructing device for the poet reminding himself of what must be discarded and adjusted as a poetic state of mind makes a poem possible. Recalling the beautiful lies, there are a series of questions addressed to the world below and its nationalist histories, the Spanish Civil War (1936-9) and the American Civil War (1861-5). The inference here might be the pointlessness of these important events, or the distance (perspective) that flight provides over them. Turning to the inevitable and worldly force of gravity and the 'position' we take on what matters – the actual world is not quite and never can be wholly dismissed. O'Hara wrote, 'I'm not saying that I don't have practically the most lofty ideas of anyone writing today, but what difference does that make? They're just ideas. The only good thing about it is that when I get lofty enough I've stopped thinking and that's when the refreshment arrives' (Lehman 1998: 185). As he says in the poem, further on: 'to be out of, forever, neither in nor for'. Thinking and not-thinking are the means to achieve poetry. Even in the liberation, the refreshment, of flight there is that cycling back towards thinking: 'A sudden down-draught reminds you of gravity'. That the gods are both 'speculating' and 'bemused' points to the presence of these two modes at once, or an oscillation between them, or a state of mind that can hold both at arms' length: the hyperconscious mode of unintention.

It is at this point, perhaps, once the poet has instructed or reminded himself of the process that produces lyric poetry, that O'Hara's characteristic poetic voice and method gain traction in the poem. Linking gravity and love, the gods with bemusement, helplessness with freedom, the beautiful association of eyelids and wings, the abstract term, form, becoming a sleeping form, the roll of prophetic phrases through the whole of the last, urgently building stanza that throws up such abstract terms as space, speed, and finally singularity, all terms prevalent in modern physics of relativity and mathematics: these are the restless touches of whimsical, surprising associations so characteristic of O'Hara's verse. The enjambed 'But', coming after 'love' signals this shift from self-instruction, just as a sonnet's *volta* might, into a true flight of poetry composed on the wing. The ending of the poem is a celebration of this freedom, this 'refreshment'.

This other who flies: through Lacan, the poem is the alibi

From the above the question arises: who is speaking when using the language of the lyric poem? Lacan addresses such a question when he asks not just who is speaking but who (or what) is being spoken about or through the 'I'? This question is crucial to understanding what 'frees' the poet to create (to fly) from what mostly inhibits (O'Hara's *cement/pavement*) while still being able to create a lyric, personal voice. In his typically acute understanding of the labyrinths within and between self and language, Lacan suggested of any speaker, 'It is not a question of knowing whether I speak of myself in a way that conforms to what I am, but rather a knowing whether I am the same as that of which I speak' (Lacan 2004: 456). The subject, the 'I', cannot say who is speaking (or what or even if they are speaking), but might 'know' (perhaps in the way GE Moore famously *knew* his hand was held up in front of his audience) whether 'I' am the same as 'I'. In any case, Lacan argues, 'even if I lose myself in the process, I am in that process' (457). Confidence in this logic might seem to be at the base of O'Hara's poetic practice. For the poet, the question in Lacanian terms becomes whether the poem is Imaginary or

Symbolic: is it a (distorting) mirror of the aesthetic self or is it yet another series of signs that socially and politically construct and re-construct us as desiring beings, sliding between the self-defeating modes of metaphor and metonymy? (For the poet in the act of writing it might come down to an instinctive sense of authenticity or inauthenticity in the voice produced in the poem. We grope, or feel for it.) The lyric poem can be neither of these options for it is both mirror and sign, we know; and Lacan himself turned to poetry in his argument against Saussure because it is poetry that shows the possibility that language can say (be made to say) *something quite other* than what it says (see Lacan 456). This becomes especially possible when the speaker is attempting to bring words from the (language-like) energy of the unconscious. For the purposes of this discussion a state of unintention is defined by partially controlled irruptions of metaphor, metonymy, associations strange, mysterious and yet vividly alive to the consciousness. While irruptions drive the substance of the lyric poem, it could equally be said that the poet, in delving into the unconscious, is also after integration and harmony, even reconciliation, since the poet meets the *anomie* of the self so fiercely; and feels the need to reconcile the self, whether consciously or not. 'For *I* is someone else (*Car je est un autre*)... The first study of the man who wants to be a poet is the knowledge of himself, complete. He looks for his soul, inspects it, tests it, learns it...' (Rimbaud 1966: 305).

The lyric poet may have a greater need of knowledge of self, and has this need because this poet has too great a sense of themselves, for whatever reason, driving them to investigate, understand, reconcile, express or explain themselves to themselves. It bears repeating that this drive is as unconscious as it might be conscious: the poet may be aware of a drive but not necessarily recognise what it is in its fullest manifestation. How the poet approaches this search will vary of course, but it is worthy of further conjecture. There are no doubt all manner of means, including O'Hara's immersion in the chaotic present moment, but the major point remains that all of them seem to involve escape from a sense of self in an act of writing that at the same time recovers the self (a new self?).

In this state, which arises from being a poet and writing poetry (from intention to unintention), the unconscious can prompt expression. In foregrounding the psychological aspects of the writing self, we are acknowledging the possibility of neurological and neuro-chemical correlates. Drugs, alcohol, and even some forms of mental illness have provided poets with access to creative states of mind throughout history. But this is an area of inquiry outside the province of this discussion. The sense of unselfconscious freedom we are proposing poets cultivate is paradoxically there for those who can succumb to being 'helpless': 'can you believe/that?'

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