TO BE A POET

by

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Abstract

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This qualitative dissertation will use narrative psychology and biographical methods to explore the role art plays in the processes of living. I will present biographical portraits and critical analyses of three living New York City poets identified with the second generation of the so-called New York School of Poetry. I am interested in (1) the factors surrounding the emergence of artistic identity; (2) the "grammar" of the work produced; and (3) the way of being in the world (Stein, 1926) that the work engenders. I am especially interested in gauging the degree to which writing a certain kind of poem (or kinds of poems) offers the writer psychological utility. Conceptually, I will draw upon the narrative work of Paul Ricoeur, and the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who insisted that "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life." It is hoped that this dissertation will offer research and applied psychology a framework for thinking about the role art can play in the experience of selfhood and identity.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE: *INTRODUCTION*…1
Background of Study…1
Conceptual Framework…3
Philosophical Background…3
Psychological Background…8
Methodological Framework…13
The Present Study…13
Participants…14
Interview Protocol…16
Interview Schedule…18
Other Sources of Knowledge…19
Biographical Profiles…21
Analyses…24

CHAPTER TWO: *TONY TOWLE*…26
Introduction…26
My Personal History with Tony and his Poetry…28
Brief Life History…30
Early life…30
New York City…38
The New York School…43
The seventies…52
The last decade…64

CHAPTER THREE: *CHARLES NORTH*…72
Introduction…72
My Personal History with Charles and his Poetry…74
Brief Life History…78
Early life…78
The breakthrough year…87
Association with James Schuyler…91
First book…94
Fatherhood…97
Literary recognition…99
Regrets and ongoing struggles…101
The future…106

CHAPTER FOUR: *PAUL VIOLI*…107
Introduction…107
My Personal History with Paul and his Poetry…112
Brief Life History…113
Early life…113

College, peace corps, and journey east…117
Return to the United States…123
Marriage and New York City…125
Fatherhood and life upriver…129
Poetic turning point…133
Affiliation with Kenneth Koch…136
Regrets and ongoing struggles…138
The future…142

CHAPTER FIVE: *ANALYSES*…143
Research Review…143
Factors of Emergence…144
A Developmental Perspective…145
A Psychodynamic Perspective…149
A Socio-cultural Perspective…151
The Grammar of the Work…156
Tony's Poetry: an introduction…157
Progressive Energies…169
Charles' Poetry: an introduction…176
Progressive Energies…183
Paul's Poetry: an introduction…190
Progressive Energies…197
Concluding Remarks…207
Project Objective…207
Findings: the Regressive…207
Findings: the Progressive…212
Implications for Personality Psychology…214

REFERENCES…219

CHAPTER ONE: *INTRODUCTION*

Background of Study

I first began imagining a dissertation on poets and their works in spring 2008, during a seminar I took on the Narrative Study of Lives taught by my CUNY Graduate Center advisor Suzanne Ouellette. We read an article by a well-known narrative psychologist who used the example of Emily Dickinson to illustrate how a student might go about writing a life study organized around a focal question—in this case, Dickinson's reclusiveness. He advocated sleuthing through a wealth of documentary and biographical sources, but said nothing about her poetry, as if it belonged to a superfluous extra-biographical category that had little or no value in helping to explain her isolation. I had several questions. For starters, how did Dickenson represent reclusiveness across the 1,700 poems her sister, Lavinia, found after the poet's death in 1886? Secondly, was her reclusiveness a *modus operandi* for writing poems? And how did the artifact (the poem), the act of creating (writing), and the personal and social identity that both inspire (being a poet) influence her cognitively, affectively, on the level of narrative, and socially?

In a letter to Jung, Freud wrote, "Before the problem of the creative artist analysis must, alas, lay down its arms" (SE XXI, 177). Although he was proud of his analysis of Da Vinci (1910), Freud was doubtful that psychoanalysis could penetrate to the sources of creativity. Elsewhere, Freud wrote that "all genuinely creative writings are the products of more than a single motive and more than a single impulse in the poet's mind, and are open to more than a single interpretation" (Freud, 1900, 266). Along these lines,

my dissertation will *not* attempt to build a psychological theory of art. Attempts at this have been made elsewhere – primarily in the field of psychoanalysis and psychobiography (e.g., Todd Schultz's *Handbook of Psychobiography* (2006), especially the articles on Elvis Presley, Sylvia Plath, James Barrie, and Edith Wharton). Elsewhere in the psychoanalytic tradition, Melanie Klein imagined that art fulfilled a healing function, allowing the artist to explore (and possibly resolve) intra- and interpersonal conflicts without reliving inciting traumas. Post-Kleinians like Milner, Ehrenzweig, and Winnicott expand upon the role of art in object relations.

As fascinating as these theories are, they tend to privilege etiology over teleology. *What, for example, does creativity do to and for the artist across the social contexts through which he/she develops?* Nielson (1999) argues that unconscious motivations can be used to create new cultural forms—cultural forms that fulfill a progressive function psychologically. Nielsen's method involves looking for moments in a narrative when the tensions between conscious and unconscious structures are palpable. She calls such moments *black holes* on account of the invisible energy they radiate. In her reading of the autobiography of Øivind, an elderly Norwegian man, she locates the intersection of conscious and unconscious structures in a story he tells about a Christmas when he was growing up in provincial Norway. Øivind remembers feeling angry after being humiliated by his father, and then overwhelmed by guilt when his father dies of a heart attack shortly after. This life-disrupting event requires that the young Øivind assume an adult role and provide for his mother and sisters. The close relationship he shares with them makes it challenging for him to establish independence as a mark of masculinity. Nielson shows how Øivind draws upon an array of cultural forms to construct a way of

being in the world that he passes on to his son, as well as to the readers of his 30-plus page autobiography.

Similarly, this dissertation explores how the "cultural forms" of poetry influenced the lives of three New York City poets—all close friends, all over the age of sixty-five, all heterosexual, Caucasian and male, and all affiliated with the second generation of the so-called New York School of Poetry. I am specifically interested in (1) the personal and social events that surround the emergence of their identities as "poet;" (2) the "grammar" of their works; and (3) the ways that being a poet influenced/influences each across an array of personal and social contexts. The aim of this study is to explore the role art can play in the processes of living. Beyond merely representing the events of a life, might art also play a role in helping to create one?

Conceptual Framework

Philosophical Background

The modernist poet Gertrude Stein believed that to compose in language was to compose a way of being in the world. Words (the "composition") differentiated experience into specific patterns of thought and feeling. In her essay, *Composition as Explanation* (1926), she writes, "The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything. This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, *it is*, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen" (Stein in Retallak, 2008, 215). Put simply (if this is possible with Stein), the writer of the composition is the composer of his/her

phenomenological reality. A similar notion can be found in the ideas of the twentieth-century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who believed that the textual form of life is both informed by—and actively informs—extra-textual contexts through which persons develop. Language, argued Wittgenstein, should not be thought of in terms of what it *means*, but how it is *used*. In *Philosophical Investigations*, he writes, "Every sign by *itself* seems dead. *What* gives it life? – In use it is *alive*. Is life breathed into it there? Or is its *use* its life?" (PI #423)

The intellectual journey that led me to Wittgenstein began in 2005 after reading the Anthropologist Peter Stromberg's book on evangelical Christian conversion narratives (1993). Stromberg theorizes that converts use a canonical language—which he defines as modes of describing self and world particular to a specific worldview—to express previously inaccessible desires in an acceptable, socially orthodox form. The canonical language of a Born Again conversion narrative becomes the means of a narrator's self-transformation, organizing identity within a tradition-specific mode of signification. Stromberg's work is useful because it shows how language can cause significant changes to the self, across an array of personal and social domains. The biggest difference between what I do and what Stromberg did is that I conceptualize narrative as a limitless array of textual forms, including poetic ones. I believe that the texts a poet composes can influence his/her construction and experience of selfhood, helping him/her determine which experiences are salient and which not, thus shaping, at least partially, his/her life-defining picture and the choices made in response to this picture.

Stromberg's (1993) anthropological work is reminiscent of the narrative work of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1970), who conceptualized life as "an activity and a passion in search of a narrative" (Ricoeur, 1991, 29). In *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (1970), Ricoeur developed a "double hermeneutics" of regression and progression as a critique of Freudian sublimation. Using Freud's essay on Da Vinci (1910), he shows how regressive energy, which in Leonardo's case is an unresolved Oedipal Complex, is transformed by the progressive solution of Leonardo's activities as an artist and scientist. Ricoeur asks, "Could it be that the true meaning of sublimation is to promote *new meanings* by mobilizing old energies initially invested in archaic figures" (Ricoeur, 1970, 175)? In *Search For A Method* (1963), the "existentialist" philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre developed the concept of a *progressive project*, which he defined as a life activity that distinguished an individual from the deterministic social/environmental forces that informed/inform him. "Complexes, the style of life, and the revelation of the past-surpassing as a future to be created are one and the same reality," Sartre writes. "It is the project as an *oriented life*, as man's affirmation through action" (Sartre, 1968, 108). Both Sartre (1963) and Ricoeur (1970) sought to explore how projects can move persons beyond the conditions of their environments. Sartre writes: "For us man is characterized above all by his going beyond a situation, and by what he succeeds in making of what he has been made—even if he never recognizes himself in his objectification" (Sartre, 1968, 109).

Ricoeur expanded upon his double hermeneutics twenty-two years later in *Oneself As Another* (1992), arguing that narrative continually re-contextualizes "old energies" as the circumstances of living alter. Conceiving narrative as a *discordant concordance*

"between the manifold of events and the temporal unity of the story recounted" (Ricoeur, 1992, 141), he theorizes that the nature of narrative is to "integrate with permanence in time what seems to be its contrary in the domain of sameness-identity, namely diversity, variability, discontinuity, and instability" (Ricoeur, 1992, 140). In effect, the "regressive" and "progressive" coalesce each time an individual articulates who he/she is. Bax (2005) finds commonalities between Ricoeur and Wittgenstein on the grounds that both refused to equate personal identity with an immutable substance. Just as Ricoeur insisted that identity was formed out of an array of heterogeneous elements, Wittgenstein thought that identity was the product of convictions that permeate behaviors and linguistic self-expressions, coalescing into a meaningful whole that yields the illusion of an immutable, internal self. Personal identity does not reside in a pre-given substrate, but is an ambition expressed linguistically.

The American philosopher Garry Hagberg (2008) has written on Wittgenstein and autobiographical consciousness. According to Hagberg, Wittgenstein believed that the attributes one associates with one's "self" are created by how one goes about representing one's life. He writes, "And it is emerging that language… is what one might then call the vehicle for selfhood. The linguistic dimension of the self is, as we are increasingly coming to see, necessary (and not merely as *ex post facto* contingency) to its constitution" (Hagberg, 2008, 153). To illustrate the point more fully, he uses an example of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864) where the underground man speaks of his existence as "the hell of unsatisfied desires turned inward…" These desires are not an expression of pre-linguistic biological sensations, but are concepts rendered intelligible through the act of giving them voice.

Hagberg (2008), however, warns against unfettered linguistic constructionism: "We might… say that such newly articulated aspects create the reality they describe – but this places too great an emphasis on the creative dimension of aspect-dawning self-description to the exclusion of the constraints within which it moves" (Hagberg, 2008, 212). Still, notwithstanding genetic, dispositional and social constraints that limit self-transformation, Wittgenstein believed there was more room for transformation than was allotted for by most Cartesian-influenced perspectives, which support the reality of a hidden, internal self. We construct new life-defining pictures by awakening sets of relations and connecting the dots through personal life stories. Hagberg (2008) finds an analogue to this phenomenon in the 1957 diaries of the British philosopher and writer Iris Murdoch:

> Murdoch wrote, *'Re-thinking one's past is a constant responsibility'*: it should be constant because of new light shed by the ongoing recontextualization of our past deeds, words, and thoughts, because of the new or deepened ways of seeing ourselves brought in by sets of internal relations awakened by active retrospection… We make a life-defining picture of ourselves by awakening those sets of relations and connecting the 'dots'… with a narrative thread. And that ongoing work-in-progress then becomes a picture we come to resemble, in that it determines which experiences are salient and which not, thus shaping, at least partially, our subsequent choices in response to the picture, the unfolding narrative (Hagberg, 2008, 221).

Here, Hagberg explicitly links narrative to behaviors and actions. Our "life-defining picture" informs who we are, what we say about ourselves, and how we *act* across social contexts. As Bax (2005) points out, these notions are present in Wittgenstein's *Lecture on Religious Belief* (1966). Wittgenstein argued that faith for the religious believer was not something internal, but rather an organizing principle; for instance, a picture [e.g. of Judgment Day] functions as "guidance for his [the believer's]

life" (Wittgenstein, 1966, 53), helping him self-assess, organize behavior according to particular patterns, and treat others according to ethical standards. The identity of the believer is characterized by the various thoughts and pictures he uses in describing himself. Consequently, persons can construct new life-defining pictures that awaken sets of personal and social relations and a fresh constellation of self-defining memories. This new life-defining picture—in turn—will influence how they perceive and act in the world, determining "…which experiences are salient and which not, thus shaping, at least partially, our subsequent choices in response to the picture, the unfolding narrative" (Hagberg, 2008, 221).

Psychological Background

In the field of academic psychology, a philosophically-inclined researcher faces the challenge of taking a philosophical claim and developing a method for locating that claim in a living person or group. This is often easier said than done. Luckily for me, the philosophical claims discussed above are related to work that has been done in narrative psychology, particularly in the Narrative Study of Lives. Dan McAdams (1993) conceptualizes identity as a life story—that is, an internalized narrative integration of past, present, and anticipated future. McAdams and Pals (2006) developed a five-level framework for conceptualizing personality in which narrative is the fourth level—and the most likely of the five to undergo significant change through the life-course. Unlike Wittgenstein, however, McAdams and Pals (2006) are skeptical about the degree to which a change in narrative can affect core levels of personality. Gregg (2007) divides personality into two categories: *core-level personality*, which he defines as affective

states and tensions that characterize the genotypic level, and *social personality*, which is an ongoing reconfiguration of core-level personality "in congruence with a set of cultural prototypes and moral sentiments" (Gregg, 2007, 213). According to Gregg, identity "seeks to encompass and represent both of these senses of self or subselves" (Gregg, 2007, 214) to oneself and others. Within this model, identity is an integral part of personality; changes to identity cause changes to personality in the sense that one's core-level personality will be reconfigured into a new social personality.

According to Gregg (2007), the shape of an individual's social personality, and clues about his/her core-level personality, can be found through careful analyses of his/her life story. A challenge for a narrative-oriented researcher, of course, is to determine how best to capture a subject's life story. Researchers in the Study of Lives have long debated the question of structure. Gail Hornstein (1994) insists that "Every biography has to find a form that naturally shapes itself to the form of its subject's life" (Hornstein in Franz & Stewart, 1994, 63). In his monograph, *Life Histories and Psychobiographies*, Runyan (1984) locates ten "relevant issues" pertinent to the structures of biographical narratives: *conceptual framework, content selection, facts, generalization, explanation, the causal structure of narrative, values and objectivity, use of the social sciences,* and *historical influence*. He encourages psychological-oriented biographers to consider these issues "in light of concerns such as temporal order, thematic organization, manageable length, and intelligibility in story or argument" (Runyan, 1984, 77). Still, the researcher's choices—what he/she decides to include or to leave on the cutting room floor—"[are] as much a statement of preference as anything

else" (Hornstein in Franz & Stewart, 1994, 53). This preference, argues Hornstein, should be guided by an ethical standard of truth:

> To conjure up the subject and have her speak onto the page, the biographer has to render her in a form the subject can recognize. She need not agree with everything that is said—some of it will hurt her or make her angry—but she ought not to feel exploited or abused. We need a loadstar in biography, something to substitute for an objective standard or truth, and an ethical one might serve as well as any (Hornstein in Franz & Stewart, 1994, 56).

With an "ethical" structure in place, how does a researcher ensure an "ethical" interpretation? Elms (1994) cautions the eager psychobiographer from having too much voyeuristic fun "rummaging through the intriguing intimacies of someone's life and spreading them out for public consumption" (Elms, 1994, 225). He goes on to write, "Ethical psychobiography doesn't just avoid the unethical; it adds to our human understanding of ourselves and other human beings" (Elms, 1994, 225).

Narrative researchers and psychobiographers must find an appropriate theoretical approach when it comes time to analyze data. According to Hornstein (1994), an ethical interpretation involves transparency in both self-reflexivity (e.g. critically asking oneself what one does and doesn't want to find in a subject), and the nature of one's theoretical approach. As Runyan (1984) demonstrates in *Why Did van Gogh Cut off His ear? The Problem of Alternative Explanations in Psychobiography*, different theoretical approaches yield dramatically different psychological portraits of a subject. Runyan takes issue with the claim that "the interpretation of single cases is little more than an arbitrary application of one's theoretical preferences" (Runyan, 1984, 49), arguing that the researcher should evaluate alternative explanatory conjectures by critically evaluating them against one another in terms of plausibility. Schultz (2005), in a similar fashion,

develops eight markers for a good psychobiography: *cogency, narrative structure, comprehensiveness, data convergence, sudden coherence, logical soundness, consistency,* and *theoretical viability*. He warns against adopting "a posture of surrender" in which "all interpretations are equal, their relative merits indistinguishable" (Schultz, 2005, 8).

Analytically, I draw upon a phenomenological/existential interpretive approach. In his famous (and only!) complete case study, *Letters From Jenny* (1965), Gordon Allport characterized the existentialist-oriented researcher as one who tried to compose, order, and extract the essence of a subject's worldview in a manner that "would always place central reliance on [the subject's] story, and would seek the explanation for her [his] life in this summary worldview" (Allport, 1965, 164). Both Allport and Hornstein insist, however, that this *doesn't* preclude looking – to quote Allport – "into, around, through, and between" data to construct a reliable worldview that convincingly accounts for an individual's conduct. This involves alternating between what Josselson (2004) refers to as a hermeneutics of faith and a hermeneutics of suspicion. A hermeneutics of faith reconstructs what a subject says about his/her life and its sources of meaning. A hermeneutics of suspicion, on the other hand, assumes that "surface appearances mask depth realities" (Josselson, 2004, 13). In my analytical chapter (Chapter Five), I use a hermeneutics of suspicion at moments when my participants' narratives diverge from what I observe to be true about their lives, or when I detect unspoken (and perhaps unconscious) motivations that challenge their claims.

Because I am interested in the *roles* that creative writing plays in the processes of living, I approach my data with a functionalist tact. Here's how Schultz (2005) frames this approach, which he thinks is operational in all good psychobiography:

> So, keep an eye out for function. Ask yourself, What does this artist get out of his art? What does it "do" for her? And when it stops doing for him what it used to, why? Is the art a form of escape (defensive), or is it a way of working through (restitutive)? (Schultz, 2005, 138).

As Elms and Heller (2005) demonstrate in their essay on Elvis Presley's hit song "Are You Lonesome Tonight," a functionalist reading can be aided by a synchronic evaluation of a song/poem against what was happening in the artist's life when the text was written. Elms and Heller show how live performances of the song reveal the deepening personal crises that a once youthful and enthusiastic Elvis underwent as he aged. Word choice, intonation, slips of tongue serve as psychological clues. In his monograph, *Uncovering Lives: The Uneasy Alliance of Biography and Psychology* (1994), Elms explores the functions of creative writing, locating six types to help researchers make sense of the role[s] creative writing play[s] in an artist's life: defensive, expressive, intellectual, interpersonal, passive-aggressive, and restitutive.

A defensive type can provide a writer with the disguised satisfactions of powerful unconscious urges and desires (e.g., hostile, sexual, etc.), while allowing him/her to consciously deny that he/she wishes for their fulfillment. When faced with questions about content, writers may appeal to fantasy, claiming that little to none of the material is rooted in his/her psychosocial reality. *An expressive type* constitutes writing that conveys personal identity to oneself and others. *An intellectual type* pertains to artifacts that are created for the sake of their creation, with few or no ulterior motives. *An interpersonal type* possesses some kind of social/relational objective—whether to seduce bedfellows, make friendships, educe a client-patron commission, or to heal troubled human ties. *A passive-aggressive type* is defined by a psychology of revenge. And finally, *a restitutive type* resolves the inner crises of authors, enabling them to work through psychological

conflicts and emerge less conflicted persons. Although these types are useful tools for thinking about function, it is challenging to say where one begins and the other ends.

Methodological Framework

The Present Study

In Chapters Two, Three, and Four, I present the life stories of my three poets, with particular attention to the factors leading up to the emergence of their artistic identities. Chapter Five offers analyses of their poetic works. Questions are asked of the poetry itself: *Are there structural, thematic, and tonal parallels between the life and the work? Does the work help to shed light on the life, and/or the life on the work? Can writing be said to constitute a progressive project within the context of the life?* I theorize about what writing does for each poet—that is, how it responds to and/or influences the circumstances of his existence. Stein (1926), again, saw the composition as potentially inventing new "grammars" for being in one's time. Here's how the poet and postmodern philosopher Joan Retallack defines "grammar:" "Grammar, for Stein, is the logic of composition with words. In her view, it is malleable, subject to reinvention, and in that reinvention new ways of being in one's time become possible…" (Retallack, 2008, 58). Poetry then is not so much a mimetic representation of self and world, but a space within which self and world are at least *in potential* reconfigured. Much like Wittgenstein's concept of language as a form of life, Stein was an ardent believer in the consequences of the linguistic form—mainly that language constituted a way of being in the world. In *History or Messages from History* (1930), she wrote that "…There are two things that are interesting history and grammar" (Stein in Retallack, 2008, 262). Stein

believed that “history can be in strenuous competition with grammar” (Retallack, 2008, 58). Thus, what is written, when, and by what means may reveal how a writer responded/responds to and potentially influences his/her socio-cultural and historical circumstances.

Stein’s assertion that history and grammar were at times in competition is similar to recent work done by Gregg (2007) on identity and narrative in North Africa. Gregg shows that no matter how uniquely subjects construct their personal narratives, they are constantly negotiating “master narratives” of identity shaped by culturally-informed gender roles, religious ideologies and practices, and sociopolitical and economic structures.

Participants

My poets are Tony Towle, Charles North, and Paul Violi, all of whom are New York City writers associated with the second generation of the so-called New York School of Poetry. All three poets are characterized by the New York School literary critic David Lehman as being members of the second generation of the New York School of poetry. I chose these specific poets for several reasons: (1) I have access to them; (2) they are a “cohort” and have been linked personally and aesthetically (e.g. writing with, for, and about one another) since the mid-1960s; (3) they have substantial corpuses of work in print; and (4) all over sixty-five, they were ready and willing to share their life stories.

I came to know all three through my involvement in the New York City poetry world, first meeting them in spring 2003 at the Fish Bar in the East Village of Manhattan.

The small, quasi-regular group of younger and older writes who'd gather there occasionally included Tony, myself, Paul, Justin Jamail, Amber Reed, Davey Volner, and—on one occasion—Charles North. In January 2003, I was invited to read with Tony and Paul at the Bowery Poetry Club in Manhattan. Then in the winter and spring of 2005 I was the curator of a high-profile poetry reading series at the Accompanied Library of the National Arts Club and invited all three to read. And finally, I interviewed and wrote a paper on Charles North for a Study of Lives seminar I took with my advisor Suzanne Ouellette. This paper addressed Charles' vocational unease through the *focal* approach to the study of lives advocated by Rosenwald (2003). Rosenwald characterizes the *focal* approach as entering a life via "…an aspect of the individual's life that appears puzzling to common sense – paradoxical, exaggerated, irrational, inconsistent" (Rosenwald, 2003, 138). Despite having published several collections of poetry over 30 years and a collection of essays, co-editing the anthologies *Broadway* and *Broadway II* with James Schuyler, and working as poet in residence at Pace University in Manhattan, Charles has a hard time referring to himself as a poet. I hypothesized that this was at least partially a consequence of how a proper vocation (e.g., becoming a lawyer or physician) was emphasized in Charles' upwardly mobile Jewish household.

In accordance with my IRB proposal, I discussed the project with all three and offered to send copies of the interview transcripts and the dissertation itself upon completion. I asked my participants to sign two forms of consent (one for my records and one for their own). I did *not* assign pseudonyms or change geographical and institutional details. Doing so would have been impossible given the public nature of their work, which I draw from extensively.

The Interview Protocol

I interviewed Tony, Charles, and Paul three to five times each. A semi-structured interview protocol was followed. Initially, I drew upon a schedule developed by Sigmund Koch as part of a study of twelve well-known artists from several artistic disciplines at the Aesthetics Research Center at Boston University in the late 1980s (a group that included Edward Albee, Arthur Miller, Saul Bellow, Toni Morrison, and the poet Richard Wilbur). The artists were asked to participate in four two-hour interviews organized around specific themes. A semi-structured interview protocol was followed during each. Koch spent the first session discussing factors that helped shape the artist's sensibilities; the second and third sessions were on the artist's craft, which included discussing a major work in the presence of an expert; and the fourth and final session was dedicated to developing an historical perspective. In my prospectus and IRB application, I envisioned three interviews (described below). However, due to my practice of letting the poets talk for relatively long periods of time, it sometimes took several meetings to get through questions I had prepared for a single session.

First interview: *emergence of artistic identity*. This interview took roughly three hours and was dedicated to a discussion of the personal and social factors surrounding the emergence of the poet's artistic identity. After reviewing demographic information and family background, I asked each to talk about when he first started writing poems, and about the personal and social events that were occurring at that time. I also inquired about when each started thinking of himself as "a poet." In the case of all three, a rough outline of the life began to emerge during this session. Sample questions included:

-When did you first become aware of poetry as a genre?
-Do you remember the first poem you wrote? Can you describe it?
-Were your parents encouraging of your poetry?
-Were there people outside your family who encouraged you to write?
-Were there people inside or outside your family who discouraged you from writing?
-At what point did you begin introducing yourself to others as a poet?
-Do you think of yourself as a professional poet? When did you begin thinking this way?

Second and third interviews: *life story inventory*. This inventory was initially based on a version of the McAdams (1995) life story interview, which can be found on the Foley Center website run through Northwestern University. The inventory takes two to three hours, and is divided into nine sections: *life chapters, critical events, life challenge, influences on the life story (bad and good), stories and the life story, alternative futures for the life story, personal ideology, life theme,* and *other*. Sample questions include:

-Looking back over the various chapters and scenes in your life story, please describe the single greatest challenge that you have faced in your life. How have you faced, handled, or dealt with this challenge? Have other people assisted you in dealing with this challenge? How has this challenge had an impact on your life story?
- Looking back over your entire life story as a story with chapters and scenes, extending into the past as well as the imagined future, can you discern a central theme, message, or idea that runs throughout the story? What is the major theme of your life story? Please explain.

Here, something unexpected happened. Tony, Charles, and Paul were all resistant to what they claimed was the reductive nature of the questions. Tony, for instance, said that it was simply impossible to locate a single moment that was his nadir experience. Paul felt similarly saying, “Things happen. Bad things. Good things happen. So, I don’t know if there’s one period. There wasn’t one period where just bad things happened. You take it as it comes.” Thus, I modified the protocol by customizing it in response to

material that had come up during the first interview. This involved rewriting questions across the nine thematic categories advocated by McAdams (1995). For example:

-*To Tony*: Could you tell me more about your decision to leave your second wife in 1979? Was monogamy a challenge?
-*To Charles*: You tend to avoid personal disclosures in your poems. Are you this way among your friends and family as well?

Some questions from the original McAdams (1995) protocol were left in their original form. For example:

-*To all three*: I would like you to think about your life as a story. All stories have characters, scenes, plots, and so forth. There are high points and low points in the story, good times and bad times, heroes and villains, and so on. A long story may even have chapters. Think about your life story as having at least a few different chapters. What might those chapters be?

The interview schedule

The interview schedules varied somewhat. This had to do with the length of the meeting, the conversation style of the poet, and an array of time constraints. The schedule I arranged with Tony involved five lengthy conversations from June 2008 to May 2009. These conversations, the majority of which occurred over dinner and dessert, lasted from two to four hours in length, and were generally looser and freer-ranging than my conversations with either Charles or Paul. Our first conversation occurred in the West Village in July 2008. There was a second conversation a few weeks later at a restaurant in Manhattan that Tony likes. The three remaining conversations (December 2008; February 2009; and May 2009) were conducted at a café around the block from the Tribeca loft he shares with his girlfriend of twelve years. The third, fourth, and fifth conversations were digitally recorded and transcribed. The first two were not recorded. I

took hand-written notes because Tony was initially skittish about being recorded. I waited until the third interview to record, at which point he was comfortable with the idea.

I interviewed Charles a total of four times. Our conversations were conducted in his living room between the hours of 3 PM and 6 PM over the 2008-2009 academic year, excluding an earlier interview for an article I co-wrote on the poet James Schuyler in 2004. The 2004 interview was recorded and transcribed and has been included as a link on the University of Buffalo's EPC website, which maintains a page on Charles and his work. An interview in spring 2009 was also recorded and transcribed. The two remaining interviews [spring 2008 and fall 2009] were not recorded. I took hand-written notes for the same reason cited for Tony. More than Tony and Paul, Charles was worried about being quoted out of context and asked to see his biographical profile. He sent back a lengthy email with helpful explanations and qualifications.

The schedule I arranged with Paul involved three conversations that lasted from two to four hours in length. The first occurred in January 2008; the second in March 2009; and the third in June 2009. All three were conducted at my apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan—during the early evening hours to coincide with Paul's hour long drive home to Putnam Valley after teaching classes at The New School and/or NYU. The second and third interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The first interview was not recorded.

Other Sources of Knowledge

Other sources of knowledge were drawn upon. Although no major biographical work to date has been written on Tony, Charles, or Paul, reviews of their work, interviews, and critical treatments of the New York School are available. All three gave me their curriculum vitae, which helped when it came to dates and institutional affiliations. Paul and Tony also presented me with detailed lists of readings. Additionally, Tony published a 100-page memoir of his life from 1960-1963, which cover the years he moved to New York City and began writing poetry, and also provided me with the DVD of a four-hour interview he and the poet Bill Berkson did with the scholar Michael Davis on the topic of Frank O'Hara.

Having known Tony, Charles, and Paul each for about five years before embarking on this project—and, in that time, befriending a number of poets around New York who have known them since the 60s—I found that I possessed a significant amount of information about their lives. I kept a file in which I wrote down these memories as they came. But this material presented me with an ethical dilemma. I found out things that were revealed by mutual friends, and on occasion, by one another. And to complicate matters further, some of the things I learned shed significant light on what I observed and heard during the interviews. However, following Josselson's (1996) work on ethics and process in narrative research, I had an obligation to focus my attention on what each of my subjects chose to share with me. Although I did not refrain from theorizing about their lives, I was careful to avoid including information that they did not intend for me to hear, or to use. Sadly, much of this information would have added significant depth to my analyses.

Lastly, I procured each poet's entire corpus of work, which, in addition to poetry collections, includes prose publications, chapbooks, poetry pamphlets, art books, collaborations, broadsides, essays, published letters, and – in the case of Tony and Charles – a volume of selected poems. Through the course of the interviews, I asked questions about the work each was writing during the years being discussed. Each subsection of each biographical portrait begins with verse that was written during that time in the poet's life. In the case of autobiographical content in a poem, I inquired as to whether the material described was accurate enough for me to cite as biographical fact in my profile. This turned out to be a prudent decision because many of the anecdotes turned out to be either apocryphal, or else exaggerated to achieve various literary effects. As Tony put it bluntly when we sat down to discuss his life in the 1970s: "If you take my work from 70 to 79 I don't know what a psychologist would make of it without making a mishmash of the poems and spoiling the literary effect."

Biographical Profiles

I organized my data into three lengthy biographical profiles. In accordance with Hornstein's (1994) insistence that "Every biography has to find a form that naturally shapes itself to the form of its subject's life" (Hornstein in Franz & Stewart, 1994, 63), I tried to capture the narrative style of my participants. Charles, for instance, narrated his story more or less chronologically, whereas Tony moved back and forth across time to contextualize particular pieces of information. There were significant differences between the three when it came to tone. Paul used a great deal of humor, frequently coloring stories with laughter, absurdist jokes, and humorous asides. Tony tended to

employ sarcasm and irony, which sometimes made it challenging to know how he really felt about aspects of his life. Charles, on the other hand, was more serious and circumspect than his friends, reviewing the events of his life with candor, though with a degree of analytical detachment that distinguished him from his friends. There were also differences when it came to questions they *didn't* feel comfortable answering. Tony generally left no stone unturned, opening up at great length about his regrets and self-perceived mistakes, struggles and personal shortcomings. The only thing he eschewed discussing was the art he has had to sell over the years to make ends meet. Charles refrained from saying much about girlfriends he had before meeting and marrying his wife, or his struggles with depression. Paul shied away from discussing specific challenges he's had in his life, preferring to elaborate upon his method for dealing with them. A structurally uniform presentation of their life stories would have lost many of these differences. So, as much as possible, I tried to populate my profiles with direct quotations taken directly from poems, published work, and the interview transcripts. This reliance on primary documents is a technique used with great success in several biographies I read during the spring of 2009, including, though not limited to Ray Monk's biography of Wittgenstein (1991), David Macey's biography of Michel Foucault (1995), and Gail Hornstein's biography of Frieda Fromm-Reichmann (2005).

Because my analyses hinged upon being able to move across the three profiles fluidly, I needed to organize the data in a way that would permit fluid multiple case analyses. After completing the interviews and typing up the transcripts, I devised a tripartite rubric that helped me structure data. This rubric allowed me to read across the profiles without losing the key differences that existed between their respective shapes.

Rosenwald (1988) developed a theory of multiple-case research in which he makes an argument for "conversations" between individual cases captured through intensive exploratory interviews. This, he argues, allows "shared realities to be reconstructed out of individuals' perspectival images" (Rosenwald, 1988, 239).

I decided to begin each profile with a section that introduced the poet and his work. The second section briefly recounts my personal history with each. According to Hornstein (1994), ethical interpretation should always involve self-reflexivity (e.g. critically asking oneself what one does and doesn't want to find in a subject). The third section consists of the life history, rendered in forms that Tony, Charles, and Paul will hopfully recognize as their own. As Hornstein (1994) makes clear, however, "She [the subject] need not agree with everything that is said—some of it will hurt her or make her angry—but she ought not to feel exploited or abused" (Hornstein in Franz & Stewart, 1994, 56). Here's a quick review of the rubric:

[1] Introduction: *a brief physical description; a brief anecdote to capture the poet's character; a brief description of the work.*

[2] My personal history with the poet and his work: *several pages dedicated to self-reflexivity in which I review how I came to know each poet and my knowledge of his written work.*

[3] Life history in brief: *a review of each poet's life story divided into subsections determined by the shape in which they told the story. The subsections appear as follows:*

Tony Towle
Early life
New York City
The New York School
The seventies
The last decade

Charles North
Early life

The breakthrough year
Association with James Schuyler
First book
Fatherhood
Literary recognition
Regrets and ongoing struggles
The future

Paul Violi
Early life
College, peace corps, and journey east
Return to the United States
Marriage and New York City
Fatherhood and life upriver
Poetic turning point
Affiliation with Kenneth Koch
Regrets and ongoing struggles
The future

Analyses

My analyses, which constitute the fifth and final chapter of the dissertation, center around three research questions: (1) *In what ways do Tony, Charles, and Paul construct their lives on the narrative level, particularly the personal and social events surrounding the emergence of their identities as "poets?"* (2) *Generally speaking, what can be said about the "grammar" of their poetic corpuses?* And finally, (3) *How has being a poet – including the activity of writing poetry – influenced each?*

My analyses are informed by Larkin et al.'s (2006) *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA), which revolves around the *existential claims* and *objects of concern* constructed by a subject. I actively draw upon Larkin et al.'s (2006) two commitments: (1) a phenomenological commitment to give voice to the claims and concerns of the subject; and (2) an interpretive commitment to contextualize and make sense of claims and concerns from a psychological perspective. Ultimately, my goal was

to gauge how much of a progressive force poetry constituted in each life. As the Italian writer Italo Calvino put it, literature locates "a reality of levels," and by doing so creates another. I wanted to know what this other layer looked like, and to develop a method to make sense of it psychologically.

CHAPTER TWO: *Tony Towle*

> At a certain point my imagination began to stir, like boats,
> sitting on a still horizon, moved by a gathering breeze,
> torn apart in a tempest,
> and by the nerves in the following calm.
> — from "Autobiography" (1970-73)

> no event in your life is of the slightest importance,
> but there is nothing you cannot use;
> the unceasing events of your boring life
> occur only for the success of a particular poem
> awaiting your efforts on a horizon.
> —from "Nearing Christmas" (1971)

Introduction

My first conversation with Tony took place on a hot afternoon in early July 2008. Given the choices of his apartment in Tribeca, my apartment (at that point in the East Village), an interview room at the CUNY Graduate Center, or a "neutral location," Tony chose a café in Greenwich Village where he, Charles North, and Paul Violi sometimes meet because "it's rarely crowded in the afternoon and you aren't rushed out." He was about twenty minutes late, and I began worrying that I had the time wrong, but then looked across Seventh Avenue and saw him approaching cautiously with a cane held close to his side as he walked. He has had to use a cane since 1997, as a result of slipping on a patch of ice in front of his building on Warren Street in 1991, in addition to a neurological condition called cerebella degeneration. It is roughly analogous to Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), or "Lou Gehrig's Disease," but has a more gradual progression. Tony saw me and flashed a bemused grin, picking up his pace a bit. His beard was well trimmed and his gray hair parted neatly to the side. His glasses hung

from a chain around his neck, and he wore a button-down Oxford and a pair of worn jeans and gray athletic shoes. We sat down and ordered food. He ordered chicken fingers and I had coffee.

Despite saying he was tired and *didn't* have much energy, he began talking and continued for the better part of three hours. The first thing he chose to talk about was "Frank" – that is, Frank O'Hara. In fact, O'Hara (who died in 1966) often comes up when Tony tells stories about his past. O'Hara supported Tony's work from the beginning in 1963, and Tony's first book-length collection, *North* (1970), was published by Columbia University Press in the Frank O'Hara Award series. Furthermore, the older poet is mentioned or makes a "cameo" in a number of Tony's poems (e.g. *Addenda, Nearing Christmas, Recapitulation, Sunrise: Ode To Frank O'Hara*, and *Thoughts at Frank O'Hara's City Poet Party, 6/9/93*). In fact, I encountered mention of him at the first of Tony's readings I ever attended, at the Zinc Bar in Manhattan in fall 2003. He read *Digression, 5/10/03*, written in response to reflections on the works and days of O'Hara by Frank's roommate, Joe LeSueur, and published earlier that year. LeSueur had died in the meantime. The centerpiece of the poem relates an anecdote that Joe told Tony many years before but that was not included in the book:

> …And you left out
> a great story that you told me back in '64
> which you said Frank didn't like to talk about
> of how at the Living Theatre reading five years before,
> which wasn't the Leroi Jones benefit by the way —
> that was in '63 and I was there — because Leroi
> was one of the readers in this one, with Allen
> and Ray Bremser; there is a famous Voice photo
> of the three of them watching Frank read that Larry used
> in a lithograph, incorporating Frank's "To a Young Poet"
> about John Weiners — so Frank was reading that poem
> and others and Kerouac was in the audience,
> drunk, and yelling: "Get off the stage, O'Hara, you faggot,

> I want to read some haiku!" and after a few minutes of this
> Frank actually started to leave but the audience
> said: "No, don't go, don't listen to him"
> and so forth but Kerouac wouldn't stop and finally
> Frank, walking off, said, "No, that's all right, let him read,
> my silence is more interesting than his bullshit"
> though delivered, as you told me, with tears in his eyes.

Tony tells me about a "public dispute" he is having on a poetry blog over the well-known O'Hara poem, "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island." Someone in the poetry blogosphere was proposing that the actual author of the poem was the late Kenneth Koch. Tony rehashes the details of the debate, and how he had been up late the night before thinking about what to write to end the matter. He decided to call Frank's sister, Maureen, for some pertinent information about who took what out of Frank's loft after he died, and when. It turned out that she was going to call *him* – she knew about the controversy and had a copy of a letter (which she faxed to Tony right after they spoke) her brother had sent to Hal Fondren — in whose house on Fire Island the poem was written — on July 19th 1958, a week after he had written two poems, "Ode en Salut aux Poètes Negres Françaises" (Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets) and "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island," and included copies of the poems for Hal. Tony forwarded me the letter he sent to end the debate, which concludes: "This closes the book on the authorship of "A True Account…" as far as I'm concerned, and I don't intend to say anything further about it. Frank gets his extraordinary poem back and Kenneth [Koch] was not demented after all."

<u>My Personal History with Tony and his Poetry</u>

I first met Tony Towle the spring of 2003 at the Fish Bar in the East Village, Manhattan. For a while we were part of a small, quasi-regular group of younger and older writers who gathered occasionally that included Tony, myself, Paul Violi, Justin Jamail, Amber Reed, and Davey Volner. I was told early on that Tony was once the friend and protégé of the first-generation New York School poet Frank O'Hara. I was also told that he was handsome when younger, something of a lady's man, and had once been a heavy drinker. He continued to drink, but moderately, rarely if ever exceeding two drinks. My first impression was of an opinionated man in his mid-to-upper sixties who walked with a cane and enjoyed witty, somewhat sardonic conversation. Slightly over six feet, he carried himself with a combination of vigor and fragility. He was verbally sharp, but required extra time making his way to and fro physically and had a slight tremor in the hands. It would later be revealed to me that in addition to the residue of a broken leg, he has been diagnosed with a neurological disorder that doctors think could be one of two conditions, which are both slow moving, but progressive.

Knowing virtually nothing about the "second generation" of the so-called New York School of poets (which, in addition to Tony's cohort of Paul and Charles, is usually thought of as including Bill Berkson, David Shapiro, Ted Berrigan, and Ron Padgett), I went to the Saint Mark's Bookshop soon after and flipped through his then recent chapbook *Nine Immaterial Nocturnes* (2003). I was immediately struck by the imagery – such as the final lines of "Ethos": . . . *for that's what happens to an ethos: it dapples the landscape / like invisible confetti from a distant century, / falling unobserved as one rakes the leaves, / gathers the kindling.*

I got to know Tony better in January 2004 when my poet friend Justin Jamail and I participated in a reading with Tony and Paul Violi at the Bowery Poetry Club in Manhattan. Then in February 2005 I asked him to read alongside Billy Collins for the final reading in a poetry series I organized for the Accompanied Library at the National Arts Club in Manhattan. It was a thrill to stand before a standing-room-only audience and introduce him and his work. (Regrettably, my introduction was lost and therefore cannot be quoted from for the purposes of background.) I maintained occasional contact with Tony over the next four years – mostly through poetry readings, e-mail exchanges, and from time to time for dinner.

Tony was initially wary about this dissertation being written, and explained that the psychological treatments of poets he'd read tended to "ransack" the life to explain the poems, whereas poetry, for him, was, if not *outside* of life exactly, not autobiographical, per se. He didn't decide to write poetry, he was impelled to. That being said, he seemed intrigued by the idea of a dissertation being written on his cohort, which he feels has been routinely ignored by the poetry establishment. Although he never came out and said he was pleased I was writing the dissertation, and did say that he was happy a younger person was interested in what he had to say.

<u>Brief Life History</u>

Early Life

*

The gulls glide, in 1939, into the bonus of another country,
the balloons and machinery of all the Europes and Americas,
a hundred million thoughts at rest in the river,
stirring, as I begin to think about myself,
and in the history of my ears making a beginning of the frontier.
—from "Sunrise: Ode To Frank O'Hara" (1966-67)

Tony Towle was born into a middle-class family in 1939 at Lenox Hill Hospital in Manhattan. The Towles lived in Inwood before moving to Rego Park, Queens when he was two, so his father, who did (non-aviation) interior design work for American Airlines could be close to the airport that would be named LaGuardia. They lived on the top floor of a six-story brick building off the ten-lane thoroughfare of Queens Boulevard, looking west toward Manhattan. There were twelve such buildings, quite new at the time, on each of two blocks. By the time the Towle family moved into Apartment 6D at 64-39 98th Street, in 1941, the area was a growing white, middle-class neighborhood, and became predominantly Jewish after the war. Their apartment building was the last before several block-long excavations stretching west that were put on hold during the war and which provided the neighborhood children a jungle of trees – mostly sumac – to spend long afternoons playing in. It did not resume development until a couple of years after World War II. Here's how Rego Park is described by Tony in the long poem "Autobiography," from 1971:

> Next door, back in Rego Park at the end of the Forties,
> "Walden Terrace" arose, its eight stories of cement
> making obsolete our previously majestic six of brick,
> and was the home of Sid Caesar for a while
> who was good for a dollar tip on a drugstore delivery.
> People came from nowhere after the war,
> like going nowhere after it.
> We played in the postwar expansion as the buildings went up,
> then faced with a vanishing frontier our families pushed on …

Tony characterizes his childhood—at least up to the age of nine—as "imaginative" and "escapist." He recalls that the apartment buildings on Queens Boulevard were connected by a series of hallways that felt like a subterranean maze, which, he surmises, impelled him to write the line "Also tunnels run existing beneath the

floors" in the poem "A Note To Charles North," written in 1973. His childhood memories reflect an awareness that "the city" was over there. Quoting again from "Autobiography,"

> … on July 15, 1960, I began writing poems,
> which oddly enough has made me feel gradually more comfortable,
> at least an improvement over when I was nine, in Rego Park,
> slowly ripening beside the great asphalt ladle of Queens Boulevard
> which led a broad trail of starry lights
> to the distant elegance of a visible Manhattan …

Although he has a vague recollection that he could see the Manhattan skyline in the distance from his bedroom window, his father, who was an artist as well as interior designer, had paintings of the stylized buildings as seen from the east, hanging in the apartment – along with framed Museum of Modern Art reproductions of Matisse's Fauve-period sailor and an O'Keeffe barn, as well as antique Chinese plates. Other early memories include: wearing a pair of striped overalls that were ridiculed by another child in the playground, drawing in crayon the faces of Mussolini and Hitler and Tojo on wooden blocks, a Victory Garden plot his mother kept during the war in one of the block-long vacant lots. Tony also remembers the traffic he could hear from his room (punctuated by periodic silences provided by red lights). He thinks that it was for this reason that his first visit to the country, at the age of five, was frightening. The "deafening silence" and "dark tree shapes" were scary, as was the realization that anyone could just come through the window at anytime. His bedroom in Queens, after all, was a good 50 feet off the ground.

Tony's father, Erwin Weible Towle, was born in 1905 and came from "a quasi-prominent family" in Omaha. His Uncle Roy was elected mayor for a term in the '30s, and had also been police chief. The black sheep of the family, Erwin rebelled against

Midwestern, Protestant values, and moved east to New York City as a young man. Though his education was "spotty," he had artistic talent and found regular employment as an interior designer. On the one hand, Tony characterizes his father as "funny and disarmingly charming." However, he was ambivalent about having a family, and behaved in ways that were "thoughtless" and "absentee." But Tony credits Erwin for inculcating in him a sense of aesthetics and recalls the colorful reproductions of O'Keeffe, Matisse, and Picasso hung on the walls of their apartment, in addition to a bronze Buddha, an antique Korean chest, a Persian rug, and expensive drapes and sofas that decorated the place. He also recalls a collection of classical 78s that included Tchaikovsky, Gershwin, Katchaturian, and Stravinsky — and the scariness of the cover of the latter's *Firebird* seen at the age of four or five, and remembers the music as scary as well.

Tony's mother, Mary Rigg, was born in 1913 in Decatur, Illinois. His maternal grandfather was an insurance salesman. His mother died of cancer in 1965, and his father 23 years later, in 1988 – at that point living in government-assisted housing on Miami Beach. I asked how it was to lose his father and Tony explained, again, that they were never particularly close and that that he didn't travel to Florida to attend the funeral. He was closer to his mother than his father, and had a close relationship to his sister, Terry, who was born in 1947 and died in 1987, of cancer, at 40. The two younger siblings are very much younger: Tom (born in 1954) and Peg (born in 1956).

Tony's feelings for women were always strong. He recalls a robust desire for girls while in 8th grade at the all-boys YMCA's McBurney School on 63rd Street in Manhattan. In *Memoir*, he writes, "It was my one year in private school and I had to

commute on the subway from Rego Park. It was a boy's school only and, as socially backward a 12-year-old as I was, I found that I greatly missed the presence of girls in the classroom." When his family moved to Dobbs Ferry in Westchester the following year, he attended the public (co-ed) high school, but didn't have a girlfriend until his sophomore year – Roslyn – to whom he lost his virginity. Although their time "going steady" was brief, she gave him an atlas as a gift, which had a lasting effect, piquing an interest in the Foreign Service. Tony studied the maps for hours on end, in addition to reading what he could about history, especially military history. This provided an escape from a present he characterized as largely "depressing." The same was true for the literature he read. And he enjoyed escaping into the world of Shakespeare, especially *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice*, although had no interest in trying to write his own verse until later. "It simply never occurred to me," Tony says…"…it would not have been considered a 'normal' thing for teenage boys to do." Tony claims to have always had a capacity for historical memory, and when he was nine memorized the Presidents of the United States in order, and then moved on to memorize the monarchs of England. A punctilious knowledge of historical dates (both personal and global) is something that makes much of his poetry.

Tony had broken up with Roslyn (the geographical distance was too much to overcome) and, when he was a senior, started dating a junior named Monica. During a senior class trip to Bear Mountain, a state park on the Hudson River, they ventured off by themselves into the woods. Monica soon found out that she was pregnant, which was inopportune because Tony had just been accepted by Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. A year younger than Tony, Monica dropped out of school and followed

the young man whose baby she was carrying. Frightened, they decided to keep the pregnancy a secret. Not surprisingly, the pressures of supporting a pregnant girlfriend necessitated that Tony drop out of Georgetown and find a job halfway through his first semester. He didn't have much luck and writes in *Memoir* about a job he had selling encyclopedias in a suburban neighborhood outside D.C. in December 1957 that left him, "steeped in despair and self-pitying ruminations, not having come even close to making a sale."

Monica gave birth at Georgetown Hospital to a girl they named Melissa Ann, but there were complications. She developed hydrocephalus, or water on the brain, a few days after they brought her home from the hospital. This condition wasn't easily treated in the late fifties. Furthermore, Tony, not yet eighteen, was unable to legally sign the birth certificate. Worried that the baby would require an operation, he sent a panicked telegram to his mother and father, then living in Rye, New York. It soon became clear that the child would need special care so Tony did some research and located a "D.C. home" and arranged for Melissa Ann to be taken away permanently. In order to make this happen, though, he first needed to explain his financial situation to a District of Columbia judge. Making between $35 and $60 per month (having found a job at a furniture store), he worked out a deal to pay $15 each month toward the care of the child. Looking back, he characterizes this as an instance in which he was able to assert some control over a situation via verbal acuity. He never saw Melissa Ann again.

Months later, Monica found out that she was again pregnant. They were already married at this point, having – after an extensive search – located a Presbyterian minister in the District who was willing to marry them while Monica was carrying Melissa Ann.

Tony explains that "…it took several agonizing months to find a minister who would even perform the ceremony, since we were underage, and parental permission was out of the question since we had decided not to tell them why we eloped – as if any reasonable person couldn't have given it a good guess." Their second baby, a boy named Malcolm Scott, was born on April 6, 1959, the night of the Academy Awards. The baby didn't bring much joy. Tony's spirits continued to deteriorate and he experienced several episodes of suicidal ideation. At one of his many jobs during 1958, he had purchased a .22 pistol from a co-worker; it came with five bullets. His rationale was burglars, but, not surprisingly, Monica was upset by the purchase. He'd load the gun and place it in the dresser drawer and then Monica would find it and take the bullets out. By the spring of 1960, things were unbearable. He recalls a terrible argument during which he took out the gun, which, luckily, happened to be unloaded, pressed it to his temple and squeezed the trigger six times in front of a horrified Monica. He then tossed the gun on the bed and went out for a walk.

In May 1960 he strolled into a "beat" coffee house, a type that had started becoming fashionable everywhere. Though he knew about the beat poets Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, he was far from being a beatnik himself and didn't feel the least bit hip (after all, he had an office job at a furniture store). Still, two important things happened at the café: first, he wrote some lines that could be considered his first poem; and second, he began to seriously consider leaving his domestic situation—and that if he didn't, "something bad was going to happen." Here's how he describes it in *Memoir*:

> I had begun, surreptitiously, writing poems in 1960, in Washington, in reaction to and escape from a two-and-a-half-year-long teenage marriage that had become unendurable. Sometime that May, I found myself sitting alone in a Beat-style coffee house, writing down a few lines I felt were a poem. With that experience

> working on me below the surface, in mid-July, on what seemed at the time an impulse from nowhere, I called in sick to my job of two years at a furniture store, walked over to a park on Wisconsin Avenue near our apartment, and wrote my second and third poems. This was exhilarating and at the same time instantly made my current life seem even more unbearable. That evening I had yet one more horrible argument with my wife, Monica, and a day or two later I moved out and got a room by myself, leaving her with Scott, our infant son. I left the job, too, a week or so later, and by mid-August, with a scant forty dollars to my name, I was on the train to New York. I would stay at my parents' house in Rye, their final move in Westchester, until I reestablished myself somehow. I was impelled to leave the situation I was in. Suicide had often struck me as one alternative, poetry had unexpectedly provided another.

Tony represents the emergence of his early poetic identity in more metaphoric and ironic, terms in "Autobiography":

> For ten years I have courted the muse,
> through memories and despair, poverty,
> the specters of urban development,
> and the blood of an unbelievable impatience.
>
> At a certain point my imagination began to stir, like boats,
> sitting on a still horizon, moved by a gathering breeze,
> torn apart in a tempest,
> and by the nerves in the following calm.
>
> At first I boiled the language, like an egg,
> the spirit broken at the insufferable hands of sociology,
> until at last the ground trembled and broke, like an egg,
> and I could imagine filling some small need of literature's
> as well as finally, and in a modest way, my own…

With poetry came a new friend, a young woman by the name of Carol. During his time at the furniture store, Tony met a British girl named Faith who had an older brother who was prematurely gray and who was having an affair with Carol, whom Tony himself would soon have a four-week romance with. He describes her as "a medium-sized brunette with large brown eyes. She was a year younger than I was, and, though she was also from an un-exotic part of Westchester (White Plains), she struck me as extremely cool. She used the French *"tu piges?"* – presumably the equivalent of: *"you dig?"* She

had smoked marijuana, which she referred to as "boo."" Despite being "afraid of drugs," Carol thought Tony was cool, partly – he imagines – because he would walk around with a pipe in his belt "like a pistol." She also dug that he wrote poetry and gave him a copy of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *Coney Island of the Mind*, which was the first contemporary collection Tony ever read. Poetry was no longer the province of dead authors like Virgil, Shakespeare, and Keats, but a form that was open to the people and doings of the living. Carol also told him about some New York City painters, the Abstract Expressionists, and boasted that she "hung out" with William de Kooning at a popular painter and poet's bar downtown called the Cedar.

Tony began daydreaming about an entirely different kind of life: "Carol engendered in me vague dreams of being with her as a poet in New York, meeting painters, hanging out in bars, and doing interesting and artistic things." Reflecting upon his decision to leave Washington D.C., Tony explained to me that, "It was perhaps both the most precipitate and necessary decision of my life, as well as the least defensible from a conventional point of view."

New York City

*

Poem

Awake, I move in a doubtful margin.
New York is a cloud. I awaken

and pictures move on the wall.
There is nothing to say;

I am alone with the changing weather
and I made sure I was going to be here.

In Rye, it wasn't long before Tony felt stifled by his parents and their expectation that he find a regular 9 to 5 job. Overall, his family felt ambivalent at best about his sudden interest in writing poems and "becoming" a poet. In *Memoir*, he tells a story about showing some work to his paternal grandmother, who was close to 80 and visiting from Omaha: "I brought her a half a dozen or so and sat there while she read them. After a few minutes, she remarked matter-of-factly, more to herself than to me: 'I just don't see how you're part of us. I just don't see where you come from.' I had nothing to say in response. I didn't know either."

On the first morning of his job search, Tony took a train to Grand Central and walked halfway up the stairs of an employment agency on 42nd Street, but was hit by the realization that he didn't want a job, at least none that the agency was likely to offer, so bolted down the stairs and started walking south until he reached Washington Square Park. Although he didn't know Greenwich Village well, he "knew it was the place to be" and walked around until he found a café, which he began visiting regularly, called the Figaro. Similar to the sense of alienation he experienced at the beatnik café in D.C., he assumed that "…those who were really 'with it' at the Figaro knew that I was not one of their number. I didn't project the appropriate attitude, for one thing." Forty years later, in poem called "In The Coffee House," Tony remembers his early days there:

> I should have brought
> something to read
> because I have nothing to do now
> but write, the way I used to
> forty years ago, in the Figaro
> in the Village
> at Bleecker and MacDougal, exhilarated
> by loneliness, poverty, and paralyzing
> indecision, resolutely ignoring the fact

that everyone cool in there
knew that I wasn't—
lost to what was happening
behind the overpriced coffee, 35 cents
for the fuel
to infiltrate oblivion;

and I waited for a girlfriend
and composed jejune little ironies
that I hoped would pass for poems
and I had all the time in the world.

It wasn't long before he decided to find the Cedar Bar, half-hoping to find Carol there (she had moved to NYC with no forwarding address). But instead of a dynamic gathering of Abstract Expressionist painters and their poet friends sipping martinis, he stepped into a small, dingy bar with several shady-looking men talking in hushed tones; and he left immediately. "The Cedar," he remembers, "was not an *inviting* watering hole; you had to work your way into it, and I didn't begin *that* process until at least a year or so later. As for famous artists, if de Kooning himself had been sitting there, I wouldn't have recognized him; I didn't even know what his *paintings* looked like."

Gradually, some semblance of a professional and social life began to congeal. He found a temp job working at *The Herald Tribune* on West 41st Street and then a position working as a distributor at the Franklin Department Store located at 36th Street and Sixth Avenue, even *closer* to The Village. He enjoyed the fact that it paid $80 a week and that wearing a suit and tie was required, which he preferred "as it provided a veneer of respectability for my general insecurity." He also met two new friends while hanging around The Village. They owned motorcycles and hung around Washington Square Park and "had an alienated drop-out attitude" that involved smoking pot, taking methadrine and peyote and "a bewildering variety of uppers and downers." Though Tony abstained

from drugs (on account of being *afraid* of them), he happily accepted an offer to move in with them on Nelson Avenue in the Bronx. Although it felt liberating to be away from his parents, the bachelor conditions on Nelson Avenue were by no means ideal. He remembers the place as being marked by "*ur*-bachelor accommodations: not much furniture and no attempt at any sort of housekeeping. The dishes were *never* washed." He wrote little poetry while living there, and recalls working on one or two pieces incessantly, but with unsatisfactory results.

However, he began to read more and more contemporary poetry, starting with T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland and Other Poems*. More than Ferlinghetti's *Coney Island of the Mind*, Eliot's lines (especially from *Ash Wednesday*) stuck with Tony, and he was intrigued by the notion that poetry could be personal and lyrical, as opposed to being epic and overblown. Through a woman he was courting, to an unsatisfactory end, he was also introduced to a number of classics, including *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Pride and Prejudice, Madame Bovary,* and *The Red and the Black.* On several occasions in *Memoir*, Tony underscores that he came at great literature "from left field" – without having studied it "in an academic setting." "It was the most *disciplined* reading I have ever done," Tony recalls, "and it worked. Flaubert, Joyce, Stendhal, and Jane Austen were able to keep me from self-pity and claustrophobia."

After moving apartments and being laid off from the Franklin Department Store, Tony found a new job working in the NYU library stacks as a "runner," which he describes as "demeaning," but circumstances necessitated that he remain until he could save some cash. He characterizes the period as "nightmarish:" he was working a grunt job, had no woman in his life, wasn't eating regularly or particularly well, and was

drinking too much coffee and smoking too many cigarettes—and suffered through a case of anxiety-induced insomnia that culminated in debilitating flu-symptoms that lingered for a number of weeks and further intensified his melancholia.

As it had in the past, and would again, literature provided a diversion. As an employee of NYU, Tony was allowed two free courses per semester. He decided upon an English composition class and a survey of medieval and renaissance French literature. In the French literature class, he was taken with the figure of Clément Marot, who was able to successfully get out of jail on two occasions by writing long poems to Francis I. It was also around this time (late January or early February 1961) that Tony came across Donald M. Allen's classic *New American Poetry, 1945-1960*. Allen aimed to present readers to a "third generation" of living American modernists poets, and made the decision to include relatively unknown poets published only in the little magazines of the late-fifties. Poets represented in the volume included Helen Adam, John Ashbery, Ray Bremser, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, Denise Levertov, James Schuyler, and Gary Snyder—to name a few.

Of all the poets included in the massive 400-page anthology, Tony found himself most drawn to the "New York" poets, explaining that "The "New York" poets (James Schuyler, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, and John Ashbery, in particular) because they, he explains, "'represented' New York, but partly too because I found the work a little more enigmatic and harder to get a hold of. I found this inspiring rather than discouraging. I wanted to create things that were equally elusive and wonderful." Excited by what he read in the anthology, Tony shared some of his poems with an NYU student named Barbara who was in one of the classes and with whom he was briefly

involved romantically. Barbara encouraged him to read the poetry of Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams, which provided some context for the early-twentieth-century modernist groundwork beneath the post-war poets in the Allen anthology. After a brief affair, Barbara moved to Paris to study at the Sorbonne, and Tony found some roommates and a place to live downtown on East 3rd Street between Avenues B and C, which, although hardly the gentrified neighborhood it is today, was close to NYU and The Village. In June of that year he noticed an advertisement in the New York Times for a series of six poetry readings to be held on Sundays at the New School University. He recognized a number of the featured poets from the Donald Allen anthology and very much wanted to attend, but waited until the fifth reading, which featured Kenneth Koch.

The New York School

*

my life is barely started, from January 1963,
when I knew it would have to be poetry or nothing.
Since then I have looked mostly like a lawyer, a broker,
but in struggles with the eternal verities,
and with always the one day to be disposed of;
at times in nostalgia for someone's past – not my own –
I told Frank that his poems made me have it for his,
and I had it for John's, Kenneth's, and Jimmy's,
and Joe's, Norman's, Larry's, Joan's, Mike's, and Jane's as well.
I came to know these people, but I don't really, of course,
as I go on with my work to some distant point,
with most of the feelings I had before
and the sorrow of literature I learned to keep.
—from "Addenda" (1971)

Tony describes Kenneth's reading in *Memoir:* "The reader this week was Kenneth Koch, whose name, one learned, was pronounced "Coke." His poems in Allen's *New American Poetry* were among those that I found most intriguing. They outdistanced me, so to speak – they seemed to include so *much*. The big surprise during the reading,

however, was that the audience laughed quite often – and knowledgeably. I hadn't realized that Koch's work was quite that funny. It hadn't occurred to me that poetry *could be*. I soon started laughing when everybody else did, so I wouldn't look like a fool, but I couldn't help feeling that I was the only person there who wasn't really getting it."

The final of the six readings featured Frank O'Hara, who despite not educing the laughter of Koch's reading, "got the same impressively appreciative ovation as Koch had the week before." Now with faces to match to some of the names in the Allen anthology, Tony began hanging out a bit at the Cedar Bar. And it was during an early visit that he had his first conversation with Frank O'Hara. He nervously approached O'Hara and complimented him on his reading at the New School, and was told by O'Hara that his evening had been made by being recognized. Tony remembers being struck by O'Hara's "nasally voice," and the way he "gave ordinary words in a phrase an unexpected inflection;" this led Tony to surmise that O'Hara "was almost certainly a homosexual." Regardless, the two sat at the bar and began talking about poetry, and Tony was soon asked if he wrote, to which he answered "Oh, I try." He recalls feeling humiliated that compared to a "famous" poet like Frank he had not written anything noteworthy, and certainly nothing that he felt comfortable sharing. O'Hara, though, was gracious and seemed interested in what he had to say.

After Frank left, Tony sat at the bar thinking about what had just taken place. His ruminations, though, were interrupted by a Cedar acquaintance who came over and asked Tony if he was queer. Startled, Tony answered, "No, I'm not." The guy explained that neither was he but that Frank had looked depressed and was clearly looking for someone to go home with. In *Memoir* Tony writes about finding it ironic that although his

encounter with O'Hara was warm and genuine, it could only go so far on account of his *not* being homosexual. But sexual politics aside, the chance meeting is a key moment in his life story.

Unhappy with the NYU library job and lonely after Barbara's departure, Tony impetuously decided to leave New York for a time and travel to Mexico. Not being able to afford a ticket, he decided to answer an advertisement for volunteers to deliver a car to San Francisco—a topsy-turvy trip that resulted in a short period of time living and working in Los Angeles. "As ephemeral as they seemed," Tony's literary ambitions called him back to New York. Still thinking about the reading series and his encounter with O'Hara at the Cedar Bar, he was able to find Koch and O'Hara books at a large bookstore on Hollywood Boulevard. He found *Second Avenue* (a short, but difficult book-length poem by O'Hara) challenging but with a little time felt he actually comprehended it. He was also quite taken with the "extravagant imagery and free-wheeling satire" of Koch's *Thank You*. Koch – Tony recalled – was planning on teaching a poetry seminar in January at the New School. And so, with a $100 donation from his grandmother from New Rochelle, Tony booked a one-way ticket on a Greyhound Bus traveling nonstop from L.A. to Manhattan.

It was only a matter of days before he found himself at the Cedar, where he encountered O'Hara again, who seemed genuinely pleased to see him. After some talk about California, Tony explained that he was planning to take Kenneth Koch's workshop at the New School. Kenneth – coincidentally – just happened to be a few feet down the bar and O'Hara insisted on making an introduction. Here is the account from *Memoir*:

> A day or two later, I took the train down to the city and went to the Cedar. It certified the culture shock. The bar was brimming with the kind of assertive

> energy I didn't see in Los Angeles. I got a beer and made my way down the bar. There was Frank O'Hara, with a dark-haired young man. O'Hara seemed genuinely pleased to see me and introduced Frank Lima – who sized me up suspiciously. To make conversation, I mentioned that I had just gotten back from California. O'Hara said how marvelous and, naturally enough, asked me what I had been doing there. I immediately realized that the briefest description of my trip would show what an idiot I was to have taken off like that, so I fudged the details and changed the subject. I mentioned that I understood Kenneth Koch was conducting a poetry workshop at the New School and I was going to attend. "Oh, really? Kenneth is right over here." To my astonishment, and before I could ask him please not to, O'Hara walked the few feet to the bar and came back with Kenneth Koch. "This young man is going to take your class at the New School." My astonishment turned to chagrin. Koch looked at me expectantly. I didn't know what to say. I wanted to compliment him; I had spent many hours getting to know *Thank You*, and it had been a pleasure and a revelation to do so. "Oh, Mr. Koch, I love your work. It's so . . . so . . . I was floundering for a synonym for "sophisticated," which wasn't quite right, but I knew the perfect word was there somewhere. He stood there waiting for me to finish my sentence. Superficial is what I heard myself saying. Koch stared at me in disbelief for a second or two, then turned away and walked back to the bar. What had I done! I was mortified beyond belief.

As it turned out, both Koch and O'Hara were offering workshops that year. Tony decided it would be a good idea to take the two simultaneously, and thinks his mother may have loaned him the $80 that was required to enroll in both. It was a fortuitous decision looking back. He was incredibly inspired by Koch's teaching style, which brought "…fresh air on stale attitudes about poetry and what it should or should not be." O'Hara's teaching style, on the other hand, was comparatively "low-key" and "laissez faire," although O'Hara, unlike Koch, encouraged students to come with him to the Cedar for drinks and conversation at the end of each class.

These impromptu meetings gave Tony and Frank an opportunity to get to know one another better. Toward the end of the semester, Frank invited Tony over to his apartment for a drink, an invitation that Tony accepted, though not without some apprehension: "I thought it would surely be interesting, a privilege, even, to get to know Frank personally, but I didn't ever want to be in a position of having to fight him off."

Luckily, Frank was a gentleman and read the signs perfectly: Tony was "straight." After drinking a glass of bourbon with Frank and his roommate, Joe LeSueur, the two sat in the kitchen and drank a second glass while listening to a shared favorite composer, Prokofiev. Listening to Prokofiev's *Third Piano Concerto*, Tony was astounded to learn that Frank, who had been trained as a classical pianist, was able to play the concerto, but had given up piano because he thought he could be a better poet than musician.

Over the months that followed, Tony and Frank became increasingly friendly, and Tony was given phone "privileges"—that is, he could phone for no particular reason, just to chat. In Gooch's biography of O'Hara (1993), Joe LeSueur discusses how their home life in the early 60s was burdened by frequent and unannounced visits by a dozen or so new young poets. "I never fought them off, but I sure didn't want those young poets coming around as often as they did," LeSueur explains. "They would come sometimes before Frank got home from work. I remember Tony [Towle] downstairs yelling up, 'Frank! Joe! Are you up there? I know you're up there. Let me in.' He wanted to come up and drink our liquor and wait for Frank so they could sit and talk and talk and talk and talk" (Gooch, 1993, 401-402). Frank also invited Tony to parties where he met artists like Jane Freilicher, Larry Rivers, Mike and Patty Goldberg, Alex Katz – and poets such as John Ashbery, Bill Berkson, David Shapiro, Barbara Guest, James Schuyler, Kenward Elmslie, LeRoi Jones (later Amiri Baraka), and also Allen Ginsberg, with whom Tony once peed into the same toilet at one of Frank's parties. After Frank's workshop ended, Tony applied and was accepted to the New York City Writer's Conference, the $200 tuition being covered by scholarship. The writer's conference, in its third season was

held at Wagner College on Staten Island and directed by Willard Maas, who was on the English faculty there.

In April of '63, three months before the conference, Tony and another young poet named Frank Lima had taken over O'Hara and Joe LeSueur's apartment on the second floor of 441 East 9nth Street. Frank [O'Hara] continued to spend time there since his new apartment was in the process of being renovated, which led to "a dorm room party atmosphere," which was a good deal of fun socially, although not so restful when it came to actually domesticating his new apartment. Tony and Frank Lima were asked by a classmate from the New School to participate in a group reading, his first reading ever, at the Smolin Gallery on 57th Street, after the workshop came to a close. He writes about how Frank [Lima] and he devised a strategy for slowing one another down should either get nervous and read too fast: a swift kick under the table. Tony endured several of Frank's kicks as he sped his way through almost all of his material. Still, with a New York City reading under his belt, he went off to the New York City Writer Conference with high hopes. Although the time at Wagner was complicated by a passionate affair he was having with an African-American woman named Gloria, who ended up leaving New York for the south later that summer and breaking his heart, he wrote well enough to be awarded the Gotham Book Mart Avant-Garde Poetry Prize, which he was asked to share with another young poet.

Tony's poems from this period are much different from anything he would write again. Many of them are mysterious, often without being the least bit obscure, and blend the real and the imagined with such care as to make them indistinguishable. In the words of Ron Padgett, "At this relatively early stage of his career, between the ages and 24 and

26, Tony Towle went beyond writing the kind of poem that is fixed in place, like a butterfly specimen, which might be beautiful but certainly is dead. Towle's poems are beautiful too, not because they form decorous displays, but because they are alive with intelligence, urbanity, and multiple voices and views, alive the way the real world is alive anytime we are brave or naïve enough to open up and let it be as astonishing as it is" (15). Take, for example, the mystery in the final stanza of the poem "Prologue:"

> The pilgrims are cautious and exact
> and only a trickle comes to the edge.
> I stir slightly.
> The residue, white, is hung
> Without sound.

Tony was fairly experimental when it came to how he'd go about making poems. Just like the movements within a symphony, the poems convey a continuous depth of feeling, despite the movement that occurs within the space of a single poem. Briefly roommates with the collage artist, Joe Brainard, Tony also began experimenting with collage and from the early spring of '64 to the summer of '65 worked on "Lines for the New Year," a 600-plus-line poem that drew heavily upon a collage technique. This is how Tony describes the poem and his association with Brainard in an interview with Leo Edlestein that was published in Pataphysics magazine in 2003:

> When Frank Lima moved out to get married that fall (1963), I had the place to myself and rather liked it that way. The second bedroom was my storage room. It was Ted Berrigan who prevailed on me to let his friend, "an artist living in Boston right now, a real nice guy," move in. No, Joe had nothing to do with my sense of humor, per se; that was fixed long before, and I think my dark ironies are different from the spirit of Joe's work. However, he was very responsible for my "pop collage" period because, although his collages didn't affect my *work* (although I certainly liked them a lot), some of the materials for them that he scavenged and brought into the apartment did…

> Literary appropriation was very much in the air around this time. One was given permission to tap non-literary outside sources by both the New York School (some of the poems in Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath*, for example, which had come out the previous year), and the French Surrealists. I had been toying with collage in the fall of '63, and had written one poem that was basically taken from advertising, and another that primarily came from a Hindi grammar book — the diction of the translated phrases struck me as wonderfully absurd. But Joe started bringing home periodicals I would never have gone out and bought — comic books, "true romance" magazines, wrestling magazines — which would now be sitting in piles around our kitchen. Joe had moved in in December; in March, I started using Joe's "literary" scavenges in earnest. I was lifting and collaging sentences and sections from all sorts of popular publications and juxtaposing them for effect. I felt no compunction to be "pure" about my borrowings, though. I would tinker with them, changing a word here and there if I thought there was a need for it, especially the pronouns, although the primary effects came, I think, from the juxtapositions.
>
> Anyway, this style sort of took me over from early spring '64 to the summer of '65, when I finally finished "Lines for the New Year," a 600-plus-line poem I had been working on for a year, and which was my farewell to this way of writing…

The first two stanzas of "Lines for the New Year" reads:

> The first day of January is the first day
> of the New Year. In the north
> there is snow and ice and the forest rings
> with the sound of the ax.
> So this is really a game of tag. Run across it
> as if it were a cake, and you were the knife
> cutting it right through the middle. At other times
> the clouds seems to be pillows. My target
> is a cool, tax-free million. I am very calm about it.
> I could end up making a good deal more.
>
> We decided that the sun was a hug plate of gold.
> We wanted to pull it down from the sky with a rope,
> or across the sky, in a boat. We know how to find
> the east. The east is where the sun comes up each morning.
> In the morning we begin the work. There may be hundreds,
> even thousands, of trees to chop down. It will be long after dark
> before we can stop and go home to bed.

The length of the poem (14 tight pages in his selected poems (2001)) was in part a response to Frank O'Hara's challenge to him to write a long collage piece. In the years

between ‘63 and Frank’s tragic death in ‘66, they continued to socialize, enjoying one another’s company immensely. As it was for many, Frank’s tragic and untimely death was a blow to his younger, admiring friend. O’Hara died following an accident on Fire Island in which he was hit by a man speeding in a beach vehicle during the early morning hours of July 24, 1966. Although he survived the collision and was responsive, he died the following day of a ruptured liver at the age of forty, and was buried in the Green River Cemetery on Long Island. Gooch (1993) writes about the rapidity with which the news spread: “What is certain is that at 8:50 PM on July 25, 1966, Frank O’Hara passed away at the age of forty… Within an hour everyone seemed to know of O’Hara’s death. Helen Frankenthaler called Bill Berkson at D.D. Ryan’s in Newport. Patsy Southgate called Joe LeSueur. Joe LeSueur called Larry Rivers. Kynaston McShine called Tony Towle. Tony Towle called Jasper Johns…” (Gooch, 1993, 466).

Thirty-eight years later, Tony would encounter himself in a poem of Frank’s. The date was July 26th 1963 and Tony had come over Frank’s apartment to use his friend’s typewriter, his own having been stolen during a burglary a few months earlier. Here’s how he describes the scene in *Memoir*:

> My recollection, aside from the act of it being an extremely warm and humid night, is that I started working on a poem that I quickly realized would be for Gloria [note: Gloria was his girlfriend at the time]. It came to be called “Poem of August,” but I started in it July, on the 26th. I know the exact date, and that I had actually come over to O’Hara’s loft to type up my previous work, through a poem of Frank’s I had certainly read but never noticed the significance of until about two months ago, almost 38 years later:
>
> *you come by to type*
> *your poems and write a*
> *new poem instead on my*
> *old typewriter while I sit*
> *and read a novel about*
> *a lunatic’s analysis of*

a poem by Robert Frost
it is all suffocating

I had unexpectedly come across myself as an incidental portrait in the second stanza of this lovely miniature study, composed in a bittersweet minor key. In addition to my recollection of looking down at the paper in the typewriter that evening, at the large table Frank also used as a desk, I now have an additional image of myself, in profile and from twenty feet away, Frank's perspective from the sofa near the front windows, as I sweated over my work both literally and figuratively.

The Seventies

*

…For young people there was a pin,
expressing love in simple cascade of diamonds,
on 34th Street
which we give no relief walking and walking,
looking for something to stick it into,
women and children first, apples, walnuts, melons,
the calm transparency of plastic, the gruging
response of lead, or the rolling fog or even a jar of worms!
—From "The Morgan Library" (1970)

I meet up with Tony in January 2009 to discuss the 70s, the decade during which he thinks he wrote his best poems. Our conversation is held over dinner at a quiet café around the block from the Tribeca loft he shares with his girlfriend Diane. Tony is not in good spirits. He is agitated about health problems and feels lonely and overwhelmed because Diane has been away in Boca Raton, Florida for several months arranging for her recently deceased mother's home to be rented. He warns, a minute or two after we sit down, that the 70s are even trickier to write about than the 60s—explaining, again, that his poems are a separate thing from his life—and that he thinks it unlikely that one could tease out biography from the work, which, in addition to being marked by elevated tones, lush, surrealist imagery, extravagant metaphors, and elaborate syntax, present autobiographical material through a filter of humor, irony, and satire. For instance, the

poem “April 24th” catalogues a lengthy list of fellow New York poets with whom he travels on a chartered bus to Cleveland:

> Each year our group holds a ceremony
> at the grave of some great poet, singing
> and praying tribute to his memory
> for some great poems he has left to be read and remembered.
> Last spring, Edwin Denby, Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery,
> Jimmy Schuyler, Kenward Elmslie, Frank Lima,
> Bill Berkson, Joe Ceravolo, Ted Berrigan,
> Allan Kaplan, Ron Padgett, Dick Gallup,
> Peter Schjeldahl, Joe Brainard, John Giorno, Anne Waldman,
> Michael Brownstein, Lewis Warsh, David Shapiro and I
> chartered a bus,
> and went to visit the Hart Crane monument in Cleveland.

But no such trip ever occurred, not to mention the fact that Hart Crane, who committed suicide in 1932 by jumping off a steamship into the Gulf of Mexico, doesn’t have a monument. Tony says, “If you take my work from 70 to 79 I don’t know what a psychologist would make of it without making a mishmash of the poems and spoiling the literary effect.” But as in our earlier conversations, I begin with my first question and then three hours pass without a lull in the conversation.

Tony starts by explaining that 1970 was a big year for him as a poet. He felt part of a poetry renaissance started by Ashbery, O’Hara, Koch, and Schuyler in the late-50s and early-60s. In the late 60s Anne Waldman and her first husband, Lewis Warsh, kept an open house at the Saint Mark’s Place apartment for the poets and artists of their generation, of which Tony was a foundational member, especially since he, like Bill Berkson, had a personal relationship with Frank O’Hara and a number of Frank’s poet and painter friends. Take, for example, the opening stanza of the poem “The New York Clouds,” dedicated to the painter Larry Rivers: “In 1963 I wrote that New York was a

cloud. / Telephones rang. I was swept up / in the most impressive poetry renaissance / since Pound, Eliot, et al. / Larry refined the painted clouds of Africa." Bill Zavatsky, a poet and the publisher of SUN Press, came onto the downtown scene around this time and described Tony as already having established something of a veteran's status around Saint Mark's: "When I came on the scene in the early seventies," says Zavatsky, "Tony was an established junior member of the New York School. For starters, he knew O'Hara and had a friendship with him. Also, one of his early books was published by Tibor de Nagy Gallery, which also published Ashbery and his group. That set him apart from the rest of us, in addition to his being four or five years older."

Tony got to know Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery, and James Schuyler better in the years after the death of O'Hara, and developed nuanced understandings of their works. He catalogues their names in "Addenda":

> I know from Frank O'Hara that
>   the poem and its setting
> are completely at your disposal,
> from Kenneth Koch that the
>   resources of language
> are greater than oneself and
>   thereby liberating,
> from John Ashbery that the
>   mysterious and beautiful
> are still supremely possible,
> and supremely inspiring –
> and James Schuyler's blinding
>   exactitude of observation,
> its serene and tremendous
>   burden.

Tony's work was getting into print. Two collections had been privately printed: eighty copies of *Poems* in 1966, and three-hundred copies of *After Diner We Take a Drive into the Night* was printed by Tibor de Nagy Gallery in 1968. His first major

collection, *North*, was published by Columbia University Press as the third annual winner of the Frank O'Hara Award in 1970. According to Columbia University Press, the award was "meant to carry on in some measure Frank O'Hara's interest in helping new poets in their work." Eligible were poets who had not yet had a book published or accepted for publication by a commercial or university press. The previous year, a board of judges (which included Schuyler and Ashbery) chose the poet Michael Brownstein's collection *Highway to the Sky*, which came as a real blow to Tony. He distinctly recalls being approached by Harry Segessman, an editor at Columbia University Press, at a gallery opening in Manhattan and told that the award was going to Brownstein. According to a letter written by Schuyler (2004), Ashbery had mixed feelings about the manuscript Tony submitted. In an explanatory letter to Koch dated April 1, 1969 Schuyler writes: "Guess you know by now that Michael B [Brownstein] is this year's O'Hara poet. John and I did a lot of buck passing to no avail since we both felt that somehow Tony [Towle] ought—or needed—to get it. But John finally confessed to finding a certain monotony in Tony's mss and that tore it." Tony admits to having been stung by the letter's publication in 2004, even though the event occurred thirty-five years earlier. Similarly, it saddened him that Ashbery said nothing in 2003 when Tony dedicated his chapbook *Nine Immaterial Nocturnes* to him.

In 1970, Tony received an unsolicited note from Harry Segessman asking him to submit a manuscript. Although he was put off from having been passed over in '69, he complied and shortly after was informed by letter of having won. *North,* which featured cover art by the artist Jasper Johns, received a respectable amount of critical attention around the city. Stuart Byron, who Tony first met at the New York City Writer

Conference at Wagner College in '63, wrote a review that characterized it as "an astonishing first book," revealing "a poet of great range, precise and deft use of language, concentrated power… it impresses as did, 10 and 15 years ago, the first books of Creeley and Ashbery, Snodgrass and Howard, Bly and Wright… there are eight or nine poems in *North* which will be read, I feel, for a very long time" [Stuart Byron, The Village Voice, March 18, 1971]. For the jacket blurb, James Schuyler wrote that a "…striking merit of Mr. Towle's work is the way he has found to deal with the disordered opulence of the Surrealist heritage by engaging the hermetic clarities of dreams and the associative in the life which gives rise to them and of which, he convinces us, they are an undetachable part. Poetry continues to be one of the rarest of pleasures, and those who care about it can find here a noble grace, dramatic and personal." A poem from *North* entitled *Poem*, reads:

> A skylight of wire and glass with a retractable roof
> holds the pan of boiling thoughts,
> bubbles of air freezing and thawing
> come upward from the hardened concrete,
> and lends a feeling of drama and steel framework.
>
> We think we are housed in a golden dome,
> with carved and trailing flowers, with nymphs
> to draw close from the brilliant heavens,
> in stacks of glittering elements,
> our attachment to the people we know and space.
>
> We move along in the space, its innumerable
> walks along the beach but really New York,
> summer, fall, blazing away
> and nothing further from the truth.

Poems like this one, written between '65 and '69, have been described by fellow poet and friend Charles North as having "an extraordinary depth of feeling. Another New York poet remarked to me some years ago that of all the poems he continued to

read, Tony's were the ones that invariably moved him to tears" (North, 2001). Looking back, Tony sees the publication of *North* as the climax of his career in terms of recognition; he had an optimistic feeling that he was at the beginning of a long, potentially distinguished career as a writer. "Things took a downturn," he explains wryly, "and by '75 or '76 I felt passed by altogether. Ironically, it was then that I was doing my best work." The work that he churned out during the mid-seventies was different from what he was writing during the time he knew O'Hara. It was less lyrical and abstract and perhaps more elegiac. And though he continued to use surrealist imagery and speech, the work was more autobiographical, albeit complicatedly so. Tony confesses having felt a tinge of guilt for writing poems that were similar to O'Hara's, but got over it when he imagined Frank saying, "Don't blame me for your lousy poetry you big bag of shit." An early example of Frank's breeziness can be found in For *Irma During April*, written in 1967 and included in *North*. The first few lines of the poem read:

> Now it is April, then the great bull of May,
> and then it will be my birthday and time for presents and the beach.
> That's when the poetry of summer descends on you
> if you are a poet, and the metaphors emit an enormous heat,
> tapering off to the luxuriant melancholy verse of fall.
> Then 1968 and my vote for president, and January 1969 and 70. By
> this time my poetry improves, a compliment to the new administration.

Charles North, who is and has been a deft and thoughtful reader and commentator of his friend's work, makes an important distinction between Frank and Tony, writing, "Whereas O'Hara sometimes wrote what he called "I do this I do that" poems, Towle's procedure is something like "I do this I *think* that, now I *am* that, now that has become *this*, now I'm considering what I just thought and felt about that, etc." (North, 2001).

Tony's next three collections, *Lines for the New Year* (1975), *"Autobiography" and Other Poems"* (1977) and *Works on Paper* (1978) were not immediately snatched by eager publishers. All three were published by small presses run chiefly by poet friends affiliated with the downtown poetry scene (e.g. Larry Fagin, David Rosenburg & Bill Zavatsky, and Paul Violi). The poet Hugh Seidman published a positive review of *"Autobiography" and Other Poems"* in The New York Times Book Review, on May 14, 1978, that concludes: "While such poetry may not suit all, Tony Towle is as skilled at it as any, and the poet here is most engaged in exploring language as a medium, aside from its strictly communicative purposes. As he says in "Autobiography": *Then as now my life is very / simple and of course tragic, / but my thoughts are very / complicated*." Tony befriended these and other younger poets when they began hanging around the Poetry Project in the years after O'Hara's death in '66. Many of these men constitute the "horde of younger practitioners" mentioned in a lengthy poem called "Nearing Christmas:"

> My life at any rate is more oblique than Frank's.
> What have I said to the sun, for example.
> What did I ever say to Frank, for that matter,
> brooding on the promontory of my early poetic development,
> silent and self-preoccupied, garrulous and self-preoccupied,
> not that anything's changed too much,
> an aging Frank O'Hara Award winner
> jumping from icefloe to icefloe,
> a step ahead of a horde of younger practioners,
> to whom I nevertheless occasionally turn and shout some advice…

In '69, Tony was asked to teach two semesters of poetry workshops (one in the fall of '69 and one in the spring of '70) at Saint Mark's. He ran them loosely and told participants they were welcome to give him up to six pages of poems per week that he would comment on (this was also the protocol practiced in workshops he'd taken with

Koch and O'Hara some years earlier). It was through these workshops that Tony, then 30 years old, met the slightly younger aspiring poets Paul Violi and Charles North. He remembers that they joined his class, one during the fall '69 workshop and the other during the spring '70 workshop, although he forgets who came when. Tony immediately noticed that they had talent, and as he puts it, "were as good as I was, or at least well on their way." In the tradition of Frank O'Hara, he invited his students to come with him to a local hangout for pizza and drinks, a ritual that usually ate up about twenty of his thirty-five dollar per session stipend. "I would almost always pay most of the bill by the night's end," he reports.

Tony, however, wasn't there for the money. He was happy to have a poetry-related escape from his work and family life. From 1964 until 1981 he was employed at Universal Limited Art Editions (ULAE), Tatyana (Tanya) Grosman's printmaking studio in West Islip, Long Island. She felt the studio needed a secretary, and wanted to find a poet for the job. The only American poet Tanya knew personally was Frank O'Hara who had collaborated with Larry Rivers on Tanya's first project. Knowing Tony needed a job, Frank passed his name to Tanya who shortly after took him on as an employee. Tony felt positive about the job for a good portion of his time there and still hopes to write a serious memoir about his experiences with the artists who would come by to work. As he puts it on his website, "ULAE was in the forefront of the American 'print renaissance' of the '60s and '70s. Between 1957 and 1967 Mrs. Grosman invited Larry Rivers, Jasper Johns, Grace Hartigan, Robert Motherwell, Fritz Glarner, Helen Frankenthaler, Robert Rauschenberg, Lee Bontecou, Jim Dine, Barnett Newman, James Rosenquist, Marisol, and Cy Twombly to add the dimension of printmaking (lithography and etching) to their

oeuvre." He describes his work duties in an extended essay written for the catalogue of the 1997 exhibition *Proof Positive: Forty Years of Contemporary American Printmaking at Universal Limited Art Editions*:

> From originally not knowing what I was supposed to do, I ended up, at one time or another, doing almost everything that needed to be done (except print or cook lunch). First, there was constant travel to and from New York on a bewildering variety of visits and errands. For many years a typical morning could begin with a hasty trip to New York as soon as I arrived and gulped down some coffee… There were actual "secretarial" duties as well: the correspondence Tanya was expecting did materialize, billing, sending out biographies of the artists (which had to be typed up one copy at a time) and typing a "documentative description" (artist, number of stones, paper, size, etc.) on ULAE stationary for each print that went out of the studio. Since Tanya didn't permit any erasures – which went along with her concept of perfection – this could be quite time-consuming by itself.

Although it was inspiring for him to be around famous artists and their works, the job began to conflict with his writing. For one thing, there was the commute; the trip to ULAE required a long train trip to the south shore of the island. Furthermore, the nature of the work entailed irregular hours that at times involved evenings and weekends, especially if there was a deadline pressing down on the studio. Tony was forced to miss many literary events that he "really needed to be at." Whereas Tanya had been "very supportive" when *North* came out, her attitude by the mid-70s began to change. "Being a studio manager for Tanya was becoming a fulltime job," Tony explains. "Could I live in New York and drink and continue to work out there? Tanya thought I should move my family out to Long Island, but I didn't want to do that… I didn't think that would be good for my poetry… Through the years I wanted more and more to be in New York and I was missing things. Many of my friends were more or less professional poets and working in New York and I wanted to be there too." His association with ULAE

dwindled by the end of 1978, though he remained involved in some of the studio's events and functions, working on a part-time basis until 1981.

Tony's life as a husband and father also presented a challenge to his life as a poet. When *North* came out, he was married to the actress Irma Towle, formerly Irma Hurley, and they had a three-year-old daughter named Rachel. He and Irma met at a party in 1964 hosted by a composer friend of Frank's. In his memoir of O'Hara, Joe LeSueur (2003) describes Irma as follows: "In her early twenties, a high-strung, rawboned slip of a girl with enormous, panic-stricken eyes…" (LeSueur, 2003, 167) Tony met Irma at a party and by May 1965 they were a serious couple. She was several years older. In August they moved into an apartment at 100 Sullivan Street and married the following year. In hindsight, Tony claims feeling that the marriage was a mistake fairly early on, but *didn't* want a repeat of the debacle with Monica that had marred his early twenties. Any thoughts of leaving the relationship were further buried when Irma got pregnant, giving birth to Rachel in July 1967. Unlike Tony's relationship with Scott, he was close to Rachel from the beginning. "It was apparent," he explained, "from the time she was about three. There was closeness there, and still is."

On the one hand, he was enamored of his daughter, and – a self-described "traditionalist" – enjoyed aspects of domestic life. He had grown up in "the buttoned up fifties" and wanted very much to be monogamous. On the other hand, he felt constrained by the expectations of Irma at home and Tanya at work. This led to an increase in his drinking, which he surmises led to a pattern of promiscuity, and lots of it. Tony began having extra-marital affairs about five or six years into his marriage. Between '69 and '79, he reports having scads of one-night stands and several multiyear affairs. One of

these longer affairs was with a woman named J— . He explains that they developed a strong sexual bond that flowered into a six-year relationship. Early on, J— was even responsible for a couple of flings he had. "I'd be at art parties and because I couldn't have her I'd get together with someone else. But she liked me and there was always something there." J— had come to New York City from Chicago to work at the Whitney Museum of Art and Tony had gotten to know her through collaborations between the museum and artists at ULAE. In 1973 he delivered a slide to her apartment, a visit that ended with the two in bed. When I asked if Irma knew about what was going on, he responded, "I think on some level she did. But on some level since I would say that I was going out to drink – and since she knew I drank a lot – there was a presumption that I wasn't going to be doing anything other than that. But *that* never affected me, at least not until my fifties." Tony says that being spontaneous and open to the unexpected – which was important for poetry – involved having the time to stop into a bar, which always at least had the possibility of leading to a sexual experience. On several occasions he found himself drunk at the Chelsea Hotel with a woman he'd just met, leaving a false address (usually somewhere in Minneapolis) with the "pig-faced" attendant.

Concerned that his drinking was getting out of hand, Tanya Grosman suggested he see a psychiatrist in 1976. Because many doctors were also amateur art collectors, Tanya knew a number of psychiatrists, one of whom had a practice on Park Avenue. Tony describes giving the psychiatrist his three books in exchange for three sessions, after which he discontinued the therapy: "I probably wasn't a very good patient…. probably not very forthcoming. One thing I remember was that during the second or third session – and there were no more – he told me, 'You know you have a way of

talking about yourself as if you were someone else.' Walking home I thought *wow what a great thing to say*. I was thinking *he's right*. I even used it as an epigraph for a poem that was never published."

I asked Tony whether he experimented with drugs during this period. The seventies, after all, have a reputation for having been a time of sexual liberation and recreational drug use, especially in the arts. He tried smoking marijuana on one memorable occasion but didn't care for the effects it had. "I remember smoking at a party in '64. I think Bill Berkson was there. And I got so paranoid I felt that people were against me. I remember thinking that and then thinking that it couldn't be true later on. I felt that people were being nasty to me; and that was not good. I certainly don't need that kind of device in a social situation, so I avoided it for a while. But then in the late 70s there was a woman I met at the church [Saint Mark's] and she was into pot and had me over one night and we smoked. She said she had this aphrodisiac pot and so I said 'yeah, I'll try that!' It was just the two of us, not at a party. And that was *very* enjoyable. She was right. I saw her for a couple of times."

In a move that he continues to characterize as "inexcusable" and "insane," Tony left Irma in 1979. Rachel was thirteen years old at the time. Although he hadn't wanted to repeat the messy debacle with Monica and their infant son Scott, he met someone whose affections he felt he couldn't pass over, at least not then. The woman was Jean Holabird, an attractive painter who seemed sympathetic to his needs as an artist. Tony and Jean would live together on Warren Street for the next fourteen years, coming undone in the mid-90s in response, at least in part, to a "public affair" Jean would have with a sous chef in Tribeca.

Though his marriage was in shambles, and his drinking was escalating to a point where he would eventually need to seek help through rehab and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Tony wrote more in the seventies than he ever would again. Life was topsy-turvy and entirely without the predictable rhythms that many writers need to produce quality work. Somehow, though, he managed to write and write and write. From the poems of this period, he feels especially positive about "Nearing Christmas," which chronicles the first time he reports having heard Frank's voice. In other words, some of the language in the poem came to him as if it were spoken to him by his old friend and mentor. The action in the poem takes place at Bloomingdale's on December 15th 1971, where an intoxicated Tony went to buy skirts as a Christmas present for Irma. The final lines read:

> Finally I have gone to Bloomingdale's
> and I am back.
> You call that lyric you big bag of shit?
> I am not talking to myself,
> or in that manner to a great poet of the past,
> that must be Frank, talking to me;
> I am at last fully awake in this mortal life,
> for the few years in the middle,
> and I keep myself opaque and I don't regret it,
> on the promontory.
>
> Frank you've got to help me
>
> and there is an answer but not at this moment.

The Last Decade

*

> Well, like the Mets I'm coming up to bat in the bottom
> of the 9th, or the 8th, if I'm lucky,
> but far behind in the game —
> and the music seems to have stopped to listen.
> —From "Digression, 5/10/03" (2003)

I met Tony at the same Tribeca café in late May 2009 for our fifth and final conversation, which we agreed would be dedicated to roughly the last ten or so years of his life. Tony shows up looking fresh, but complains of feeling rather gloomy about things. His health hasn't been good and he wonders how much more time he has. He will be headlining a reading in the autumn at Saint Mark's and imagines that it may very well be his last. And in a month's time he'll be seventy, a birthday he's not particularly looking forward to:

> Seventy is a big number. You don't come back from there. You're beginning to get old. This American optimistic horseshit that 'O you're young.' No! Fuck you! You're fifty and you're telling me I'm young! I don't want to hear it! It's like you hear 'O my 85 year old grandfather just married a fifty year old woman and plays three sets of tennis a day.' What the fuck does that have to do with me? You hear 'O you're not old.' Sometimes you are old! It's an American thing. You're 85 and you're not old! Yes you are! You're lying there with tubes and you're not old? Not that I'm a Bible freak, but I think it's right on the money: three score and ten. And I've thought for quite some time that once you get to be 70 that's the beginning of old age because that's getting up there. I mean, yes, you can be a young 75, but you're 75, not 45. Don't kid yourself. I can't imagine I will think differently in five years, if I make it five years. I don't know anybody who gets to 80… Larry [Rivers], Kenneth [Koch]… and they had money. Seventy-eight seems to be it. So, I can't imagine how much more over 80 I could live and the kind of life I would have.

And worst of all, he hasn't written anything in over a year. This is disconcerting because writing has been the only thread in his life—"through the relationships, the bad relationships, jobs, losing jobs, and not having money, or very little. That is the only thread and I've had a very difficult time in the last year writing… I stopped writing when I got the proofs for my last book… I took a vacation and when it was time to get back on the horse I'd forgotten how to ride." Without writing he doesn't know what his life is about. This disconcerting hiatus, luckily, came to an end with the composition of a poem

written on the occasion of his seventieth birthday called "Seven-0," which ends with the haunting lines, "…I wonder what percentage of my life has been spent / trying to be funny and ending up otherwise. / The number is somewhere in the waterfall. / And here's to keeping it ambiguous enough / for the universe to suspend my fate / until it shakes the dust from a billion suns, at least."

As previously mentioned, the past few years have been complicated by health problems. A few years ago he spent time at Saint Vincent's Hospital after falling and fracturing his nose. He also started convulsing in Vienna while vacationing with his girlfriend Diane and her elderly mother three years ago and required immediate medical attention. And most frightening of all, he experienced a transient stroke, referred to as a transient ischemic attack (TIA), or more commonly, a mini-stroke, as Diane and he were preparing to leave the city and travel upstate to Olivebridge (in the Catskill Mountains), where Diane owns a modest weekend home, purchased shortly after her divorce in the mid-nineties. Here's how Tony describes the frightening episode:

> We were getting ready to go upstate in a rented car, and I didn't feel well; I didn't know why. I had gotten enough sleep and I hadn't had anything to drink the night before. I used to drink more at night than I do now. Now I'd just pee all night. I used to drink when I'd play computer games. I'd drink brandy. But by chance I hadn't had anything. But for some reason I didn't feel well. And I got up from the desk chair and fell on some boxes. And then I dragged myself to my chair, my desk chair, and sat on it and Diane came out from her room and my speech was slurred. So she called an ambulance right away. God! Had that happened an hour later I would have been going 75 on some freeway and you wouldn't be talking to me now!

After three days and a battery of inconclusive tests, Tony was released from the hospital and put on blood pressure medication. His physician was worried for a while about the higher chance of a stroke due to an irregular heart rhythm that was detected and

considered heart surgery. Luckily, the fibrillations seemed to have been transient and haven't been detected since. Cerebella degeneration, on the other hand, continues to trouble him, though is more acute sometimes than other times; the winters are especially challenging. He points out that its progression is slow and that nobody – neither his neurologist nor various medical sites on the internet – seems to know how long a person can live with the condition. He is hoping for the best, although cannot help but feel gloomy whenever he imagines a life without mobility.

His career is tenuous as well. After leaving ULAE in '81, Tony spent four years working as an administrative assistant in SoHo at the Center for Entrepreneurial Management. Compared to ULAE, the work was uninspiring and he recalls taking long lunch breaks (which included drinking) across the street at Fanelli's Café. He left the job in '85 after an altercation with his boss over being asked to come in the day after Christmas. After a stint of unemployment, Tony found part-time employment as a freelance editor, working for someone he knew through the Center for Entrepreneurial Management who was setting up a foundation for the teaching of entrepreneurialship. In '89, he was retained by the foundation for a set monthly rate to edit its documents, articles, and books – and is listed by the Library of Congress as the co-author of a series of books on how to start and operate your own business, which he finds ironic given his employment history. Keeping this job, which remains his central source of income, has been a source of stress in recent years. There were changes in management recently that led to questions about his relevance to the foundation. He was recently assured by the founder (who originally hired him back in '86) that "Everyone around here thinks you're necessary." If he were to lose the job he would have little income outside Social Security

and that would spell trouble. To make matters worse, Diane, an actress, does not get regular work, so must do catering work to help make ends meet. "Neither of us is in a secure position," he laments. Sadly, he has had to sell some of the art he was able to collect through his years at ULAE, a topic he doesn't care to discuss.

Tony narrates a rather longwinded story about his messy breakup with Jean Holabird. The relationship, he explains, came undone over the course of several unhappy years. And then in June 1993, after throwing him "a half-assed" birthday party, she sat him down and explained that she was going to have an affair with a man from the neighborhood. Tony recalls his reaction to the news: "And I didn't know what I was supposed to do. I said alright I see. But you realize that if you do this it will no longer be any of your fucking business what I do. And so she had the affair but still wanted to know what I was doing. And I wasn't going to let her know." Tony was became outraged because Jean had promised to keep the affair hidden, so to keep him from feeling humiliated in front of their Tribeca neighbors and friends, but began showing up at local bars and restaurants with her new paramour.

In retaliation, Tony began seeing a neighborhood woman named Ruth. One night he walked into Puffy's (a bar where Jean and he often socialized) and saw Jean sitting there. Instead of leaving, which he initially wanted to do, he walked to the end of the bar and sat down. There was no reason, after all, why Jean should be given Puffy's as part of their "divorce" settlement. Ruth, whose "shifty" boyfriend was then dying of cancer, came up to Tony and said, "Jean's giving you a pretty hard time, eh? Well, you can come back to my place. We don't have to do anything." Tony knew what that meant and went home with her that night. The two dated (enjoying one another's company, and

helping each other with their respective losses) for about a year, during which time Tony continued to live with Jean on Warren Street. It was a saving grace that he no longer had to spend every night on Warren Street with his ex-girlfriend, though Jean put pressure on him to confess where he was sleeping, which he refused to do. He was enraged when a bartender at Puffy's spilled the beans and told Jean that Tony was seeing Ruth. Up to that point he had kept the affair secret. On nights when both he and Jean happened to be at Puffy's, he'd hail a cab and leave, ostensibly on his way home, but would instruct the driver to drop him off on Ruth's block, which was in eyeshot from the bar.

But in early '95 Ruth abruptly ended their affair, explaining that she wanted to see other people. There were fewer and fewer reasons to remain in Tribeca so Tony took over his brother's truncated studio on Mott Street between Second and Third Avenues. He was happy to be away from the "soap opera" of Tribeca and Jean, but began feeling lonely and without prospects. "I was happy to be out of the relationship," he says. "But I didn't want to be alone." At was at this point that Tony decided to put a personal ad into a local newspaper:

> So now I'm alone again at the beginning of '95, and it was unpleasant. And I'm getting older—I'm 54. All the bars on 29th street, all the Irish bars, are full of young people. Just nothing. Just depressing. I decided to put a personal ad in the paper. And when you do that it's a big decision; and it felt big. It seemed… less so now… not quite shameful, but sort of pathetic. It seemed pathetic; it's like… I don't know what it's like… shameful, pathetic, like *you have to do that?*

Luckily, he was fortunate enough to meet a woman named Barbara through the personals. He met her at an East Village restaurant and was immediately taken by "a charming big blonde with high cheekbones." By the second date things became romantic and she began spending nights with him. But for reasons that he still doesn't entirely

understand, she phoned him up one day from New Jersey, where she lived, and broke off the relationship, which came as a blow. As he puts it, "Losing Barbara was hard, especially the way she did it. I didn't expect her to disappear." Tony is under the impression that her decision had something to do with the fact that she was evangelical Christian, and although she had a sense of humor about it all, she was probably looking for someone who was willing to attend church, which he wasn't.

After nine lonely months, he was introduced to his current girlfriend Diane by a bartender friend at Puffy's, above which Diane lived. At the time she was working through a messy divorce and was literally pushing herself to be social and maybe meet someone new. She was so nervous initially that she'd get a drink and then sit outside Puffy's on a bench, before hurrying back up to her loft. Gradually, she found the courage to have her drink at the bar. The two met and shortly after became romantic. Tony explains that Diane saved his emotional life. His selected poems, *A History of the Invitation: New & Selected Poems 1963-2000*, is dedicated to her with a phrase in Italian that refers to Dante's book-length homage to Beatrice: for Diane / per la vita nuova ("for the new life"). In the second half of the poem "In The Coffee House" (published in his most recent collection Winter Journey (2008)) Tony waits for Diane at the Mona Lisa coffee house in the Village at Bleecker and Seventh:

> The San Remo bar was there across the street
> where I learned years later
> real New York poets went
> and drank real drinks,
> but the San Remo is gone
> with everything else from 1960—
> discarded, lost, or broken, or certainly
> wouldn't fit anymore,
> except for the sound advice
> still gathering dust:

Think before you speak.
(Yes, I probably should have done that.)
A penny saved is a penny earned.
(That could have been made a bit clearer, perhaps.)
Don’t be a complete idiot.
(Hey, I gave it a shot.)
You should really think about a career.
I’m thinking about it now
and there it is: unintentional barbs,
unasked-for opinions
and missed opportunities strewn
and rusting about the incorporeal field.

I told Diane I’d be here ‘til six. Waiting
for a girlfriend literally is a great improvement
over the afternoons at the Figaro;
and in fact it’s cool to have a girlfriend at my age
I think amusedly to myself
behind the overpriced coffee –
2.95 to contemplate the traffic
fleeing down the avenue and into the past
which has brought me up to the present,
where I put down my pen, figuratively.

CHAPTER THREE: *CHARLES NORTH*

…by tightening
His lips and muscles and breathing properly
From the diaphragm, as in love one compensates
For weakness with emotion, overcoming
Obstacles—"sound" here being inspired stretches
Between deserts of obscurity hence
Most inspiring to those who learn its flow,
Via the mysterious physiology
That makes us stop and listen attentively
To its rushes, and sometimes exceed ourselves.
—from "Some Versions Of Reeds" (1974)

I'm feeling it now, sorrow
out of which to construct
some thing shining

by a poet
whose quiet voice and sinewy
demeanor, the opposite
of sinewy minded

are as comets
to a snowstorm, each has
its object neutralized
by its context so finding
out what that is

is less important
than finding the next time
you can say it.
—from "A Note On David Schubert" (1978)

Introduction

Charles North is a distinguished-looking man in his mid-sixties with a gentle face. He has a slender build. He has somewhat disheveled white hair. His sharp blue eyes radiate intellectual life behind dark-rimmed glasses. A mutual friend once described him as having the look of a saint – engaged in the here and now with tranquil intensity.

Charles doesn't have the rugged machismo of a Charles Bukowski, nor does he have the imperiousness—however effete—of a T.S. Eliot, but has a *strong, grounded* presence—which, to me, feels like a hybrid between a trusted uncle, a college professor, and a friendly but reserved older man. On more than one occasion he tells me that the ability to open up to others is a relatively new experience for him, his having been shy and quiet, especially among people he didn't know well, for a good part of his life.

During our four conversations, Charles sat attentively on a sun-faded couch in the living room of the spacious apartment he shares with his wife of 45 years, the painter Paula North. Paula and he have a warm, admiring relationship and he rarely attends poetry events or dinner parties without her. They have also collaborated through the years artistically. For example, his most recent publication, *Complete Lineups* (2008), was published with cover, drawings and reproductions of artwork by Paula. Their apartment has the warm, bohemian feel of dusty books, musical instruments (clarinets, recorders, a saxophone, a guitar, a tiny baby grand piano) and comfortable, overstuffed chairs and couches. It is also full of Paula's oil portraits, still-lifes, and landscapes, as well as artworks by painter friends like Trevor Winkfield and Rackstraw Downes. Two of the portraits (one by Louise Hamlin from the mid-80s) are of Charles in his late 30s and early 40s. His hair is brown, more plentiful, and longer, but otherwise he looks the same.

There are works by other artists, too, including Joe Brainard, and poem broadsides by, among others, James Schuyler, John Ashbery, F.T. Prince, Tony Towle, and Paul Violi, as well as numerous photographs of their children: Jill, now in her mid-thirties and a professor of philosophy at Yale University, and Mike, who is a doctoral

student in Social Psychology at Princeton. Charles is a devoted father; and he explains that the joys of fatherhood initially took him by surprise. Whenever he talks about his children he has the warm twinkle of a proud pater familias in his eye. He delights in their accomplishments, which he talks about with a combination of pride and humility. He resists boasting, but is more than willing to let you know if asked how well their lives seem to be going.

My Personal History with Charles and His Poetry

My first exposure to Charles North was at a public reading that he and John Ashbery gave at the Sackler Auditorium at Harvard University in November 2001. My first personal introduction was at a reading I gave (in my capacity as "sometimes poet") with the New York City poets Justin Jamail, Paul Violi, and Tony Towle at the Bowery Poetry Club in January 2003. We maintained a casual friendship over the years that followed and I asked him to read with John Ashbery (a poetic hero to us both) in a high-profile poetry reading series I organized for the Accompanied Library at the National Arts Club in Manhattan in 2005. It was a thrill to stand before a standing-room-only audience and introduce Charles and his work, though I recall feeling anxious because a friend tipped me off that Charles was particular when it came to how his work was talked about publicly.

Luckily, the introduction was well received. I praised his work for being challenging, without being purposefully opaque; and for being lyrical, without compromising a natural sounding cadence. If I were to introduce him today, I would add something about how he can make lyrical poems out of language that is not very lyrical at

all. He possesses the ability (and this may be his great poetic talent) to lift rather mundane and technical-sounding verbiage into music. I first realized this at a reading he gave for the launch of a recent collection of poems, *Cadenza* (2007), at the Cue Art Foundation in Chelsea. His lines had the musicality you hear when reading Wordsworth or Keats, but drew from linguistic contexts that were neither romantic nor sentimental. This comes across when one reads a North poem silently, and then a second time aloud. The words have a way of bouncing into song. Try it with the poem "Sonnet" from *Cadenza*:

> Sonnet
>
> The tone poem left the door open.
> Well, close it.
> It doesn't stay. It reminds me of
> Elizabethan plays where eyes,
> especially the tragically blinded ones, are "jelly."
> It has a center with a circumference loosely attached
> smeared over individual needs.
>
> Since the ideas about wastefulness
> Are smeared over their objects,
> the tone is everywhere.
> It expresses its reluctance as virtue.
> It is reluctant to intrude, like minds into
> the fleetingness they concede.

Charles' work is full of transformations: the non-lyrical into the lyrical; gloominess into humor; idea into idea in a steady stream-of-consciousness that is more purposeful than accidental. The work encompasses a wide range of emotional moods, tones, philosophical themes, and poetic forms—and is alive to tradition without closing itself to the creation of something new, which makes it characteristically American.

Generally speaking, he feels uncomfortable talking about his work. In a 1993 letter to the Australian editors of the magazine Pataphysics, he explained that "…my

(few) efforts to describe what I'm working on have invariably interfered, to put it at its mildest, with what I'm working on. I wish it were otherwise!" Charles likes to see himself as always working on new ways of making a poem, and tends to be as interested in how poems work as in what they might or might not mean semantically. A quick gloss through his *New and Selected Poems* reveals a plethora of forms from free verse to Villanelles, and an array of more inventive forms drawing from areas as diverse as architecture and baseball. The content of his poems is rich, varied, and frequently abstract, which often makes it difficult for a reader to say what it is that a poem is about. Like the work of Gertrude Stein or John Ashbery, Charles' poems are often easier to experience than to understand. "The quality of the affection," to borrow from Pound, grants the work a sensibility that, in the words of Paul Violi, "…shines through the experimentation, ingenuity, and abstract lyricism" (Violi, 1999).

I got to know Charles more in March 2004 when a poet friend named Justin Jamail and I interviewed him for an article we co-wrote on the public readings of James Schuyler, who was an early champion of Charles' work and whom Charles befriended in the 1970s, during a period when Schuyler was struggling with acute mental illness. The transcript of this interview was published in Pataphysics magazine and the article itself in the American Poet, both appearing in spring 2005. I walked away from this project with an interest in hearing more about Charles' experienced as a writer in the New York City art world.

I interviewed him again in February 2008 – this time in my capacity as a doctoral student in Psychology – for a paper I was writing in a study of lives seminar with my advisor, Professor Suzanne Ouellette. Our assignment was to choose an individual,

living or dead, and to write a life study that incorporated some of the theoretical and methodological approaches we had reviewed in class. Having had it in mind that I would one day write on the lives of some of the established poets with whom I had become acquainted since moving to Manhattan in 2002, I thought it made sense to start with Charles, mostly because I already had a sizable folder of notes on him from the Schuyler article.

Over the course of the three-hour interview I learned that he had done graduate work in English at Columbia University; matriculated at Harvard Law School but dropped out very soon; was accepted for a Ph.D. program in philosophy at Columbia (where he was going to specialize in aesthetics) but never enrolled; got married and lived for a while in France; returned to Manhattan and worked as a freelance book editor; and then found fulltime work, almost by chance, as a teacher of English at Pace University. His vocation as a poet emerged in the course of these swings of interest; and he published his first official collection of poems, *Elizabethan & Nova Scotian Music*, at the age of thirty-three—two years after he and Paula had self-published, via mimeograph and hand-stapling, their pamphlet of list-poem baseball *Lineups* with accompanying drawings.

However, even though he began to publish poetry with more regularity after the early 1970s, it took him a long time to tell others that he was a poet; in fact, to this day he occasionally introduces himself to others as a college teacher or writer rather than a poet—this despite having published eleven collections of poetry over 30 years as well as a collection of prose pieces; co-editing the anthologies *Broadway* and *Broadway 2* with James Schuyler; winning awards for his work; and being given the title Poet-in-Residence at Pace University in Manhattan. My paper addressed Charles' vocational

unease through the focal approach to the study of lives advocated by Rosenwald (2003). Rosenwald characterizes the focal approach as entering a life via "…an aspect of the individual's life that appears puzzling to common sense – paradoxical, exaggerated, irrational, inconsistent" (Rosenwald, 2003, 138). My question was a simple one: why was it hard for Charles to tell others that he was a poet? I hypothesized that this was at least partially a consequence of how a proper vocation (e.g. becoming a lawyer or physician) was emphasized in Charles' upwardly mobile, Jewish household growing up.

<u>Brief Life History</u>

Early History

*

> Sometimes I think I'm
> close to discovering
> why half my life has occurred
> in a fog, which makes
> the other half radiant
> by comparison.
>
> —from "A Note One Labor Day" (1989)

Charles Laurence North was born in 1941 in Brooklyn into a Russian Jewish-American household. His father attended Townsend Harris, one of the best high schools in the city, went to work at 15, took accounting courses at CCNY, and eventually earned two law degrees from Brooklyn College, attending classes at night. He worked in the textile business in Manhattan, and married and moved to Manhattan just after Charles was born. His only sibling, his sister Julie, was born three years later in 1944. In 1950, the upwardly mobile family moved to the then rural suburbs of Westchester County. His mother came from a lower middle class household (her father owned a cigar store) that

placed great value on literature and music, particularly opera. She studied piano but more importantly had a writing career as a journalist, writing a travel column for *The Brooklyn Eagle* (which, incidentally, was edited a century earlier by Walt Whitman) and ghostwriting speeches and other prose for business people around Westchester. She was also something of a fiction writer manqué, and Charles recalls hearing about her unsuccessful attempts to publish both adult and children's fiction. As a grade-schooler, Charles himself won several local prose-writing competitions. He briefly tried fiction in college, and was excited to have a story he wrote in his freshman English class (the same class where he met Paula) published in the college literary magazine. But he had no serious thoughts about becoming a writer until his middle twenties, and at that point was drawn more to poetry than prose.

Music permeated the North household, and his mother's love of music had an influence on both children, as did both his parents' love of books. Charles recalls playing with toys in his pre-school years near the family piano while his mother regularly practiced. When he was 10, somewhat by chance—since a family friend knew someone who taught clarinet—Charles began to study clarinet and soon excelled. (His sister is also very musical, and has performed, written, and recorded music.) At the age of 13 he shyly auditioned for the semi-professional Westchester Symphony Orchestra and became part of the group, and in 1955 spent the first of three summers at the National Music Camp in Interlochen Michigan, where he studied with a Chicago Symphony clarinetist, and gradually worked his way to the upper echelons of the young clarinetists, several of whom went on to play with major U.S. orchestras.

Despite his considerable talent, he decided against a career in music. To his parents, who had lived through the Great Depression on little income, a career meant something secure like law or medicine, so they discouraged him from music; moreover, he was never quite able to acknowledge the success others granted him, and although he performed a good deal during his high school years—all-county and all-state concert bands, as well as solo performances—it was almost always accompanied by anxiety. Charles confesses to being haunted even now by "occasionally overwhelming nostalgia" for his musical life as a teenager. Clarinets appear in his poetry; he uses the word "haunting" in a poem titled "Clarinet" (1987; an adaptation of the 18th-century French poet André Chénier's short, rhyming poem "La Flute"):

> Less than a recurrent dream, but more haunting.
> The clarinet is poised and I begin playing,
> conscious of occupying some exact center
> where I am both rival and conqueror.
> My usually awkward embouchure
> produces tones which are inspired and pure.

His awkward embouchure, which is the position of lips and associated muscles in playing a wind instrument, is able to produce "tones which are inspired and pure." The reader is told from the start, though, that such moments occur only in the occasional dream—which may explain the "haunting" quality. Other references to the clarinet can be found in the poems "Some Versions Of Reeds" (1974) "Day After Day The Storm Mounted, Then It Dismounted" (2000), and "Summer Of Living Dangerously" (2007), only to name a few.

Although Charles speaks appreciatively of his mother's musical influence, his feelings towards his parents are complicated. Both he and his younger sister endured a

mother and father, whom, as he succinctly put it, “were lousy parents with good intentions.” Generally speaking, childhood was a dark and gloomy time; even the memories of his mother playing at the piano are tinged with sadness. Looking back, Charles is surprised by just how much of his childhood he seems to have blocked out. However, he has fond memories of playing in Central Park as a young child before moving north to Westchester in 1950:

> I grew up on 96th Street, just off Columbus Avenue, just a block away from Central Park. And the school I went to was even a little bit closer to the park, and I went there on weekends. Some of the happiest times I remember were running around and playing baseball and tag and everything else in the park. So much so that the smell of nature to me always has the smell of the ground in Central Park, and the horse shit on the bridal path; it really was very important to me, until I turned nine and we moved north to Westchester…

The “outdoors” continued to mean a lot even after his family’s move:

> When my parents moved to what’s now the suburbs, it was pretty rural: a lot of undeveloped land, a lot of woods; so after the age of nine it was still really the country. There were some deer, and woods, fields, and air, and I frequently walked home from school, which was a mile and a half. This was 1950, when people who could newly afford it were beginning to move out of the city.

He also has fond memories of the time he spent as a young child with his mother at the local branch of the New York Public Library. He loved returning home with a pile of borrowed books, especially mythology, or even more exciting, the library books that were on sale for a dime or quarter.

Positive memories aside, Charles has a hard time responding when asked whether his childhood was an imaginative time:

> I’d like to say yes, but it’s hard to know. I understand the question and I know it’s a natural question and the response ought to be yes, but I’m not really sure

> what the response really is. I know that when I was a young child I read avidly from the time I was three years old till I entered high school; and then I stopped reading—despite, or maybe even because of, my mother's pushing—and rediscovered books only in college. High school was sports, music, and girls… and friends.

Although he describes feeling "wiped out" by adolescence, in reality his high school years had many positive aspects. He had many friends, including girlfriends, was a leader of a number organizations including the high school newspaper, and no one seemed to catch on that underneath he often felt nervous and melancholic. "My recollection is that just about every day of my life after school, depending on what season it was, I was out shooting basketballs, or playing baseball, or playing football, or playing tennis, or doing varsity track and field." In response to a question about romantic heartbreak, he mentions being "stood up" for the only time in his life by a Canadian girl—whom he remembers as "dark-haired and pretty, probably an early Paula"—he had made a date with towards the close of one summer at Interlochen. He still remembers how surprised and hurt he was.

Charles enrolled, "with a chip on [his] shoulder," at Tufts University in 1958 soon after he turned 17. He had been the top-ranked boy in his class—receiving the math award at graduation—and was advised that he didn't need to apply to a "safe school;" nonetheless, he was wait-listed at Harvard, Amherst, and Brown, which devastated him. In June of his senior year his Dean phoned Tufts, to which Charles had not applied, and managed to get him an interview; he was immediately accepted. Although he had to take a room off campus for his first semester and for a time was set on transferring, the silver lining, apart from discovering a charismatic philosophy professor who stimulated a lifelong interest in philosophy, was meeting Paula in the first English class he took. He

describes being immediately attracted to her, but couldn't work up the nerve to ask her on a date until midway through their sophomore year. He feels pretty certain that their first date was a reading given on campus by the poet Robert Frost, who would read at President Kennedy's inaugural just over a year later. Charles recalls that Frost was unpleasant during the reading and snapped at someone in the audience who may have been opening a candy wrapper. He also finds it mildly ironic that at that point he was ambivalent about poetry, and only attended the reading to see "some famous guy" with a young woman he was intent upon impressing.

He double-majored in English and philosophy (and effectively minored in French), and after graduating, began a Master's program in English at Columbia University. Paula and he moved to Manhattan, separately, and then were married in June 1963. The wedding, which Charles says he would do entirely differently if he could do it over, was held in his parents' backyard under a tent. Paula and he began a honeymoon at West Hampton Beach near the end of Long Island, but found the hotel they were staying at virtually deserted in early June and the weather miserable, so they turned around and instead spent several days at the Plaza Hotel in New York City, which was a happy experience.

After finishing his coursework at Columbia, though not his Master's thesis, he decided not to go on for the Ph.D. Not really knowing what he wanted to do, he followed in the footsteps of a college friend who gone on from Columbia English to law school. In Charles's case, it was Harvard, which pleased his father tremendously; not only was it a top law school, but a law degree promised to open many career doors. Paula and he moved to Cambridge as husband and wife, where Charles spent the summer in Widener

Library trying to finish his Master's thesis. The association with Harvard, though, turned out to be short-lived. Charles describes a rapid realization that law was not for him; he officially withdrew only six weeks into the term, but stopped going to classes well before that. He recalls the Law School Dean informing him that, of those who did drop out, virtually all did so as early as he. The most difficult part of the decision was his knowing how much it would disappoint his parents, to whom he sent a letter explaining why. When I asked him to say more about how they (particularly his father) responded to the letter, he sent me the following email from his office at Pace University:

> I'm in my office waiting for an independent study student, and happy to deal with email! However, this is a difficult one. First, I don't really remember the letter—no doubt blocked out the experience—and second, I do feel this is on the private side. I know I was aware that my parents would be disappointed, but don't know what else I can say. Sorry. To me (still!), the most important thing is that I knew almost instantly that the law wasn't for me. At the time I didn't know I wanted to write poetry; but—with apologies for the hint of "depth psychology"—I'm sure something was simmering underneath.

The Norths stayed in Cambridge for the rest of the school year, Charles finishing his thesis (he was awarded the degree in 1964) and Paula working, rather unhappily, as a secretary at M.I.T., part of the time for an autocratic Nobel-Prize-winning physicist. Uncertain about what to do next, he applied and was accepted to a Ph.D. program in philosophy at Columbia with a plan to concentrate on aesthetics, but never enrolled. Instead, the Norths sold their car, scraped together some money from savings, borrowed some more, and traveled to Europe—briefly to London, then Paris for 6 months, then Antibes—where it was possible then to live cheaply.

In Paris they sublet an apartment on the Left Bank near the Boulevard St. Germain and enjoyed the time immensely. They walked around the city and frequently

went to the Cinémateque and the many tiny movie houses that showed old movies at discount prices for those with student cards (movies were a special interest and at one point Charles even considered applying to film school). Paula, who had displayed her artistic talent from an early age, painted in the living room of their apartment, and for a time took a class at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. Charles spent much time reading and attempting to write, mostly fiction. One of his hangouts was the Benjamin Franklin Library, which housed a collection of English-language poetry. He recalls reading some of the American "establishment" poets whom he had studied in graduate school, like Robert Lowell, Richard Wilbur, W.S. Merwin, and W.D. Snodgrass, though none excited him, as well as others whose poems he liked more, like Philip Booth and Ted Hughes. This was his first serious introduction to contemporary poetry and he was intrigued.

The Norths returned to New York City in the late summer of 1965, and Charles began editorial work on a freelance basis in the reference department of a small publishing company, whose chief editor was an acquaintance of Charles's Columbia advisor, John Unterecker. Although Charles was successful in editing—Unterecker reported his friend's calling Charles "the editing find of the century"—he found the work tedious and unrewarding. He had begun to write poems, partly under the influence of Theodore Roethke, whom he admired, and showed a few to Unterecker. Unterecker, himself a poet, suggested that he attend the New School poetry workshop being taught by his colleague Kenneth Koch—who along with John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, and James Schuyler (sometimes Barbara Guest was included) formed the so-called "New York

School of Poets." Charles, though, was timid and delayed a year, enrolling in the fall of 1966. This is how he explained the events in 2004:

> I had just begun to be interested in poetry, and Unterecker recommended Kenneth, his colleague at Columbia, who moonlighted at the New School. I kept putting it off – probably out of sheer insecurity – but finally did enroll in Kenneth's poetry workshop, and it turned out to be the last time that he taught there.

The year of Koch's final New School workshop, 1966, was a sad time for the New York City poetry world. Frank O'Hara died after being struck by a beach vehicle during the early morning hours of July 24th on Fire Island. To this day Charles regrets not having taken the workshop earlier and having had a chance to meet the legendary O'Hara (who himself had taught a workshop there some years earlier). Luckily, the workshop with Koch was a profoundly important experience for Charles—a real turning point. He explains that, "…really, everything I did with respect to poetry at the beginning was a result of Kenneth's teaching." In particular, he enjoyed the excitement Kenneth brought to poetry, and appreciated his assignments, which included writing poems in the style of American poets like William Carlos Williams and Walt Whitman. He soon published a handful of poems in the mimeographed magazines connected to the St. Mark's Poetry Project.

Charles stopped working freelance soon after the workshop as a result of being offered a teaching job in the English Department at Pace University in Manhattan. The job came about through meeting the poet Anne Waldman's mother, Frances, in Koch's workshop, and subsequently Anne; John Waldman, Anne's father, was an administrator at Pace and had been Chairman of the English Department. Koch's workshop was eventually taken over by a young poet named Bill Berkson, and for a time Charles sat in

on it, but after the initial inspiration from Koch, his poetry "floundered" for a couple of years, despite the efforts of Berkson, whom he came to know socially. In hindsight, he understands his difficulty as the product of leaving "the beloved teacher" and having to find one's own way: "I don't think it's so strange in retrospect. It took me a while to figure out what I could do, what I wanted to do, and if I could really be a poet. It took a good two or three years before I started doing anything I liked again."

The Breakthrough Year

*

> I am moved often, and easily
> without knowing why or finding it appropriate
> to be a consequence of somebody else's unfathomable will.
> —from "A Few Facts About Me" (1974)

Charles' self-proclaimed "breakthrough" came in the spring of 1970, when he sat in on a spring poetry workshop offered by Tony Towle at the Poetry Project. He was at a point where he had seriously considered giving up poetry, so Tony's entrance into his life was an extremely significant event. Tony encouraged Charles and to this day Charles credits Tony's enthusiasm, intelligence, and seriousness about poetry as a vocation with his own decision to stick to writing. He quickly fell into the habit of showing Tony just about everything he wrote and received helpful handwritten feedback. In the tradition of Frank O'Hara, Tony was generous with his time and was happy to drink with students after class at the nearby Orchidia Restaurant, where beer and pizza were served. Not knowing many people in poetry world, Charles was excited by the opportunity to socialize with Tony as well as other young poets. It was during the workshop that he met Paul Violi, with whom he became close friends; in fact the close, lasting relationship—

aesthetic as well as social—between North, Violi and Towle started at the workshop. In the late seventies, North joined Violi as co-editor of *Swollen Magpie Press*, which Violi had begun earlier with another writer named Allan Appel, and the small press eventually published ten chapbooks, among them work by Joseph Ceravolo, Mary Ferrari, and Yuki Hartman, and *Broadway*, the anthology featuring poets and artists he co-edited with James Schuyler. Tony's workshop also led to a collaborative chapbook between Charles and Tony himself, called *Gemini*, begun in February 1972.

Gradually, Charles began to meet the poets of his generation, many of whom considered the Poetry Project home base. At that time, Anne Waldman, who was four years Charles' junior and whose ancestral home on McDougal Street was a regular hangout for the Saint Mark's crew, directed the Project. Charles fondly remembers the first party he attended at her family's townhouse, which he thinks occurred while he was taking Tony's workshop or shortly after its conclusion, and was one of the first times he felt like a poet.

> I felt like an outsider for a very long time…Paula and I went to a big party [at Anne Waldman's] and I met a bunch of poets who had been just names to me beforehand; they were eventually peers, but certainly not yet. I remember being tipsy and I particularly remember meeting Peter Schjeldahl and his asking me all sorts of questions, only some of which I was able to answer. What was most important was how excited I was to be in a big room filled with poets! That had never happened before. But I did feel like an outsider…. Although most of the poets were around my age, they were already part of a group and I was just beginning. At least it helped me to feel that I wasn't the only poet, and that it was ok to be one!

The workshop also led to Charles' first poetry reading. Each semester the teachers selected one student from their respective classes to give a reading at the church. In spring 1970, Charles and a poet named Rebecca Wright were chosen to present their

work. As the evening of the reading approached, he experienced tremendous anxiety—so much that before the reading he had several beers at a nearby bar, which ended up complicating his reading experience, to put it mildly. He believes that the alcohol probably kept him from connecting with either the poems or the audience, and he left crestfallen, though he did receive compliments afterwards.

Regardless of how he thought the reading went, he was beginning to be known as a poet, at least around the Poetry Project. But as most artists learn, being thought of as an artist by other artists does not guarantee that the "genius committee" will knock on your door. Charles was thirty, with no published book, and without the academic credentials needed to secure a tenure track job in English. (In fact, during a budget crunch at Pace in 1971, he was let go as a full-timer and began instead to teach as an adjunct). His parents were not entirely approving of his career, and Paula and he were thinking about starting a family. Some of his poems from this general period reflect the uncertainty he was feeling:

> Now that I am seeing myself as a totally different person
> whose interests are like a street covered with slush
> and whose every word rings like the ear of a spaniel
>
> night joins with its various egos, its tubeless containers
> of islands being joined by the notion of paradise
> and I am swept up in what it means to be drained…
> —from "Poem" (1970)

In addition to failing to live up to his parents' ideas about what he could become professionally, Charles continued to feel like an outsider around Saint Mark's. For starters, he didn't live on the Lower East Sider; it took him 35-40 minutes to get to a reading. In addition, his life was more family-oriented than that of many of his poet

acquaintances. Although he would meet other poets at readings and afterwards for drinks, he spent the majority of his non-working hours at home on the Upper West Side with Paula, and then later with their two children. Unlike a lot of those on the scene, he wasn't a heavy drinker, he didn't do drugs, and wasn't promiscuous. Charles characterizes Saint Mark's of the early 70s as a *highly* promiscuous place sexually, "…where really everybody was sleeping with everybody else." Culturally, this was the heyday of the sexual revolution and a decade before AIDS.

Although he continued to have difficulty thinking of himself as a poet—he rarely mentioned his work to strangers—he began to write and publish more than formerly, mostly in the cheaply produced Poetry Project magazines, *The World, Telephone,* and *Adventures in Poetry* (which he felt was the best poetry magazine around), but also in the prestigious *Poetry* (located in Chicago), which accepted poems by him the first time he submitted there. Poetry magazine was perhaps the best-known poetry magazine in the country, and it was where many significant American poets, like John Ashbery, received their first national publications. When he self-published ("hesitantly," he recalls) *Lineups* with Paula's line drawings in 1972, he mailed copies not only to poet friends and others but to his then favorite sportswriter, the New York Post columnist Larry Merchant, who to Charles's astonishment phoned for an interview and then wrote two Post columns about the chapbook, the second of which detailed a large and favorable reader response. He was also invited to speak about the book on WBAI radio, along with the writer Roger Angell. He did a second set some 15 years later—they have been reprinted in several anthologies and are now collected along with newer ones in *Complete Lineups*. The lineups, at least around the city, are undoubtedly Charles' best-known poetic creations.

Using the familiar American form of a baseball lineup, Charles metaphorically organizes a vast array of objects and human experiences—e.g. seasons, cities, vegetables, philosophers, diseases, and Wordsworth poems—by batting order and field position. The disease lineup, for example, reads:

> Polio rf
> Syphilis (Gonorrhea) lf
> Heart Disease ss
> Cancer cf
> Hepatitis 1b
> Cirrhosis 3b
> Measles c
> Common Cold 2b
> Influenza p

And the lineup dedicated to herbs:

> Mint 3b
> Rosemary ss
> Thyme lf
> Salt 1b
> Garlic c
> Oregano rf
> Dry Mustard cf
> Vanilla 2b
> Nutmeg p

Association with James Schuyler

*

> 8/3
> Dense fog during the night and early morning. Late yes-
> terday you could see it begin to flow and flatten back
> against the cliff of the Berkshires, very white and dream-
> like…
>
> —from "Aug.—Dec. For Jimmy Schuyler" (1999)

In the early 70s, Charles met his poetic hero James Schuyler, whose work he had been introduced to during Kenneth Koch's New School Workshop. In the spring of 1970, Charles showed Tony a poem he had dedicated to Schuyler called "Lights"– which is in his first book, *Elizabethan & Nova Scotian Music* – and Tony, who had known Jimmy for some years, sent it to him. A few months later, and very much out of the blue, a poem, "Light From Canada" (which Charles still thinks is one of Schuyler's very best), came in the mail with a dedication – *for Charles North* – and a gloss explaining an allusion to a line of O'Hara's, and a note saying, "Let me return the compliment." Charles was amazed and delighted.

About a year later, via Tony, Charles met Schuyler at a party in Morris Golde's (pronounced *gold-ie*) apartment in the West Village. Golde was a businessman who was very involved with contemporary music and the arts in general. Charles thinks, though he is not 100% certain, that this was the same party where he rubbed shoulders with Leonard Bernstein, and had the experience of seeing him dancing "lip to lip" with another man, which for Charles, "innocent" as he was then, was "a shocker." He doesn't remember who actually introduced him to Jimmy, but recalls being literally dumbfounded and very embarrassed about it afterward. "We just stood there standing across from one another, neither of us saying much."

Schuyler grew to admire Charles' work a great deal, and – as mentioned earlier – wrote a laudatory blurb for *Leap Year*, which – again – reads, "His joy in words, and the things words adumbrate, is infectious: we catch a contagion of enlightenment. To me, he is the most stimulating poet of his generation." Charles recalls asking Jimmy if he really wanted to say that he was "the most stimulating poet of his generation" given that his

generation included such poets as Tony Towle, Ron Padgett, Ted Berrigan, Ann Waldman, Michael Brownstein, and others; Schuyler, however, was emphatic, both in his praise to Charles and when talking about him to others. In a letter to artist Trevor Winkfield dated March 31, 1971, Schuyler writes (speaking about a number of younger poets whose work he had recently gotten to know), "The one I most particularly liked was Charles North, who studied (at Saint Mark's Church, maybe?, or the New School) with Tony Towle. I think he has quite a gift." Charles didn't know about the extent of Schuyler's praise until his letters were published by Turtle Point Press in 2004. He says, "It might have made a big difference to my confidence had I been aware how much he really thought of my poems back then."

To this day, Charles regrets not knowing Schuyler "when he was younger and healthier." Schuyler suffered from legendary bouts of mental illness, which could result in disturbing breakdowns like the time he frightened Ron Padgett and his family while they were staying with him at Fairfield Porter's home in Southampton, Long Island. After exhibiting unusual behavior, Schuyler descended the staircase with rose petals stuck to his naked body and demanded to know where Frank was (referring to Frank O'Hara who had died several years earlier). Charles, luckily, never saw Jimmy "at his worst." As he put it during the 2004 interview, "When he used to come over for dinner here in the late '70s he was often silent and looked unwholesome, to put it mildly. He would play steadily with his false teeth with his tongue – at least that's what it looked like. But he never acted crazy. Once after dinner – I don't know whether he was especially tired or didn't feel well, or what – he asked if he could sleep over. We were a little nervous about it, especially as Jill, my daughter, was very young at the time, but it

was already late and of course we couldn't just turn him out. After a quiet night – for him anyway – he left in the morning. I do remember him requesting eggnog more than once when he was here for dinner in the winter, and my going downstairs in the snow to get him a quart, which he drank straight down."

Together, Charles and Jimmy edited two literary anthologies: the initial *Broadway* (1979) and then – a decade later – *Broadway 2* (which featured a cover by Trevor Winkfield). The first came about when Charles told Jimmy how much he admired a one-shot mimeo magazine that Jimmy had edited some years before, *49 South*. From this came *Broadway*, which Charles still thinks of as "something between a mag and an anthology" of poems and drawings. North remembers some mild drama surrounding the editorial process: "We met to hash out the (sometimes thorny!) issue of contributors. He was plenty tough, and had no use for some of those I suggested—at least originally." Once they agreed upon a list of contributors, they invited everyone to "send us your best poem (drawing)."

First Book

*

> What will see us through, a certain calm
> Born of the willingness to be not cowed
> The begonia idea of the universe
> And because life is so short
> A way of being unfaithful like the tide
> Minus its characteristic awareness.
> —from "Elizabethan & Nova Scotian Music" (1974)

Charles and Paula began to socialize more with writers and artists. About a year after the first *Lineups*, in the winter of 1973, they were invited to Lita and Morton

Hornick's annual artists and poets' party at their Park Avenue apartment. Both wealthy patrons of the arts, Lita also operated a foundation and press called *Kulchur Books*. Charles recalls being excited by the invitation. Chatting with Larry Fagin, whom he barely knew other than as the editor and publisher of Adventures in Poetry Magazine and chapbooks, Charles mentioned a manuscript he was putting together, with the idea of self-publishing it as he had done previously with *Lineups*. To his delight, Fagin asked to see the manuscript for Adventures, helped whittle it down editorially, and published it the following year as a chapbook with cover and drawings by Jane Freilicher (which also delighted Charles, as he loved her work, and in addition she was a close friend of, and collaborator with, the New York poets who had come to be his heroes).

The book's title, *Elizabethan & Nova Scotian Music*, combined the title of a record album of Elizabethan & Jacobean music with a trip to Nova Scotia Charles and Paula had recently taken as an homage to Elizabeth Bishop, one of North's favorite American poets, who had written poetry about the Nova Scotian landscape and people in collections like *North & South* and also *Questions of Travel*. With Schuyler's encouragement, Charles mailed a copy to Bishop and received a letter in return, in which Bishop remarked that it seemed to her almost as though the book had been written directly to her:

> Dear Mr. North:
>
> Thank you for sending me ELIZABETHIAN & NOVA SCOTIAN MUSIC (of course that title seems almost direct address [sic] to me!) – and I'm glad you like "Cape Breton", written so long ago now…
>
> …I'm sorry your book didn't come a week earlier, when I was having the "spring break" as Harvard calls it – now I'm sorry to say I am hard at work again and I haven't had time to do more than read through the poems very rapidly. I saw a great many things that I liked and that interested me very much. Please believe that as soon as I can, perhaps on a weekend, I'll really read them all over again and with attention and you'll be hearing from me again…

Charles was disappointed that she didn't in fact write again. But he was hearing positive things about his work from other critical sources. In a 1989 review, the poet and art critic Barry Schwabsky reminisces about coming across the chapbook at the Gotham Book Mart on 47th St. in Manhattan:

> A long time ago . . . a book with a fine landscape drawing on the cover (by Jane Freilicher) caught my eye. I'd never heard of the poet, but somehow this promised something out of the ordinary. It was *Elizabethan & Nova Scotian Music*, Charles North's 1974 Adventures in Poetry mimeo. I took the book home ($2.50 wasn't much of a risk even then) and near the beginning (in a poem called "To the Book") I read this:
>
> Open poetry died with Whitman.
> Closed poetry died with Yeats.
> Natural poetry was born and died with Lorca
> and Clare, also with France's Jean de Meun.
>
> I was hooked. I knew this guy knew something I didn't—something none of the other poets I knew knew either. I also saw that this was something he somehow kept to himself, even as he offered it with open hands. So it was the true poetic mystery.

Although it was a limited print and did not get much circulation outside of New York City—and specifically The Poetry Project—*Elizabethan & Nova Scotian Music* made an impression.

During the late 60s and early 70s, The Poetry Project at Saint Mark's was the hub of the "second generation New York School." Here's how Charles put it, partly humorously, in a little talk he gave at a Project Symposium in 1988 on The New York School (subsequently printed in his book of essays *No Other Way*: "I remember in the mid-to-late sixties how many poets around the Poetry Project, a partly owned subsidiary of the New School, were influenced by *The Tennis Court Oath* and *Rivers and Mountains*

[both are early collections published by John Ashbery]. O'Hara, too, was such an inspiration, even before most poets knew how much he had written and how variously. Koch had taught, literally, a lot of the writers who gravitated to Saint Mark's." In the talk, Charles expressed reservations about whether "make(s) sense to talk about a New York School of poets—or a New York School of poets—now? My current feeling is yes, but no. Or rather, it's not for us to say, but whatever we say is probably important (if any of this is) and will be used against us." [The last quip is a partially joking reference to the mixed reactions the distinctly anti-establishment "New York School" poets have generated over the years.] School or no school, Saint Mark's was a thriving social and artistic nexus, and Charles Laurence North was part of it.

Fatherhood

*

> Suppose I am not the uplifter of all I uplife,
> in the same sense that the coal-black sky, scumbled and showing a
> few red streaks,
> doesn't exactly equal space.
>
> —from "Day After The Storm Mounted, Then It Dismounted" (2000)

Paula and Charles had their first child, Jill, the same year that Larry Fagin published his first book. A son, Michael, was born 9 years later. Over the years that followed, Charles spent a good deal of time doing the things that fathers who are involved with their children do: changing diapers, taking the kids to school, attending the music and sports events they participated in, and seeing to it that they had as good an education as could be found. Intending for Jill to go to the local public school, which at one time had a good reputation, they began to hear some things which troubled them and

wound up—with the help of grandparents—sending her to a local private school that had the reputation of being the most like a public school. They were able to work out a similar arrangement for Michael.

Charles continued to write when his children were small, but produced work that he was proud of only rarely. He characterizes himself even today as a fast writer but a slow finisher, who does "…a lot of scribbling, not much keeping, and a fair amount of putting away and later—sometimes much later—relocating (in both senses)." Slowly but surely, though, the books came out. In 1977, he published the chapbook *Six Buildings*—followed by *Leap Year* (1978), *The Year of the Olive Oil* (1989), *No Other Way* (selected prose mostly about artists, critics, and poets, 1998), *New and Selected Poems* (1999), *The Nearness of the Way You Look Tonight* (2001), *Cadenza* (2007), and *Complete Lineups* (2008). His work was selected for inclusion in Scribner's Best American Poetry Series in 1995 and 2002, as well as in a number of other anthologies. And in the late 90s, his sometimes tenuous position in the Pace University English Department was reconfigured with Pace naming him its first full-time Poet-in-Residence.

Raising a family occupied the majority of his time and energy from Jill's birth in 1974 until Mike's departure for college in 2002. Whereas some artists and poets see family as a distraction from their work, Charles looks back upon the infancy, childhood, and teenage years of Jill and Michael with pride and no small degree of nostalgia. Having a loving family to whom he is responsible has partly if not entirely helped to mediate the periodic resentments resulting from being overlooked by the poetry establishment. Family life also helped Charles cope with the sickness and death of his own parents. Charles's mother died of complications from emphysema during the winter

of ‘79/‘80. Shortly after her death, his father began exhibiting the first signs of Alzheimer’s disease, from which he died eight years later. Following his wife’s death, he had remarried and moved to Florida. Charles and his sister both had difficulty in getting along with his father’s second wife. In the 2004 interview, he characterized his father’s illness as “overwhelming” and “difficult to see past,” particularly as he had to take over most of his father’s affairs. Schuyler approached Charles around this time and asked if he would be his literary executor along with the painter Darragh Park, a request that Charles turned down due to the practical and emotional burden his father’s condition had imposed on him. He continued on this theme during the spring 2008 interview—and spoke about the difficulty in coming to terms with the necessity for making decisions for a man who had seemed, even in Charles’s adult life, so capable and formidable. He described a recent, haunting episode in which he found a photograph of his father towards the end of his life, when he was virtually insensible to his surroundings; after some agonizing, he decided to tear up the photo.

Literary Recognition

*

> Aug. 4. I am in front of a larger college audience about to give my opening Charles Eliot North Lecture, but before I can utter a word someone asks a question and I spend the entire time trying to answer it…
> —from “Summer Of Living Dangerously” (2007)

When asked about his career as a poet, Charles responded that only in the late 90s did it appear to gain some momentum. Several fortuitous events took place. In 2001 he was awarded his second NEA Creative Writing Fellowship; John Ashbery, as a judge, chose his book *The Nearness of the Way You Look Tonight* as one of 5 finalists for the

inaugural Phi Beta Kappa Poetry Award for best poetry book of the year; and he gave a reading with John Ashbery at the Sackler Auditorium at Harvard University. Although he had known John casually for years, this was the first occasion that he had actually spent time with him. Prior to this he had been extremely shy in his presence.

The reading turned out to be a great success, although it was complicated by an altercation between Ashbery's partner, David Kermani, and the event's promoter which spilled over into the Sackler theater, temporarily flustering Charles (and threatening to ruin the exciting evening) as well as the reading's introducer, the poet and Harvard English Professor Jorie Graham. Actually, Charles was put off by Graham's introduction, which seemed to him to have been put together hastily from back-cover copy on his books. As a result of the reading, however, a few hundred Harvard and M.I.T. undergraduates, graduate students, professors, and community members came to know North's work for the first time. The Harvard *Crimson* interviewed North and Larry Fagin, *Adventures in Poetry*'s Co-Editor (the reading was arranged because books by Charles and John Ashbery had kicked off the newly revived press), and did a big piece on the two poets.

A handful of honors have come Charles' way over the last decade, although, as John Jacob pointed out in *The American Book Review* (2000) apropos Charles's *New and Selected Poems*: "Many poets respect what North is doing, but the big prizes and fellowships have avoided him, and reading this book one can see why. This is not the material of the American Poetry Series. These poems would sooner be the fragments of the poems in those types of books. Sometimes the fragment should be the poem, and we need poets like Charles North to remind of that."

In 2005 he was awarded his fourth Fund For Poetry Award, and in 2008 received a substantial Individual Artist's Grant from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts. Apropos the Phi Beta Kappa Award, one experience affected him deeply. He and the other four finalists gave a group reading at the Library of Congress, hosted by Billy Collins, then U.S. Poet Laureate. For Charles, as exciting as it was, the event was bitter-sweet because the winner, his former teacher Kenneth Koch, was in the advanced stages of terminal cancer, and although he gave a heroic reading, it was obvious to all that he was dying. In fact, it would be his last large public reading before his death in July 2002. Charles described watching Kenneth, who had lost a great deal of weight and was enervated by sickness and chemotherapy, walk down the aisle of the Amtrak train they took down to Washington, D.C.:

> Kenneth walked by and I hadn't seen him a while. His clothes hung on him. He had lost so much weight because of whatever was going on… the chemo. I knew he was very sick and I was actually surprised that he was making the trip. I think he knew, although I don't think it was officially announced, that he was going to get the award. We weren't told until we got down there.

When asked if he spent time with Kenneth during his final weeks, Charles responded:

> I didn't really see him in his final days. I couldn't bring myself to go to the hospital. I think Paul [Violi] might have gone, and I know David Shapiro spent a lot of time there. Again, I never knew Kenneth that well, and never felt really comfortable in his presence, any more than I did with Schuyler or Ashbery. That's the trouble, at least for me, with heroes, and father figures.

Regrets and Ongoing Struggles

*

> I don't find any single decision irrevocable,
> feeling inadequate to life's daily immensities, a condition

of the unwillingness to act, for of the things that are human

the best is to be unavoidable, which doesn't make it any
better

—from "A Few Facts About Me" (1974)

At the end of the spring 2008 interview I inquired if he had any pressing regrets about "the road(s) not taken" (e.g., whether he regretted not getting his Ph.D. or completing law school). We had been talking for nearly two hours at that point and the sunlight was beginning to slant across the living room wall. The answer was a flat "No!" He thinks he made the right occupational choices, partly by what seemed at the time like an accident, though confesses to some regrets and occasional bitterness—shared by his close friends Paul Violi and Tony Towle, whose work he admires immensely—as a result of spending so many years in "the poetic shadows." His omission from David Lehman's *Oxford Anthology of American Poetry* (2006), published just after Carcanet Press in England had included him as one of the 11 poets in New York Poets II (the first volume consisted of Ashbery, Koch, O' Hara and Schuyler), continues to rankle, though he understands the literary and social politics involved in anthology-making. Also, he remains more than a little frustrated by what he described in a 1991 lecture ("The State of the Art," printed in *American Poetry Review* the following year and reprinted in *No Other Way*) as the poetry world's "false reputations" (he thinks he picked up this phrase from Kenneth Koch), which are recognitions based on factors having little to do with the merit of work. He touched on this theme in a lengthy letter he wrote but wound up not sending (also printed in *No Other Way*) to the *New York Review of Books* apropos an article on Schuyler by the noted Harvard University critic Helen Vendler:

> [It was] as though she was attending to him [Schuyler] not because she really liked or truly admired the poetry, but because he had won a prize, had been nominated for another, and in addition had published a book-length poem. In that sort of climate of readers and critics, it's hard to imagine poets getting their due for the right reasons if at all – except occasionally…

Regret aside, Charles acknowledges that life has been good to him. He has been happily married to a woman whom he not only loves but deeply admires, as he also admires and loves his two successful, well-adjusted children. He finds it exciting—if mildly ironic—that his daughter and her new husband are both successful philosophers, one of the careers he chose not to pursue.

Charles is also grateful for his good health; he had open heart surgery to repair a leaky heart valve eight years ago, and he feels better, if anything, than before it. However, he remains all too aware that the pig valve that was surgically sown into his heart lasts approximately 15 years, which means a future surgery to replace is more likely than not. Looking back upon the surgery, he reports having been utterly unprepared for the crushing post-operative depression that came over him:

> …it [the depression] came over me; it was so overwhelming, and I was so depressed I couldn't think of what had generated it. There are some theories that it has to do with the fact that you're on a heart and lung machine and your heart is out of your body and there is this invasion of the self in this complex way that nobody fully understands. And in fact I wasn't really prepared because the surgeon didn't talk about it, nobody did. But afterward I met a couple of people who had it and felt the same way afterward.

I asked whether he thought the depression was a result of a sudden awareness of his own finitude, to which he responded that depression, according to a number of heart patients, "…came with the territory with open-heart surgery," and again that "…nobody quite understands why." He wonders if "…there may very well be some sort of mysterious neurochemical component." The operation occurred in June 2001, on his

sixtieth birthday. Other than to Paula, he didn't say much to friends about his emotional state. "I don't usually talk to people, other than my wife, about those things," he explained. When I pressed him a bit and asked whether he wishes he had friends he could share his more private thoughts and feelings with he went on to say: "I'm not that kind of person, so it doesn't bother me. We have these kinds of boundaries."

Struggling with flat affect and periods of depression throughout that summer, Charles was unable to do much writing, but did make some notes that were later used as raw material for a poem he'd title "Summer of Living Dangerously." He learned at almost the same time that Kenneth Koch had been diagnosed with leukemia and been given a discouraging prognosis. Charles made more notes for "Summer of Living Dangerously" the next summer, when Koch in fact died. (Charles feels that Koch's illness along with his own surgery underlie the whole of the lengthy poem.) The poem is in the form of a diary and chronicles 45 days (or clusters of days) from June 16th until September 30th. Below are a few of the more poignant excerpts. The first is marked by a clever circumlocution that moves the reader's attention away from a startling simile that bears a striking resemblance to a leaky heart valve:

> The pair of cardinals that zip around like flying drops of blood… let's make that like ice-dancers, especially when compared to the deliberate hawks.

The poem is packed with images and sequences that evoke transience. For example:

> June 29. We don't ordinarily think of clouds as minds, but they exhibit some of the same forms of detachment, from "spacing out" to "scattering" to disintegration. Plus the appearance at least of being superimposed, more convincingly at certain times than at others.

I am particularly struck by a large number of visual moments that communicate apprehension and fear:

> I keep staring at the space underneath a large—sycamore tree it looks like, darker than one would image even in bad weather. Than I would have imagined.
>
> Well, stop.

These melancholic images are immediately transformed by funny absurdist scenarios:

> Aug. 2. A water pipe crawled out of the woods.
>
> Aug. 4. I am in front of a larger college audience about to give my opening Charles Eliot North Lecture [Charles had in fact seen an Ashbery publicity flyer which inadvertently transcribed "Charles Eliot Norton" as "Charles Eliot North" and he was very amused by that], but before I can utter a word someone asks a question and I spend the entire time trying to answer it. I have something written on a paper on top of the lectern, but I've never seen the paper before and the writing doesn't look like English…

Because of the reflective and at times dark nature of the poem, it surprised Charles when a friend told him that he thought the book read from cover to cover like a standup comedy routine. "I am the writer, of course, but I think that's just plain wrong," he says.

When I ask what the hardest part of being a father has been, Charles pauses reflectively – stating at first that "It's a hard question to answer; I mean I've enjoyed so much about it." But then he goes on to talk about how he and Paula both miss seeing their kids as much as they once did:

> It's been very hard; again, this is something you usually associate with mothers; and that's why I bring it up – I find it interesting. It's been very hard more so in the last year or two, since Mike has really moved away from the city, and since they're so busy with their own lives. He's very very busy; Jill's very very busy. So when we see them we have to make appointments and it never was like that.

> And it's been that way with Jill for a while. She's 34 now. And she's got her own life, and she's busy, and she's married and all that. But Mike was always around, and though we talk to him regularly, we don't see him often. And I love him so much that that has been hard.

The Future

*

> I like very much the notion that I will
> Appear in another life…
> —from "Madrigal: Another Life" (1974)

"What is it that you still want to accomplish?" I ask during the fall 2008 interview. On the literary front, he wants very much to publish a book of the shorter poems he has been working on, as well as a new selected poems, especially since his *New and Selected Poems* (1999) has gone out of print with the demise of Sun & Moon Press. He would also like to publish an expanded edition of his literary and art essays. When I ask about whether he would like to retire from teaching, he states that he cannot do so for economic reasons, although he would like eventually to teach, say, one class per semester as a transition into retirement. For now, he still enjoys teaching, especially in the Honors program where he can construct his own courses. "And grandchildren?" I ask. "Are you interested?" He explains that he rarely if ever thinks about it. What he most cares about is that his daughter and son are happy and thriving, whether or not they turn out to be parents; to him, the question of children—and grandchildren—belongs emphatically to them. I broach the subject of death and dying, but Charles stops me. "Thoughts of death are close to intolerable," he says.

CHAPTER FOUR: *PAUL VIOLI*

You have a scar on your left knee.
You are not a rich man
but you are not an unlucky man
for the gods ignore you.
Friday and Saturday are your lucky days.
You have crossed the oceans many times.
You have two children, one sings in his sleep.
Some people have done you great favors.
You will not have a long life
but an exciting and sloppy one.
Now is the proper time
to attend to home duties
and not neglect your Romantic Partner.
Avoid excessive respect for old people and symmetry.
—from "Dry Spells" (1981)

Behold once more with serious labor here
Have I refurnished out this little frame,
Repaired some parts defective here and there,
And passages new added to the same,
Some rooms enlarged, made some less than they were
Like to the curious builder who this year
Pulls down, and alters what he did the last
As if the thing in doing were more dear
Than being done, and nothing likes that's past.
—from "The Curious Builder" (1992)

Introduction

Paul Violi comes across as a generous man who loves a good laugh, especially in response to the absurdist stories and scenarios that seem to populate his life. Over our three lengthy conversations, Paul tells me about how his family's Christmas rental, a large house in West Palm Beach, Florida was infested with fleas, which devoured everyone but him; or how the publisher Lita Hornick loyally continued to employ a printer even though he was going blind until one book (written by poet Anne Waldman)

was accidentally printed in blue ink; or how he was once in a car crash with his wife and kids en route to a holiday party that resulted in his being splattered with sauce from a pasta dish his wife prepared, which led witnesses to think when he stepped out of the car that his injuries were far worse than they were; or how his wife was bitten by a snake two summers ago minutes after they had listened to an audio recording of Book IX of *Paradise Lost*. He is a wonderfully entertaining conversationalist and is consummately open to discussing a range of topics from Renaissance literature to his favorite reality television shows.

In his mid-sixties and handsome, Paul is 5'10'' and has graying dark hair. He is a heavy cigarette smoker, usually a full two packs a day. Physically robust, he has the hands, shoulders, and chest of a working man, which gives him a virility that is absent in many of his contemporaries. By nature a gregarious guy, he loves spending time with friends in restaurants around lower Manhattan. However, he is also a very private person and has the reputation amongst friends as someone who tends to deal with setbacks quietly and stoically, seldom confiding in others or asking for help. In a similar fashion, his poems generally lack the degree of personal disclosures common in confessional poetry (e.g. the work of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton), which Paul tends to think of as "off-putting, unduly solemn, stolid, [and] serious." Paul's work, in comparison, is much more experimental, and celebrates more than it laments. The late Kenneth Koch, who played an encouraging role in Paul's his career, said the following at a Columbia University reading in December 1998: "The happiness, the excitement, the appreciation of the values of things—from a chiffon dress to a rocket—are, presumably, all there in the poet's imagination and feelings, but, it may be, covered over by what you

might call the ashes of day-to-day experience that covers up their dazzle. The fire needs a good shake to get it going again, or to be attacked with a new match. Paul finds these lighted matches where he goes."

He has a reputation for finding day-to-day experience for material, and cites William Faulkner's notion that the writer's job is "to create out of the materials of the human spirit something that did not exist before." Materials exist in everyday goings-on (e.g. ordering a sandwich at a deli), seemingly innocent textual forms (e.g. the index of a biography, television listings, or an apology note left on an Acura Integra) and other books, especially history. In his own words, "Everyday goings-on, or reading, especially history, provide a lot of nuggets, something that sets me off." Much of what sets Paul off is humorous. However, he doesn't like it when he is introduced at readings as "funny" and nothing else. From my perspective, this makes sense. Anyone familiar with his eleven books knows that in addition to being funny, he is at times tragic, surprising, philosophically speculative, alarming, and touchingly reflective.

Paul is unimpressed by a good deal of modern poetry, whether the "deadening language exercises" of Language Poetry, or "the self-aggrandizing style" of self-absorbed poets. He believes that the best poetry is imaginative and inventive. His frequently anthologized poem "Index" is a good example of how he goes about making a poem. The idea came to him while reading an autobiography by "an egregiously self-indulgent man," whose name he claims to have forgotten. Paul noticed that the author's egotism seeped into the end papers, especially the index. "A different character came to mind, he explains, "…one who was not quite the master of his fate, and an index, with its fragmentary lines, suggested a way to catch both the quick, haphazard changes such a

character would endure and his increasingly scrambled perception of them. As I assembled the poem it began to resemble a chronology." The first twenty-two lines read:

Index

Hudney, Sutej   IX, X, XI, 7, 9, 25, 58, 60, 61, 64
Plates   5, 10, 15
Chilhood   70, 71
Education   78, 79, 80
Early relationship with family   84
Enters academy, honors   84
Arrest and bewilderment   85
Formation of spatial theories   90
"Romance of Ardoy, The"   92
Second arrest   93
Early voyages, life in the Pyrenees   95
Marriage   95
Abandons landscape painting   96
Third arrest   97
Weakness of character, inconstancy   101
First signs of illness, advocation
of celibacy   106, 107
Advocates abolishment of celibacy   110
Expulsion from Mazar   110
Collaborations with Fernando Gee   111
Composes lines beginning: "Death, wouldst that I had
died/While thou wert still a mystery."   117

Paul explains that regardless of the many and varied jobs he took to make money, aside from teaching, none defined his identity. On the contrary, he just knew from an early age that he was a writer, and wrote his first short story at the age of thirteen. But after realizing that Jack London had already used the same plot in "To Build a Fire," Paul moved to verse. He liked the intensity of poetry and was initially drawn to the "sentimental quatrains" of the Irish poet and friend of Byron, Thomas Moore (1779-1852), although found lasting literary heroes in the satirical poets of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the early modernists of the 20th Century while an undergraduate at Boston University. Paul does not have a theory as to why it is he

always felt that he was a writer. Paul thinks the Roman poet Juvenal's phrase, "cacoethes scribendi," which translates to "an irresistible urge to write," says it all.

Poetry never generated enough income to sustain his family. He and his wife of forty years, Ann Violi, have two children, a boy and a girl, now both in their thirties. "Once you have a family," he explains, "you *scramble*." The sheer breadth of Paul's employment history is remarkable. Primarily a teacher, from the age of ten he also worked as a drugstore clerk; a fur trapper (on the north shore of then rural Long Island); a soda-jerk; a hardware store clerk, a construction worker; a factory worker; a bouncer; a surveyor in Nigeria (during time in the Peace Corps); a clam digger; a substitute teacher in the Beacon City School System; a writer and editor on various magazines; managing editor of *Architectural Forum*; a telephone book delivery man; a "traffic manager" at a TV News station; a workshop teacher and director for the Saint Mark's Poetry Project; a special assistant to Buckminster Fuller; and an adjunct professor of poetry and literature at Bloomfield College, NYU, Scarsdale Teacher's Institute, SUNY Purchase, Empire State College, Mercy College, Pace University, Dalton School, Sing-Sing Prison, Stevens Institute, Columbia, and the New School. These days he teaches literature and creative writing classes at Columbia, NYU, and The New School. This requires him to drive into Manhattan from the Putnam County home he shares with Ann three or four days a week during the fall and spring semesters and two days a week during the summer. He teaches undergraduate literature classes at Columbia, undergraduate seminars and graduate poetry workshops at the New School, and writing literature classes in the school of continuing education at NYU. The exact number and configuration of classes he teaches varies.

Now 65, he will begin receiving Social Security next year, which will help financially. Ann retired from a career teaching special needs children last year, so they must keep a watchful eye on finances. Although Paul has no desire to retire anytime soon, he thinks it would behoove him to have a less frenetic schedule—since caffeine is no longer as effective as it once was. This spring he drank too much coffee before a reading at Bryant Park in midtown Manhattan and embarrassed himself by shaking through the entire thing. As he puts it, "I had so much coffee that I couldn't keep my hands steady. You get to a certain age; your liver can't buffer the stuff."

My Personal History with Paul and his Poetry

I first met Paul Violi in April 2003, at the Fish Bar in the East Village of Manhattan. Earlier that year, through my workplace, I befriended a former Columbia student of Paul's named Justin Jamail. Justin, also a poet, invited me to an informal salon he organized every Tuesday night at the Fish Bar—comprised of Paul, Tony Towle, and a few younger poets and playwrights who had come through Columbia University in the late 90s and early 2000s. I purchased a few of Paul's books later that year, which I recall enjoying quite a bit, although I initially thought the work was too slapstick. Increased familiarity changed this impression and I later recognized an impressively large emotional and intellectual range across his eleven published collections.

I got to know Paul better in January 2004 when Justin and I participated in a reading with Paul and Tony at the Bowery Poetry Club in Manhattan. Then in February 2005 I asked him to read in my series at the National Arts Club. Not knowing his work as well as I do now, I enlisted a former student of his named Amber Reed to help me

prepare the introduction, a paragraph of which reads, "From his reading of history, a walk down Canal Street, paintings he has seen, bad movies, all of the cultural flotsam and jetsam and utter detritus that floats through our dreams and gets stuck in our hair, Violi creates galaxies—of diamonds if you please, if diamonds can be said to represent all that is strange and wondrous, surprising and delightful in this our doomed, infinitely love-worthy world. He has no fear of the personal, but finds the soul most interesting not for its dark convolutions but for what it is able to create and experience—experiences, often, of wonder, or of love—and for its ability to surprise itself. And so his poems wonder and love and surprise themselves, and in the process do some pretty neat things with form, some beautiful things with music and a lot else besides. They're also very funny."

Three years later, in spring 2008, when I approached Charles, Tony, and Paul with the idea of doing a dissertation on their works and days, Paul agreed to the project with a characteristically self-effacing joke: "I don't know whether to think along the lines of Stein's *Three Lives* or Moe, Larry and Curly. No, seriously, it all sounds wonderful. And as far as interviews and times go, you can count on all my help."

Brief Life History

Early Life

*

Yesterday also has its leaves, newspapers
blown down the bare avenues
and streets of yet another city
entering the wide morning behind you, surprising
you that this light, often unnoticeable breeze
which constantly blows in your face,
which carries sights through your eyes
like leaves through air,
can move these cities farther away

than islands driven by an ocean stream…
—from "Harmatan" (1976)

Paul Randolph Violi was born on July 20, 1944 in New York City. His family soon moved to Greenlawn, Long Island. Paul was the middle child, with an older brother and younger sister, with whom he keeps in regular touch. His mother and father were born into first-generation Italian immigrant households in Brooklyn, New York. They met young, around the age of ten, and a family legend has it that Paul's father ingratiated himself by throwing either a snowball or tomato at his bride-to-be and hitting her on the butt. His father came from a family of fifteen that valued the arts. One uncle was a prodigy on the piano and another received a master's in comparative literature from Columbia University. Opera and jazz, notably Caruso and Ella Fitzgerald, were frequently played on the phonograph on weekend afternoons and at night.

Paul's parents moved to the rural north shore of long Island, where Mr. Violi co-owned and managed Russwood Drugs and in time two other drugstores. Paul characterizes them as "high end." He and his siblings were put to work at the age of ten, stocking shelves and helping with inventory, and later working behind the lunch counter. Paul describes his father as a supportive, loving man who possessed impressive equanimity. "A determined, sensible man, he was also a genial, easy-going redhead." He never really got mad, rarely drank alcohol, and aside from one memory of his having said *"There's the son of a bitch!"* in response to seeing his former captain in the Navy appear on one of Edward R. Murrow's televised interviews, Paul can't remember his father using profanity. A World War II navy veteran stationed in the South Pacific, he was quiet about his war experiences until his seventies when he started opening up more. Paul gained a sense of what his father was like as a young man when he read his

wartimes dairies after his death in 1995. He learned, for example, that his father had taken a long train trip to see the western United States after being drafted into the Navy at the age of twenty-four. He also read about his father's experiences on a PC 173-foot submarine chaser amid the threat of typhoons and "suicide bombers," and also the intensity of seeing the ruins of Tokyo after the incendiary bombings ordered under the command of Colonel Curtis Lemay.

Paul characterizes his mother, who is alive, though suffering from dementia, as "supportive, though nervous." She was "a pretty feisty lady," he says, "with two sisters with whom she was *very* close. She was full of vitality, very loving, and determined." Both parents were encouraging of his early interest in poetry and made sure to supply him with anthologies of verse, which he read with great interest. They also placed a good deal of emphasis on education. They sent their eldest son, Peter, and then the following year, Paul himself, to The Stony Brook School, an Episcopal day and boarding school located in Stony Brook, not far from Huntington. Paul describes its "preppy" demographics as 200 students, including "two Catholics, one Jew, two blacks, and one girl." Morning chapel was mandatory and the boys were required to wear gray slacks, a blue blazer, and a blue and white striped tie. He was saddened to hear recently that Stony Brook has taken a turn to "fundamentalism."

After his sophomore year, Paul felt bored and no longer wanted to attend Stony Brook. At the time, a cousin was going to an all-boys Catholic school in Mount Vernon run by Marist Brothers called Mount Saint Michael's. His cousin liked it there, so a decision was made that Paul too would enroll. He attended for his junior and senior years, boarding in Mount Vernon during the week and taking the train home to

Greenlawn for the weekends, where he enjoyed "hunting, trapping, and having fun." Paul describes himself as having been "very wild" during high school, but in a way that generally avoided parental detection. Part of this had to do with the fact that Mount Saint Michael's was closed for saints' days, which meant that Paul was free to roam around the city with friends on days and nights when his parents thought he was attending class. "My father wasn't religious and my mother went to church on Sundays, not every day some saint was being celebrated."

When asked to recount a memorable episode from his time at Mount Saint Michael's, Paul tells a story of being smashed across the face by a brother and history teacher named Brother Charles Patrick after a morning assembly to first day of class. Brother Patrick asked Paul to stay behind as the other boys filed out for class. Paul remembers sitting there as Brother Patrick made his way up the bleachers—and then cracked him across the face with an open hand on the grounds that he was talking during the assembly. Humiliated and in pain, Paul spent a moment deciding whether or not he should shove the man backward down the steep bleachers to the gym floor. Instead, he took his punishment quietly, though vowed to himself that he would wait for the right moment to retaliate. A golden opportunity arose at the annual student/faculty football game a few weeks later. "I tried to hit him every play," Paul explains. "And eventually I put him out of the game. He couldn't raise his arms."

Paul loved sports, whether football, wrestling, baseball, or track and field (shot-put, discus and javelin). He also did a fair amount of dating from an early age [*]. Ann, however, was his first love. Paul vividly recalls seeing her for the first time. He was in a boat with friends in Northport Harbor on the North Shore, and watched as a pretty young

girl swam from the shore to the boat and surfaced. Her face appeared through the water next to the boat and he remembers thinking that she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Ann was from nearby Centerport, New York. He had a number of girlfriends through his teenage years but knew there was something singular about Ann. Like Dante's Beatrice or Petrarch's Laura, she is the muse in many of Paul's poems, especially ones written during his twenties and thirties. Take the opening lines of an erotic poem, "Centerport, N.Y.", from *Automatic Transmissions* (1970), the first pamphlet he published—

> her clothes slid off
> with the ease that makes smoke rise
>
> and we waded in   gradually
>
> two thoughts entering a consciousness
>
> dove and came up
>
>   shining
>
> and laughing as the water laughed
>   against her belly.

College, Peace Corps, and Journey East

*

> We are undertaking a voyage
> to an ancient island
> separated from the continent
> by more than water and dialect,
> boasting on its own heritage
> and rules of governance.
>   —from "Brochure" (1981)

Paul studied English and Art History at Boston University from 1962 to 1966. He says that he was not always a serious student and that he read what he wanted to read and

not always what he was required to. However, some of his coursework interested him quite a bit. In particular, he remembers influential upper level genre classes: one on satire, one on Renaissance Literature, and another on Wordsworth and Coleridge. Paul claims that the great satirists—mainly Pope, Swift, Dryden, Voltaire, Rabelais, Byron—played a formative role in his literary sensibilities, in addition to the Romantic and Victorian poets and contemporary novelists like Amis, Donleavey, and Heller. When he wasn't reading books, a good deal of his time was spent exploring Boston, hanging out with his friends, and dating a series of women. (It bears mentioning that during this period he was neither seeing nor dating Ann on a regular basis). He explains that Boston's Back Bay, "…was a great place to be single and to have your own apartment." When it came to meeting other poets he had less success. "The poets whom I met there, who were deliberately making themselves known as poets, I didn't like much. They struck me as pretentious. And also, at that time I was writing stuff that… well… it was good that I didn't publish it. It was dull actually." Much of this early work was influenced by the imagist poetry of Ezra Pound. Pound's imagism derived its technique from classical Chinese and Japanese poetry by stressing precision, clarity, and economy of language, and forgoing conventional rhyme and meter to compose "in the sequence of a musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome." Paul's next poetic stage (after graduating college) involved writing cryptic symbolist poems that were largely inaccessible to anyone but himself. Almost all of this work was purposefully destroyed by Paul by late '67 (either thrown away or willfully lost), the year Paul moved back to New York after spending a little less than a year as a Peace Corps volunteer in Nigeria and then nearly a year travelling across Europe and Asia until he reached Nepal.

The Peace Corps required that he go out to California for training immediately after graduation, followed by seven months as a surveyor and map maker in Nigeria (from December 1966 until June 1967). Paul reports that shortly after landing in Lagos, a number of his fellow volunteers literally turned around and went home when they encountered the heat and humidity and saw that the walls in the airport were riddled with bullet holes. Paul, on the other hand, had no desire to return—he was seeking adventure. Over the six months that followed, he completed maps and surveyed land for the Nigerian Government, camped and hiked, rode motorbikes into remote villages that only seldom encountered white people, was attacked by various wildlife, dealt with dengue fever and dysentery, and encountered tribes on the brink of a bloody civil war. Seven years later, in 1976, he published a book-length poem in 49 sections that chronicled his experiences in Nigeria. Called *Harmatan*, the book is the most transparently autobiographical of Paul's works. A period review characterized it as "…accomplished as most of Violi's work, but contains little of the language distortions, tv-generation wit, or structural fireworks of his other poems. It is instead an almost prosy, straightforward series of impressions: "the impressions of a poet distanced from events in order to report them as objectively as possible."

The narrative voice in *Harmatan* is set in the second person singular. When I asked about this decision, Paul said: "I was talking to a different person in a different place, and given the abrupt transitions of the time, both seemed remote. It's a poem about memory, and each section is organized around a different place and the rest of the section clusters around it. To resort to a trite metaphor, it was like putting down a bunch of metal filings on a piece of paper and then placing a magnet underneath and then they

all shoot together and form a dramatic, imagistic pattern. So, each one of those sections is just what popped up, coalesced, fell into place. I would remember a place and then other memories would cluster around that place. I wanted a poem based on plain language and direct observation." Section five, for instance, begins with the line "kaduna's tin roofs glistening in the afternoon." This line is immediately followed by a series of images:

> Peanut sacks piled into hundred-foot pyramids.
> Groups of lepers and beggars
> converging on customers outside of stores.
> Streets thick with exhaust fumes.
> Khandee's heavy breasts.
> Cock-eyed and hipless. Flowery skirt.
> Keeping mosquitoes off you all night.
> Sweet, stoned, perpetually drowsy.
> Black leg next to a white leg in candle light.
> Tongue leading a cool breeze over your skin.
> [5]

Many of the sections contain funny vignettes and images:

> Another invitation from the emir
> to come over for a few beers
> at ten in the morning.
> [11]

Or:

> Free sales demonstration.
> Made it himself out of spare parts.
> Muzzle-loading pistol
> the length of a sawn-off shotgun.
> How can he tell how much powder
> to use when he's pouring it in the dark?
> [34]

But just as quickly, the images coalesce into a darker human portrait; Paul depicts such realities as superstition, prostitution, extreme poverty, the effects of malnutrition on children, and the haunting aftermath of tribal warfare:

> Staved-in doors. Ransacked rooms.
> And on the other end of Kano, right outside
> the old city's wall's eroded embrasures:
> mass, unmarked graves
> and past them, more fields, mud compounds,
> bundles of firewood, children with bad teeth…
> [31]

As is characteristic of much of Paul's work, a premium is placed on the absurd and strange, neither of which was lacking for a young American who hadn't traveled beyond the United States:

> An oven made by packing mud
> around discarded fuel drums.
> A tongue for breakfast.
> Unsliced, lying in the tin bowl
> as if it had just pronounced its last syllable.
> [17]

Also in the montage are moments of arresting beauty and wisdom:

> Fine dust above the goat paths
> suspended in the sunlight
> then drifting upward
> as if the ground were raining on the sky.
> [48]
>
> ****
>
> A cloud looks snagged on a tree.
> Spring water flows off like excess clarity.
> In the village, the women never stop
> to take a breath, but sing
> with the ease of a stream,
> of the earth ceaselessly emptying itself.
> [49]

Feeling the build up to a civil war, later known as the Nigerian-Biafran War, Paul hastily abandoned his Peace Corps assignment and attempted to cross the Sahara but was denied entrance into Algeria, so made his way, alone, to Côte d'Ivoire where he met a young woman with whom he travelled to Paris. After a brief romance, she continued on to Ireland to visit friends, and he to Italy. Paul describes his progress eastward as follows: "Then I thought I would go to Greece. It wasn't so far away. And then I figured I'd go to Turkey, and once in Turkey I thought Iran is just down the road, so I went to Iran… and that's how I ended up in Nepal eventually… I think of it all as an accumulative blur. But it was a lot of fun; it was very interesting; being an American at that time was a blessing because it was such an admired country throughout the world, despite the escalating war in Vietnam." In a twist of fate, Ann was also in the Peace Corps, happened to be in Turkey while Paul was travelling through it. But he didn't learn she was there until after his return. A poem in *Splurge* (1982) called "Anatolia" remembers the Turkish winter with a consciousness of her presence:

> Snow falling on the desert, snow falling on the sea, wake
> up in between, wind filtered through bullet-ridden stop
> signs, taste the cold spoon of dawn, the crazy birds are jump-
> ing in their nests, your hair is my black moon, your lips touch
> my ears, breathe the sound of beautiful new cars speeding
> past me as I drive through Turkey again, only this time I
> know you're there too, though don't know exactly where…

Other poems contain images from his journey east. Examples include "Scrounge" in *In Baltic Circles* (1973), about India, and also a moment in the long poem "Wet Bread and Roasted Pearls" that recalls a striking visual moment during his time in Bombay:

> where one afternoon, leaving
> that city on a slow, quiet train,

trackbed raised
above flooded fields,
no land in sight,
I could see nothing
but sky mirrored in water
and the tremendous sun drawing
its hour-long reflection
across horizonless blue.

When I asked if his year travelling was the highlight of his life he grinned and said that it was the highlight of that time in his life, but that there have been many since.

Return to the United States

Paul recalls feeling let down upon returning to the United States at the end of '67. Much of this had to do with where the country was in regard to Vietnam; also, he felt a growing disenchantment with what was called "the consumer society" or "conspicuous consumption" at the expense of American values. Here's how he characterizes his return: "…I went from places where sick and starving children were ubiquitous and then came back to America and worked on a cruise ship and the contrast gave me whiplash. Also, I was very politically involved at the time in response to what was going on in the world. I mean LBJ and Vietnam—and I thought the war was all a total sham—no justification as to why I should kill Vietnamese. It didn't make any sense to me. I'm not sure it was as transparently a sham as the Iraq War, but I felt just as strongly. Congress didn't declare this war and it violated every sense I had of politics and the American Constitution." Although he attended antiwar demonstrations, the experience of becoming politically active was educational. While he opposed American foreign policy, he was simultaneously critical of "the radical left," which, in his words, "[tried] to manipulate legitimate protest to a more extreme action, or an extreme end, which is just to blast the

whole thing apart… and I resented seeing the way they tried to do that… They took a Constitutional right to speak up and took it to a place that reminded me of the Bolshevik provocateurs…"

Luckily, he was never drafted to serve, and recounts his elation upon being declared 4F at his draft board interview in the early summer of '68. Going into the interview was jarring because he had been working as a clam digger on Long Island, so was tan and in good condition physically, just the kind of specimen the army was looking for. He remembers changing into a button-down shirt on the way to the interview and buttoning it to the wrists and neck. Furthermore, he devised a strategy of showing a lack of interest in anything political. He figured that the government was looking for any attitude that was strongly held, the psychology being that someone who vehemently opposed the war could as easily channel that intensity into killing Vietnamese. Paul figures that his apathy in combination with having contracted Dengue fever and a lingering extreme case of dysentery while abroad, bolstered by a low score on the intelligence test, disqualified him from the draft. Upon hearing the verdict of 4F, he left the federal office and did a series of cartwheels in the parking lot before climbing into his girlfriend's Mustang convertible and speeding away into a beautiful summer afternoon.

Others of course were not so lucky. Two friends from Boston University were drafted and came back psychologically damaged, drug addicted, and/or alcoholic. One of the two has written Paul and Ann one letter a month since 1969. Paul describes these long letters as incoherent and at times painful to read. He occasionally sent his old friend a postcard but has not seen him since shortly after their marriage in 1969 when they paid him a visit in Boston. He drove them around the city making sound effects and refusing

to speak. Although the tragedy is overwhelming, Paul points out that his friend's sense of humor hadn't been entirely destroyed. Decades ago he [the friend] came upon a Holiday Inn "Tudor Room" restaurant that was being demolished and took several large portraits of sixteenth century aristocrats. He then proceeded to send three of the portraits, 2x3 feet in size, to Paul and Ann as postcards by writing their address on the back and then placing several hundred stamps at the top right corner.

It is a marvel to Paul that some returned from Vietnam relatively unscarred, whereas others were reduced to lives of sadness and dysfunction. Paul discussed the second of the two veteran friends in an interview he did that was published in Pataphysics magazine. In it, he recounts attending a David Letterman taping when he came to New York City for a visit:

> I was with a friend I hadn't seen in a while and I was dismayed by the way he looked. He was still a young man but Vietnam and booze had turned him into a frail, trembling old man who had to use a cane. He had tickets to the show and I thought that was an odd thing to do. He had a pal with him, a big guy who was on crutches, and they had been drinking quite a bit. When we entered the studio the perky minions who seat the audience took one look at us and panicked. We didn't fit their demographic. They didn't want us anywhere near a camera angle. I think we were wearing black raincoats. I naturally insisted that we sit in the front row; they wanted us in the back row. We compromised and they seated us in the second-to-last row – in a corner! *[Laughter]*

Marriage and New York City

*

> And I like the sweet, weary feeling
> of going sleepless, aimless through city streets,
> have the action and ebullient tones
> carry me like the first wave-borne beer can
> to near a pristine shore…
>
> —from "One for the Monk of Montaudon" (1981)

After being declared 4F and working as a Long Island clam digger, Paul moved to Manhattan and reconnected with Ann. The two were married on June 29, 1969 and lived for a while in an affordable apartment Paul found on the lower east side. Wanting to make inroads into the downtown poetry scene, Paul had begun spending time around Saint Mark's. The Poetry Project offered reading series on Monday and Wednesday and poetry workshops on other days, several of which Paul took. Although he felt that the majority of his classmates were ambivalent about the material he was writing (not to mention the quantity he was writing it in), he was encouraged by his workshop leaders. The most valuable workshop of all, though, was run by Tony Towle, who Paul thought was the most talented poet around the place. His initial impression of Tony was of a man who knew art, music, and literature inside and out, and who was very much involved with contemporary poets and artists in New York.

Tony was magnanimous in the attention he gave to Paul's work and willing to share his connections, getting Paul and Charles (who Paul soon befriended) invited to a host of literary gatherings. He was energized by the friendship that almost immediately began developing between himself, Tony, and Charles. As he describes it, "It seemed like the three of us were just naturally compatible friends, in terms of humor, our take on poetry. We became friends very quickly. There were a lot of after reading and after workshop get-togethers at bars. We were interested in literature—you know not just the poetry scene. And our humor—our senses of humor complemented one another. We had a lot of fun and I also learned a great deal from them."

Paul found himself writing more than ever. Looking back, he feels sheepish about the "mindless prolixity" with which he sometimes wrote and published during this

highly frenetic period. Although much of the work was later discarded, some of it found its way into his first pamphlet, *Automatic Transmissions [AT],* which came out in 1970. To this day, Paul continues to have ambivalent feelings toward it. *AT* is *not* listed on his official website, nor is it mentioned on his website or author websites run through the Electric Poetry Center (EPC) of SUNY Buffalo or a modern American poetry website maintained by Oxford University Press. It took a while before I knew it existed at all. Another former student of Paul's told me about it and suggested I go to Butler Library at Columbia to take a look for myself. "It's much different than anything else he's written," the friend said. I ended up getting a copy through a West Virginian bookseller who specializes in hard-to-find pamphlets. While I waited for it to arrive, I emailed Paul to ask why it was no longer part of his "official" oeuvre, to which he responded:

> Good question about *Automatic Transmissions*: good in the sense that I never clearly decided why I left it out, just knew I didn't want to include it for a number of reasons and had and still have mixed feelings about it: (A) I felt that some or all of it had been subsumed by the later book, *In Baltic Circles*, therefore making it superfluous. (B) I had outgrown it, didn't care much for it, and pretended it never happened. (C) I disliked the cover and still do. (D) Pamphlets are supposed to be ephemeral, except the ones I still like and have elevated them to the rank of book. (E) Sometimes I read it and think I should list it.

The pamphlet was published by a small press Paul co-founded called Swollen Magpie Press, after a line from Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos* in which the poet refers to himself as "a swollen magpie in a fitful sun." At the time of its publication, Paul and Ann, recently married, were spending the summer in New Hampshire where Paul was working a construction job. In the evenings they would hang out with a group of young men and women in the area, one of whom was an artist and volunteered to do the cover. Paul agreed without ever seeing a sample of the guy's work, a decision which continues

to annoy him. The cover consists of a rather eclectic grouping of black line drawings, including the hood of a car, an old woman's face, a young seductive girl kneeling, and a small classical looking building behind a well-dressed man. "High school art," Paul says.

Regardless of how the cover looked, there was hardly any time to worry about it. Things were happening and there was a lot of excitement in the air. Paul describes his life in NYC as a whirlwind of aesthetic and social excitement, the nexus of which was Saint Mark's Church and the Poetry Project housed there, where he taught workshops and was interim director, as well as serving for years on the advisory board at the project. The Poetry Project of that day was full of colorful personalities and lots of interesting, albeit erratically organized, workshops and reading series. This led Paul to meet lots of new people and to fill his schedule with readings, art shows, and get-togethers. He enjoyed long nights of socializing with Towle and many other people affiliated with the downtown scene. In addition to all of the poets and painters he was reading and meeting, there was the excitement he experienced after encountering the paintings of Rivers, Oldenburg, Dine, and later Grooms, all of whom he felt were able to create beautiful things "in quite original ways."

Also influential was a postmodern turn in architecture that came about in urban centers in the late Sixties and early Seventies, namely the work of Robert Venturi. Architecture made him think and feel in ways that began having effects on his writing. "What appealed to me was the freedom, the openness, the allusive playfulness with which they drew on the past to counteract the cold and brutal severity—*you know*—all that concrete and sharp angles. What mattered was not a clean wholesale break with the past but a continuing homage to or conversation with poetry I loved." And so he began

writing a lot of new work and various people in the New York City art world took notice. On May 11, 1972, out of the blue, Paul received a letter from Lita Hornick, whom he'd never met. Lita was the head of The Kulchur Foundation and publisher of Kulchur books. She and her husband Morty were wealthy art collectors and patrons who had a spacious Park Avenue apartment which they opened up each year for a legendary poets' and painters' party. The letter, which is short, read, "Dear Mr. Violi: I have seen some of your work, and am interested in possibly publishing a book of yours some time. If you are interested, please contact me at the above address. Sincerely yours, Lita Hornick." He contacted Lita and soon after she published *In Baltic Circles*—at 123 pages, his first full collection.

Lita liked Paul immensely and ended up asking him to run a reading series at MoMA in the late seventies and early eighties. She and Morty also invited Paul and Ann over to their home in New City and to their city apartment for dinner parties, where they met many well-known "players" in the art world. Paul speaks about Lita's generosity with warmth and affection. After she became infirm – and Morty had died of a heart attack – he kept an eye on her and would escort her to dinner every so often. "I liked them a lot," he explained. "It was the least I could do when she started to decline."

Fatherhood and Life Upriver

*

Here—Welcome to Putnam Valley
New York
Population: 9,500
Elevation: Infrequent

—and luster there,
Where pollen so fine it drifted

> Through the screen, enaureoled
> The cherry wood windowsill.
> —from "Envoy" (2005)

In 1972 Paul and Ann were living 60 miles north of the city in Beacon, New York, where Ann headed the English-as-a-second-language program in the school system. While they were living there, Helen was born. After being a regular substitute teacher, Paul was commuting each day to Manhattan where he had a job working for a newspaper, *The Herald*. Even though he lived upstate, he continued spending many of his non-working hours downtown with the poets and artists he befriended there. Since he was on the train for hours a day, he used the time to write. Some of *In Baltic Circles* and his next book *Splurge* (1982) were written while commuting. The poem "Boredom" in *In Baltic Circles,* based on a conflagration he viewed through a train window one evening, is about the endless hours shuttling between the Hudson Valley and Manhattan.

After two years working at *The Herald*, Paul found a good job as the managing editor of *Architectural Forum*. Ann, with a master's in special education, found a job teaching at-risk children in Westchester, so they relocated to Briarcliff Manor, where they rented a small cottage on a large estate. In 1977 they moved to their current home in Putnam Valley, several miles north of Peekskill. Their son, Alexander, was born shortly after. Alexander was born with congenital health problems, which caused a stressful few years and near-constant worry. When I asked Paul (via email) to describe the house he and Ann raised their children in, he responded using the voice and form of a Pennysaver real estate advertisement. I include this because it underscores how Paul's poetic method can seep into the most prosaic of exchanges:

> As a real estate ad in the Pennysaver might generously say: 2-3 story

> cedar shake, 3-bedrooms, spiral stair to guest room below, laundry room, office, living room, tile-floor dining area, 2 skylights, fully equipped kitch, 1 1/2 bath, fireplace, slate-floor screen porch, backyard patio.
>
> Chipmunk condos, i.e. stonewalls, dry or masonry, terrace the ledge the house sits on and cross the sloping "lawn" (mostly weeds and ground cover: myrtle and pachysandra). The house and small piece of property is almost completely shaded by a canopy of (90'+?) oaks from which crows torment the occupants and squirrels scramble. Split logs are usually stacked in sloppy cords next to a small vegetable garden that defies the shade. An 8x8 tool shed, once a children's playhouse, is slowly falling apart at the seams.

In the poem "At The Cottage of Messer Violi," (1998) Paul humorously describes his Putman Valley home in more detail. The first few stanzas read:

> The mailbox, painted dark blue,
> sits atop a tilted cedar post.
> It has a little red flag to one side
> and it is altogether remarkable.
>
> The Toyota in the driveway
> is very old and is said
> to have come from Japan.
>
> There is in the hallway
> An immense dogfood bowl.
> It is made of iridescent pink plastic.
> It is, as I have said, immense
> and it is hideous.
>
> In the kitchenette is a statuette
> of Ceres, Goddess of Wheaties.
>
> The dishwasher is a Kenmore
> and altogether worthy of praise.

I asked if buying a home in Putnam County and having two small mouths to feed hampered his social and aesthetic life as a poet. Paul explained that having a family was inspiring and fulfilling and that he just went out there and did what he needed to do. He vehemently rejects W.B. Yeats' dichotomy between the life and the work, insisting that

the two actively feed one another. "Energy is energy, and experience generates experience, and if you're writing you're writing," he explains. "I wanted it all. It wasn't a dichotomy. I wanted a family; I wanted children; I wanted a job; and I wanted to write. That Yeatsian perfection of a life or perfection of an art—I don't buy it and I don't think he did either. You learn a great deal about life by having a family, profoundly so."

Becoming a father marked a new beginning, and a pleasant one at that. Paul is very proud of his children, who live remarkably different lives. His daughter, Helen, has a Ph.D. in botany and lives with her husband in Florida where she does scientific fieldwork in the Everglades. Alexander, unmarried, is a musician, sound engineer, actor, stage manager, personal trainer, and occasionally a model (having had some modeling success in Japan); he is easily recognizable at Paul's readings, being one of the few in the crowd with a Mohawk and facial piercings. Paul reminisces about how witty his son was when he was little. For example, Paul and a three-year-old Alex were standing on a dock looking at fish and Alexander referred to them as "wobbly boys." "Look at those wobbly boys," he said with a smile. Paul later used the image in a poem.

Helen and Alexander make appearances in Paul's poetry—usually in anecdotes that convey his abiding love of fatherhood. The poem "Little Testament," written shortly after Paul's fortieth birthday and modeled on a mock testament written by the fifteenth-century French poet François Villon, includes a few of these touching anecdotes:

> *Item*: To my son, Alexander,
> I bequeath with love and admiration
> The Arc de Triomphe.
> And here's why:
> To commemorate
> the golden attitude you displayed
> in the first moments of your life,
> the magnificent arc you made

when the doctor
held you aloft in the cold air
and you twisted and turned,
scattering everyone
in the delivery room
as you pissed all over us.

Helen is included shortly after:

Item: To my daughter, Helen,
I leave a prime Elysian lot,
that island-meadow
you rode into
late one afternoon
and let your horse wade at will,
stir up wildflower
and milkweed
in the purpling blue,

so that the silver seed
hovered far around you,
made you smile
amid innumerable smiles
and raised in a casual swarm
years of waves and glinting wings.

Poetic Turning Point

*

We, the naturally hopeful,
Need a simple sign
For the myriad ways we're capsized.
We who love precise language
Need a finer way to convey
Disappointment and perplexity.
—from "Appeal to the Grammarians" (2007)

Paul's second collection of poems, *Splurge*, was published in 1981 by Bill Zavatsky at *Sun Press* and is seen by Paul as a poetic turning point—or at the very least a more realized version of what he began in *In Baltic Circles*. He wrote the following to me in an email about the book: "I used to think *Splurge* was a big change, but now I'm

not so sure. Flipping through *In Baltic Circles* [IBC] I see poems in various forms and characters: excerpts from imaginary magazines, calendars, diaries, blurbs, mock travelogues, realistic narratives, surreal travelogues and narratives, magazine galleys, reportage, anecdotal pieces, take-offs on famous poems, distorted sonnets, mock tanka and haiku, gratuitous jokes. All seem to be continued – to better effect, I like to think – in *Splurge* and later books. One thing that fortunately fell away was the misty, mushy obscurity."

The first poem in the collection, "One for the Monk of Montaudon," was inspired by translations of troubadour poets. Paul came across the monk's little songs about things he disliked. As Paul explains it: "I thought I could write a long lyrical poem using that concept of a list, a catalogue really, but make it move like a celebratory ode… So, I included things I didn't like in addition to things I did like; and what got me going was writing about things I didn't like… like Mormon Architecture … as if I did… and that got me rolling." The poem is an appreciation of the incidental moments that fill a life and reflects what Kenneth Koch meant when he introduced Paul in 1998 as a poet who finds lighted matches where he goes:

> And the sight of a cat, undisturbed,
> curled in the sunlight, pleases me;
> or ketchup smears on table mats
> of Venezuela and its hideous flowers;
> or the sight of boys splattering peaches
> against an ancient stone wall.
>
> I just like to sit back and take it all in,
> watch the sea and sky move together
> like memory and imagination,
> move me out of a dripping indolence
> to a dripping cathedral, like Chartres,
> ("walls of glass, roof of stone")
> where I can stand outside, see
> whatever a summer sky can do, doing it all at once…

Although *Splurge* was met with positive reviews—even getting national attention with a laudatory review written by David Lehman in *Newsday* that characterized Paul as "one of the most inventive poets around"—the 80s were a period of personal transition. For starters, *Architectural Forum* had folded in 1974. A series of jobs working for various commercial or trade magazines left Paul with a bad taste in his mouth. Most notable was the period he spent working for a magazine called *Merchandizing Weekly*. Though the job came with the perk of flying around the country, it required him to write about "fucking washing machines sales."

Paul began looking around for work as a teacher. Earlier, a few of his students at The Poetry Project who were college professors asked him if he wanted to teach college courses. And so he began using his contacts to find jobs. Like many college adjuncts, he began piecing together as many classes and workshop gigs as he could, beginning with a job teaching at Bloomfield College in New Jersey, followed by workshops for Poets & Writers, Poets-in-the Schools, and courses at Scarsdale Teacher's Institute, SUNY Purchase, Empire State College, Mercy College, Pace University, Dalton School, Sing-Sing Prison, Stevens Institute, and classes at New York University. The teaching and intellectual preparation were fun, but the experience of as many as nine classes dispersed across various campuses (several of which were in different states) was draining physically. He very much enjoyed teaching despite the logistical absurdity of it all. Besides, if he felt tired, cigarettes and coffee usually helped do the trick. Not temperamentally suited for corporate business, Paul felt that writing poetry and teaching

poetry pulled things together for him, giving his life a fullness and integrity. He also liked the ever-changing schedule, which abated his dread of routine.

Affiliation with Kenneth Koch

*

Some people have done you great favors.
—from "Dry Spells" (1981)

Paul met Kenneth through Tony at Saint Mark's in the early 70s, but didn't get to know him well until the early 90s. In 1993, Paul was asked by friends in England to curate an exhibit for a museum in Ipswich. The idea came to him to do Kenneth's collaborations with painters. He phoned Kenneth and was pleased by his older friend's enthusiastic response. The two ended-up traveling to Ipswich together and then after the opening arranged two weeks of readings around England, which was great fun and a joy for both. One seemingly trivial incident seems significant. At one point they were driving north with their British hosts and Kenneth decided that to pass the time they would play a game Kenneth invented (extemporaneously) called "Merit." The game was a parody of Sunday morning talk shows, which meant that when it was your turn to speak you had to be dull and uninteresting. The job of the others was to ask you a question to which you gave a response that would then be evaluated according to whether it had *some* merit; *certain* merit; or it *had* merit (and the duller it was the higher the rating). Paul explains that he was sitting in the backseat and was rather hung-over because they'd been drinking late the night before and managed to get themselves kicked out of a pub. It was Kenneth's turn to ask Paul a question:

> And he had asked me this question about teaching and I gave him this answer and he turns around from the front seat and stares at me for about five seconds and he says, "You're *really* a teacher aren't you?" And I had just given this answer showing complete jadedness about grading papers and things academic. And then when we got back, I don't remember how long after but he asked me to teach a class on Eliot because he was going to be out of town.

Paul walked into the class on the appointed day and was astonished to find himself in front of an auditorium of Columbia students. Kenneth's courses were wildly popular; over the years he had assumed a legendary status within the English Department. The students sat there ready to hear Paul's take on T.S. Eliot, one of the most influential and challenging of the Modernist Poets. As he explains it, "I remember teaching this class and I was startled at the end because the students applauded. Soon after, Kenneth sent a case of champagne, and then he phoned and asked me to teach a course called Imaginative Writing." It was called "imaginative" by Kenneth to avoid the self-absorption so common in workshops. The course also had a strong literature component. Because Paul also shared ambivalent feelings about poetry that was too self-referential, he thinks that Kenneth pegged him to teach the course. And when a vacancy opened in 2000, Kenneth asked if Paul might like to teach the class on a permanent basis.

The class, however, was cancelled after Kenneth died in 2002 at the age of 77. The English Department, which took issue with the fact that it was billed as an "imaginative" class, moved it across campus to the Creative Writing Program. Paul was unhappy about this. No longer able to choose the students he wanted to admit, he was forced to take any student who signed up, which often led to a workshop of fifteen or more. But wanting to keep an institutional affiliation with Columbia, he taught under these conditions for two years. Luckily, he was approached by Michel Rosenthal of the English Department who told him that he was welcome to come back to the English

Department to teach literature seminars, provided that he promised not to teach creative writing. Happily, Paul traveled back to the English Department and began teaching seminars based upon departmental needs, which have included courses on Satire, Modern American Poetry, and early twentieth-century British poetry.

Regrets and Ongoing Struggles

*

> And when the smoke alarm,
> its battery worn down,
> began to beep, the signal
> at first indistinguishable
> from the birdcalls
> but the growing louder,
> triumphantly monotonous
> in their absence, I remained
> Three down:
> A man of my word.
> And that word is
> Fifty-five across: Disingenuous.
> —from "Wet Bread and Roasted Pearls" (1993)

Toward the end of our second interview, I asked Paul about life struggles. Up to that point I had focused on events surrounding the emergence of his artistic identity. Despite being warned by a mutual friend that it would be difficult to get personal information out of Paul, especially for a dissertation that could potentially be published, I had found Paul forthcoming on almost every question I asked. When it came to life struggles, however, he was vaguer in his responses. It soon became obvious to me that there were things that he simply wasn't going to share. One of my questions was in response to the Pataphysics interview he did with the Australian editor Leo Edelstein. In it Paul mentions a period of time in which he was mourning. The prompting question

was: “How do you go about finding material for your work? Do you pay attention to your dreams?” Here is Paul’s ironic response in full:

> As for dreams – I rarely have memorable ones, or any that make me think there’s a nascent poem in one. What I imagine is generally more interesting than what I dream. My dreams are either too explicit, often enjoyably so, or obviously symbolic. For instance, I was mourning recently and I had two dreams that struck me as extensions or enactments of the loss I was feeling and suppressing. In one I found myself searching through fallen leaves that were inside my house. I was on my hands and knees on a stone tile floor, reaching under leaves, looking for something I’d lost and was unable to grasp. I was bereft but calmly determined. The leaves were crisp, some were lank, freshly fallen, and they were piling up fast. I finally grabbed a broom to clear them away but the more I swept the more there were and there was no telling how they were entering the house and the whole dream plot was a re-enactment of a realization, of the irretrievable. Days later in the second dream I was trying and failing to understand, to decipher a language that I couldn’t use to articulate the sorrow I felt. I suspected it might be English, but the words weren’t understandable, no arrangement made syntactical sense. Every attempt to make a statement turned into questions. I was questioning the very language and there were no answers; whatever language it was, ultimately all of it was reduced to a pile of ashes, except for these newly forged question marks, very large shiny metal question marks that lay in the ashes. I noticed they had a somewhat elegant design. So, to answer your question: No, I rarely derive poems from dreams.

When I asked whether he cared to specify on what it was he was mourning, Paul responded “No, not today.” Consequently, I made a decision to couch my subsequent questions in general terms—asking him to share a story about a period of time that was especially challenging. This technique, drawn from McAdams’ life story interview protocol (1995), requires the subject to recount a nadir experience, defined by McAdams as a low point marked by unpleasant memories. In the words of McAdams, “What happened? When? Who was involved? What did you do? What were you thinking and feeling? What impact has the event had on you? What does the event say about the person you are or were?” (McAdams, 1995) Paul answered my version of this query in honest, yet general terms:

> You take it as it comes. Either something good comes along and takes you -- helps shift your attention, or something worse comes along… Life is fast…

Wanting more detail but careful to avoid pushing him too far and compromise the trust I felt I was beginning to earn, I thought it better to skip specifics and ask about his method for dealing with life's tragedies. He responded, "You know that phrase 'above all, endure?' There's a little truth to that. Simply to withstand things is a virtue. In other words, the crudest or simplest virtue would be strength. You realize that there's something to be said for just being able to withstand things because otherwise whatever else it is you need to deal with things just isn't there if you're reduced to a mess and you're no good to anyone else. Generally, human beings are pretty resilient. I mean everyone gets ambushed… and others often have worse problems." When asked whether therapy ever played a role in his own process of getting "up off the floor," he said it hadn't—a fact he chalked up to either culture or genetics. "Certain people are made certain ways," he explained. And on a philosophical note: "You mold yourself… as a result of looking at what you're made of – or how you act – in hopes of either changing the way you are, or staying the way you are. So, introspection is important. But self-absorption is something else… especially in terms of whining or complaining. I mean I can complain, sure… but not in public." I asked if this was why he avoided personal confessions in his poetry. Paul took a moment and then responded:

> Poems are based on feelings. And whether those feelings are conveyed in a personal sense or as a product of what the imagination can turn those feelings into: that's the beauty… that's the pleasure of writing poems. I mean your personal feelings are crucial material but you want to make something out of it. Otherwise where's the challenge? I mean just writing things down the way they are you're more of a scribe of your self-absorption as opposed to say making something that didn't exist before, or by taking something in a different direction.

> By doing that you become more inclusive; and you can do more with it. Creativity is liberating, an extension of one's self.

Paul did mention that there were some ways he thinks he could have been a better husband and father, but was careful to point out the futility of coming down too hard on oneself. "I look back and wonder if I could have been a better father or a better husband. But of course you want to do some things differently in retrospect. You do the best you can. It's nice to kick yourself in the head once in a while but not too often."

Paul is aware of the important role humor has played not only in his poetry but also on his outlook: "I think being a human being, things happen to you. You have a sense of the absurd; you have a sense of your own shortcomings; you have a sense of how things could have gone differently if… if… if…. If you believe in freewill—which I do—you have to have a sense of humor. And I think my humor is based on the contradictory aspects of my own nature as well as the way things happen. Good things happen; great things happen; sad, tragic things happen. I think my humor is tied in with that. And if it's harsh at times it's because I'm pretty harsh on myself; but if it's benign that's because I have an understanding of myself as a mere mortal." Poetry for Paul operates in a way that's analogous to humor and absurdity. As he writes in the poem "Dry Spells" (1981), "You have a deep sense of the way / propriety and absurdity complement each other." Both poetry and humor are a means by which to transform the raw material of living into something celebratory, or at the very least, into something palatable. It is a way of converting regret or sadness into something larger, and inherently life-affirming. A short poem called "Written In A Time Of Worry And Woe" from Paul's most recent collection, *Overnight* (2007), illustrates this point:

I stopped and leaned over the footbridge rail.
Far below, roaring by the library,
The stream plunged through deep winter with force
That follows a spring thaw, re-enacting
In a short stretch its ever-varied course.
I watched it flow clear under clear black ice,
Churn frothy under gray, tunnel and swirl
Under snow, pool and spill, then slide over
And under overturned stumps and debris.
I watched until I thought: February—
The apex of the year, and felt so far
Above the sum of whatever I've known
Or seen or done that I couldn't care less
What I must have lost to feel so cold and free.

The Future

*

There it is again, the future,
and it looks the same as the last time I saw it.
—from "Melodrama" (1981)

Paul is pragmatic when I ask about his hopes for the future. Although he envisions writing at least one considerably long poem and hopes to publish a selected with a major house, his primary concerns are financial in nature: "I want to clear the deck, and make sure that everything's right for my family. I don't want to leave my family any trouble to take care of. You want to set things right and get things in order." I ask if he thinks about his own death and he jokes that he does so more now but only as a result of the advertisements put onto television by drug companies. Finally, I ask if he believes there's such a thing as a good death—to which he responds that he's not sure such a thing exists.

CHAPTER FIVE: *ANALYSES*

Research Review

I am interested in the role art can play in the processes of living. Using a Study of Lives approach, I have presented biographical portraits of three New York City poets organized according to Gail Hornstein's (1994) insistence that "Every biography has to find a form that naturally shapes itself to the form of its subject's life" (Hornstein in Franz & Stewart, 1994, 63). Although I utilized semi-structured interview protocols and schedules, I made sure to give my subjects leeway when it came to how they chose to tell their stories. In the present chapter, I will make specific psychological claims about the role poetry has played in each life, with interest in three things: (1) the factors surrounding the emergence of poetic identity; (2) the "grammar" of the work produced; and (3) the way of being in the world (Stein, 1926) that the work engenders in the life. I am especially interested in gauging the degree to which writing a certain kind of poem (or kinds of poems) offers the writer psychological utility.

In my analysis, I use the double hermeneutics of philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1970), who characterizes regression and progression, respectively, as archeology and teleology (Ricoeur, 1970, 494). In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud likened the psychic history of an individual to the archeological sediments beneath the city of Rome. Archeology looked to the past—that is, to complexes of early history that continue to inform an individual's behavior and perception of self, others, and environment. Teleology, on the contrary, is concerned with future-oriented development. According to

Ricoeur, the two form a dialectical relationship within the narratives and life projects of adult individuals. Artists and other creators—as evidenced in Freud's monograph on Leonardo (1910), and Ricoeur's book-length response to it (1970)—make for excellent case studies because they spend much of their lives engaged in creative endeavors. Tony, for example, explains that as a young poet he wanted to *create* things that were "elusive" and "wonderful." Paul cites William Faulkner's notion that the writer's job was to create something that didn't exist before out of the materials of the human spirit. And Charles, too, wants to do new and surprising things in poems, including making poetry out of "the most unlikely materials."

My analyses, once again, are informed by Larkin et al.'s (2006) *Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis* (IPA), which revolves around the *existential claims* and *objects of concern* constructed by a subject. I actively draw upon Larkin et al.'s (2006) two commitments: (1) a phenomenological commitment to give voice to the claims and concerns of a subject; and (2) an interpretive commitment to contextualize and make sense of claims and concerns from a psychological perspective. Following a model developed by Rosenwald (1988), I read across the profiles with a desire to underscore differences and similarities in what it means for three individuals to be poets. It is hoped that this dissertation will offer research and applied psychology a framework for thinking about the role art can play in the experience of selfhood and identity. Additionally, I hope that my findings can be generalized beyond self-identified artists to encompass all individuals who "move beyond themselves" through creative projects of all stripes.

<u>Factors of Emergence</u>

My research led me to concur with Freud's claim that "all genuinely creative writings are the products of more than a single motive and more than single impulse in the poet's mind, and are open to more than a single interpretation" (Freud, 1900, 266). As to *why* they felt called to poetry, my subjects drew a blank; they were content to leave that a mystery. All three claimed that the creative impulse was neither wholly conscious nor rational. Tony, for example, said that he didn't decide to write but was impelled to do so. He explains that after writing his first poem in May 1960 the experience began working on him "below the surface." Somewhat analogously, Charles suspects that although he hadn't yet begun writing poetry, "something was simmering underneath" when he quit Harvard Law School in 1963. And when I asked Paul why it was he wrote, he quoted the Roman poet Juvenal, who wrote "cacoethes scribendi," which translates to "an irresistible urge to write." Although it is impossible to determine *why* each began writing, I found that developmental, psychodynamic, and socio-cultural perspectives proved useful when hypothesizing why each of my subject's artistic vocation emerged *when* it did.

A Developmental Perspective

Developmentally—and here I draw from the work of Erik Erikson (1950)—both Tony and Charles became poets during the fifth of Erikson's eight psychosocial stages of development, which is characterized by a tension between identity, on the one hand, and role confusion on the other. The developmental challenge at this stage involves the process of unifying one's various identities (e.g. son, student, romantic partner, employee, friend, etc.) into a consolidated identity. This is commonly thought to occur

by the end of the years in which young people attend college and/or prepare for a productive adulthood in the workforce. In the words of Erikson, "…it is the inability to settle on an occupational identity which disturbs individual young people" (Erikson, 1950, 262). Erikson also writes about how a young person's search for a consolidated identity may result in a reflexive rejection of identities that conflict with the newly consolidated one. Healthy ego development, though, requires that individuals integrate many components as opposed to rejecting them. Failure to do so could result in an ongoing struggle to integrate the various identities and social roles that make up one's adult life.

It seems plausible to hypothesize that for Tony the life-disrupting event of Monica's unwanted pregnancy and the subsequent sickness of the infant, compounded by a need to quit Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service (which had been a longstanding dream of Tony's to attend), caused a confusion of roles so severe that it led to suicidal ideation. Poetry came into his life accidentally—an unintended consequence of strolling in a "beat" coffee house in May 1960—and stuck as a personal and social identity. Wheaton and Gotlib (1997) write about how life-disrupting events that are not buffered by psychosocial resources often result in identity changes that endure over time. Galvanized by a sudden desire *to be a poet*, Tony decided to cut his personal and professional ties and start over—a decision he characterizes as both the most precipitate and necessary of his life, as well as the least defensible from a conventional point of view.

Charles didn't begin writing poetry until he was twenty-five, roughly five years older than Tony was when he started writing. Although he was a promising teenage

clarinetist and won prizes for his prose writing as early as grade school, his parents' values were such that it was hard for him to think about anything other than a "proper" vocation, e.g., lawyer or businessman like his father. He began writing poetry after trying his hand at several professional identities, including a brief stint in law school and a period of time working in the editing world. Through poetry Charles was able to craft a personal and social identity out of a project (writing poetry) and a profession (teaching literature, prose writing, and eventually poetry) that helped him integrate an "…evolving configuration [of] constitutional givens, idiosyncratic libidinal needs, favored capacities, significant identifications, effective defenses, successful sublimations, and consistent roles" (Erikson, 1950, 163). He was able to live a life in which he created things of an aesthetic nature and made a living, no matter how modest. With Paula's support, he settled into domestic rhythms and became a dedicated father and English professor.

Tony and Charles are individuals who fell into poetry as opposed to being taken with the impulse early on as Paul claims he was. However, both intimate a certain degree of inevitability. In response to a question posed by Sarah Fox in a 2004 interview published in *Verse,* Charles says the following:

> **SF***: Do you have an opinion about poets or artists being born, or somehow fated to have what Nabokov called "the divine spark"?*
>
> **CN**: "Fated" to be an artist is an intriguing idea. Often people appear to fall into things, more the work of chance than fate. But it's tempting—I'm sometimes tempted, actually—to see finding my way into Koch's class, etcetera, as somehow in the cards.

Here, Charles distinguishes between "fate," on one hand, and "chance," on the other. Chance implies that becoming an artist may be random—the product of a

particular set of external circumstances—whereas fate entails having an artistic calling or talent *a priori*.

From a developmental perspective, Paul differs from Tony and Charles because he claims having felt as if he were a writer from early childhood, and specifically a poet by the age of fourteen. Unlike his friends, he had difficulty recalling a specific time when he began thinking of himself as a poet. "I just always have," he explained. It is possible that some of this had to do with the fact that his parents, who he describes in loving terms, encouraged him to pursue whatever it was that grabbed his attention. For instance, when he expressed an interest in the poet Thomas Moore, his parents were quick to buy him poetry anthologies. Becoming a poet for Paul was neither a refuge nor a search for self-realization. Poetry was one of the many ways Paul's parents permitted him to engage in a type of playfulness that Pablo Picasso once claimed was significant to his becoming an artist.

According to Erikson (1950), the fourth psychosocial stage of development, particular to school age children, involves a struggle between *industry* and *inferiority*. A child that develops basic trust, autonomy, and personal initiative, was thought by Erikson to be set for an industrious "entrance into life." This entrance comes in the form of specific tasks and requirements that move him beyond "the womb of his family" (Erikson, 1950, 259) and into a world of tools and projects that create agency or inferiority. Encouraged by his parents to pursue self-selected talents—whether sports, employment at his father's drugstore, or writing—Paul develops a strong sense of self-worth by refining his skills on the athletic field, as a laborer, and as a young writer of "intense sonnets."

A Psychodynamic Perspective

As a researcher with a phenomenological approach, I am chary of analysis that is narrowly wedded to any single theory. As Nielson (1999) demonstrates, though, there are times when theoretical concepts can be located in a life. In her article on *black holes* as sites of narrative construction, she locates the residual presence of an unresolved oedipal conflict in the autobiography of an elderly Norwegian man. Similarly, a Freudian perspective helped me to think about the emergence of Charles' artistic vocation. He grew up in a house filled with music and books, but although his father read a great deal and studied classical guitar, Charles's connections to both music and books have much more to do with his mother, who wrote professionally for *The Brooklyn Eagle* and was an accomplished amateur pianist. It is suggestive that one of the few childhood memories Charles shared was his mother's practicing piano while he was in the room, and the deep feeling of sadness which remains attached to the memory. On the other hand, one of his happy childhood memories is going with his mother to the local branch of the New York Public Library and returning with armfuls of books. That he was drawn to music as an adolescent, and then to writing as a young adult—two of his mother's prime interests—seems significant.

Charles took up clarinet at the age of 10—an age when a number of his friends began to play instruments. But by the time he was 12 or 13, music had became an important part of his life, almost certainly filling emotional needs. A classic Freudian idea seems relevant here: a young boy's desire for the libidinal attention of his mother

will be thwarted by an active or imagined impediment posed by the father. Charles's father had emerged from the Great Depression as a successful businessman (who had also earned two law degrees), and he encouraged his son in the same direction. Music and literature, while appropriate for leisure time, were not the ways to make one's way in the world. Yet the latter were where Charles's real interests and abilities lay. It is only in his late twenties that he is finally able to contradict the family expectations and pursue a "non-traditional" profession—one without the financial promise of either law or business. It is tempting to interpret Charles' departure from music and subsequent discovery of poetry as the resolution, in Freudian terms, of an oedipal-like conflict—somehow resolving what Freud considered the murderous impulses (and consequent guilt) of the son towards the father as barrier between son and mother. It is important to recall that Charles was uncomfortable when I asked him—via email—to elaborate on his father's response to his decision to leave Harvard Law School after only two weeks in residence. Quoting him again, "However, this is a difficult one. First, I don't really remember the letter—no doubt blocked out the experience—and second, I do feel this is on the private side." This response meets Neilson's (1999) requirement for a *black hole,* which she defines as a moment in a person's life story where tensions between conscious and unconscious struggles feel palpable. Charles's difficulties much later on, when his father had Alzheimer's and father and son shifted roles, may be understood as a further working out of oedipal difficulties.

From a psychodynamic perspective, my transcripts revealed less about Tony and Paul. Charles, unlike his friends, had a significant amount to say about his parents. He was the only one of the three to associate the emergence of his poetic identity with a

struggle to overcome parental expectations that had been internalized. Paul, again, claimed that he had always been gripped with "an irresistible urge to write," and Tony contextualized the emergence of his writing practice as a response to unfavorable life conditions.

A Socio-cultural Perspective

Theorists such as Erikson (1950) and Bruner (1996) have written in great length on the role culture plays in human development. According to Bruner (1996), minds possess the properties they do not simply because we are human and cognitively wired according to specific evolutionary forces, but as a result of developing through and within specific cultural practices and discourses. Similarly, in *Childhood and Society* (1950), Erikson developed an understanding of identity that recognized the pervasive role culture plays throughout the eight psychosocial stages of development. The taking up of an artistic identity for all three of my subjects should be thought of against the cultural backdrop of a generation that felt no pressing need to follow lockstep in the footsteps of its parents and grandparents. The decision *to be a poet* can be interpreted as falling in line with the countercultural fervor that defined their generational moment. Charles, for example, alluded to the "dropout" culture of the sixties—citing the influence of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Existentialism, and the antiwar movement. And Tony writes about how as a young man, "Carol [his first girlfriend after leaving Monica and their infant son] engendered in me vague dreams of being with her as a poet in New York, meeting painters, hanging out in bars, and doing interesting and artistic things."

Tony, Charles and Paul share a common thread when it comes to the role social

relationships—and most notably mentor relationships—played in the crystallization of their artistic identities. Their personal identities as poets expanded into social identities when they began taking workshops and socializing with a particular contingent of other New York City poets, a group that as of 1961 was already being referred to as the New York School of poets (Lehman, 1998, 7). The critic David Lehman, who has written extensively on Ashbery, O'Hara, Schuyler and Koch (the first generation of the New York School), defines the group in terms of (a) their social relationships with one another; (b) the influence of French surrealist poetry and abstract expressionism upon their works; and (c) the New York City as a cultural backdrop to it all. Lehman writes, "The story of the New York School of poets is a study in friendship, artistic collaboration, and the bliss of being alive and young at a moment of maximum creative ferment" (Lehman, 1998, 1).

Something similar can be said about the members of the second generation, in which Tony, Charles and Paul are often classified. Regardless of whether a grouping called the New York School makes sense—and there is debate on whether it does (e.g. see North, 1998)—their experiences as poets were and are inexorably linked with one another and with the larger community of poets and writers that they continue to socialize with. Attendance at a Towle, North or Violi reading usually consists of two groups of people: (1) young poets and poetry enthusiasts with a relatively mixed demographic profile; and (2) a relatively insular and regional group of individuals, the majority of whom are same-aged Caucasian men who were either students of or friends with one or more of the founding four members of the New York School, and who found an aesthetic and social home in and around the Saint Mark's scene. In a brief statement published in

the anthology *Out of This World* (1991), Charles writes, "But really, there's no other *center* as far as I'm concerned. Where else do you go to hear those who inspire you? What other reading every two years is the equivalent of a vernissage? Where else have I taught a workshop with Yuki Hartman as a student? The place has also been a lot more inclusive than its professional detractors have been willing to let on…" (North, 1998, 86-87).

Unlike Paul, Tony and Charles couch their initial senses of being poets in highly insecure terms. It is not until they are encouraged by older, established poets and officially introduced onto "the scene" that each becomes more confident presenting himself to others as a writer. Josselson (2007) has written about how relationships between two people are always triadic: "There are the two people experiencing, behaving and interpreting their meanings to one another, and this always exists within some social context (the "Third") that gives it significance" (Josselson, 2007, 1). The "third" for my subjects consists of social networks located at several specific locations in New York City. Tony's locations are the Cedar Tavern, a bar on Second Avenue that was frequented by the Abstract Expressionist painters like Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning and then later by the founding members of the New York School. This is where in 1963 Tony met Frank O'Hara a few weeks after hearing him read at the New School. Tony looked back upon this life-defining encounter eight years later in the 1971 poem "Nearing Christmas:" "What did I ever say to Frank, for that matter, / brooding on the promontory of my early poetic development, / silent and pre-occupied, garrulous and pre-occupied…" In *Memoir*, when Tony is asked by Frank whether he writes, he replies, "Oh, I try," and feels humiliated that compared to a "famous" poet like Frank he hadn't written

anything noteworthy.

With O'Hara's assistance, Tony meets the literati of New York City, moves into Frank and Joe LeSueur's old apartment on East Ninth Street, gives his first reading, attends the New York City Writer's Conference on a scholarship procured by Frank, and wins the Gotham Book Mart Avant-Garde Poetry Prize. Within five years he publishes two collections privately, and then in 1970 his first major collection. Although his artistic life will be plagued by doubt and setbacks, his identity as a poet solidifies after his association with Frank O'Hara and the young writers and artists that Frank was famous for surrounding himself with. Lehman (1999) refers to O'Hara as "[t]he poet at the vital center of the New York School" and as someone who was "blessed with tremendous personal magnetism" (Lehman, 1999, 7).

By the time *North* comes out in 1970, Tony, according to Charles and Paul, was an important poet on the scene. By this time the action had shifted from the Cedar Tavern to the Poetry Project at Saint Mark's Church. In the late 60s the poet Anne Waldman and her first husband, Lewis Warsh, kept an open house at their Saint Mark's Place apartment for the poets and artists of their generation. The Poetry Project, housed in the Episcopal Church itself, ran regular poetry workshops and two reading series. Tony taught one workshop in the fall of '69 and another in the spring of '70. Much as O'Hara had been for him, he was instrumental in launching the poetic careers of Charles and Paul, both of whom enrolled in his workshop. Both would teach their own workshops over the decades that followed, and Paul would even direct the Poetry Project for a time in the eighties.

Charles remains especially grateful for Tony's influence. Although his early

poetic efforts had been encouraged by John Unterecker and Kenneth Koch, whose New School workshop he took in ‘66-‘67, he feels that after leaving Koch’s workshop his poetry “floundered” until he took Tony’s workshop at Saint Mark’s. Paul had a similar experience. Although he took many workshops at Saint Mark’s, it was through Tony that he felt most affirmed. Both speak about how Tony introduced them to an array of poets and artists in New York City. Reflecting upon an early party at Anne Waldman’s parents’ house on Macdougal Street, Charles said, “What was most important was how excited I was to be in a big room filled with poets! That had never happened before… [and] it helped me to feel that I wasn’t the only poet, and that it was okay to be one!” For the first time in his life Charles felt like a poet among poets.

The implication here is not a surprising one—namely that the emergence of an artistic identity is encouraged by social involvement in a community of fellow artists. This is in line with the work Gregg (2007) has done on the construction of identity. Using young people in northern Africa as examples, Gregg shows how culturally specific symbols, metaphors, and storylines are integrated into shifting sets of identities, and how socialization into a specific socio-cultural group can reconfigure a core-level personality into a social personality, which he defines as a set of cultural prototypes and moral sentiments (Gregg, 2007, 213). The final sentences of Tony’s *Memoir* reflect the development of a social personality: “By the end of the year [1963], I felt that my poems were finally getting somewhere. I felt no such confidence about the rest of my life. I was barely making enough money to live on. Romance was nonexistent. Whether my poetry was an escape or refuge from what I should have been squarely facing was beside the point: I was impelled to continue. Even though it would be another five years – only

after I had a book published – before I would answer the question "What do you do?" with "I'm a poet." – it was *then*, as 1963 drew to a close, that I knew it was so." Had he stayed in D.C., or Rye for that matter, and not met Frank O'Hara, Tony may never have thought of himself in these terms.

The Grammar of the Work

The problem that got me thinking about writing this dissertation was that psychological studies of artists tend to either ignore their work, or to mine it for clues to explain fixations, neuroses, or underlying pathologies. I wanted to develop a method of making psychological sense of how an artistic practice influences an artist's life in progressive ways. As opposed to analyzing how the life shapes the work, I was interested in how the work shapes the life—that is, how poetry can lead to a specific way of being in the world. Ricoeur (1970) argued that a person's life could be interpreted in terms of regressive and progressive energies. The latter seek to "promote *new meanings* by mobilizing old energies initially invested in archaic figures" (Ricoeur, 1970, 175). As a researcher interested in the lives of poets, I began asking questions about the role poetry might play in this "mobilization." Ricoeur himself once put it this way: "What is to be interpreted in the text is a proposed world which I could inhabit and in which I could project my own-most possibilities. . . Reality is metamorphosed by means of what I shall call the 'imaginative variations' that literature carries out on the real" (Kaplan, 2008, 49). What "variations" does a poet's work carry out on the life decisions he makes, the values he adopts, and the relationships he has with others.

Analytically, I choose to interpret "grammar" through a progressive lens. But

what does it mean for something to be called *progressive*? Sartre (1963) and Ricoeur (1970) had different things in mind when they conceptualized this domain. Sartre, again, writes, "For us man is characterized above all by his going beyond a situation, and by what he succeeds in making of what he has been made" (Sartre, 1963, 108). Emphasizing sociopolitical responsibility, Sartre believed that individuals had an ethical imperative to make something of their lives that benefited others. Coming from a more theological perspective, Ricoeur understood the progressive in terms of a subject's ability to create new and transformative forms of consciousness. Analogously, Wittgenstein (1953) wrote that language was responsible for generating "forms of life" that would invariably influence the personal and social contexts from which that language emerged (Retallak, 2003).

For the purposes of this paper, I interpret the progressive along the lines of Ricoeur (1970)—as the development of conscious forms that influence a subject's behavior toward—and perception of—self, others, and world. Since I'm working with poets, I look for progressive energies primarily within the linguistic realm. Over the coming pages, I will provide brief literary-critical introductions to my subjects' poetic corpuses, followed by several claims about how their grammars influenced them.

Tony's poetry: an introduction

Tony divides his work into four periods: poems written between 1963 and 1965; poems written between 1965 and 1969; poems written between 1970 and 1979; and poems written from 1980 until the present. His 250-page new and selected poems, *The History of the Invitation* (2001), is divided accordingly, with short critical essays

introducing each. The first epoch, "1963-65: A Note on the Early Poems of Tony Towle," is introduced by Ron Padgett; the second epoch, "1965-69: Tony Towle's New York Poems" by Charles North; the third, "1970-79: Tony Towle in the '70s" by Paul Violi; and the fourth, "1980-2000: Tony Towle up to Now" by Jack Kimball.

On Tony's early poems (1963-65), Ron Padgett writes, "The reader owes a debt of gratitude to the young author: he does not allow us to distinguish between the real and the imagined. When the "I" in a poem ponders, say, his health or his feelings, we have no way of knowing if that speaker is Tony Towle, or even partly Tony Towle" (Padgett in Towle, 2001, 15). Poems from this period might begin autobiographically but veer into lyrical abstraction. The "here" and "now" exist, though primarily as points of departure toward a world of imaginative possibility. Similar to the work of John Ashbery, the poems convey feeling without possessing a single thematic center. Take, for example, "The Hotel"—

> The two knights suggest to the king that he take the hero
> into his confidence. The pantomimes are spaced to accommodate them.
> It is a work of great beauty. It is night. Four boys
> remain on the scene. They choose four girls. This is what happens:
> Her beauty and her brains work like fire. She is shocked
> by his remark that he cannot spend too much time. We see grace of
> body and mind being torn to pieces. Now begins the bitter aftermath.
> Now the prayers of Orpheus are answered. It is the ancient
> myth of Orpheus. Orpheus cannot console himself with his own song.
> The song of the lyre is inadequate to his bereavement. Now he finishes
> the song. Everything is green. Everything is splashed with color.

The images in this and other early poems are fast paced—one image metamorphosing into another—and propelled by currents of feeling that are often ecstatic in nature—sometimes to the point of annihilating the poet/speaker (e.g. "Poem of

August" or "The Hotel"). The early poems are also populated by mythological and historical figures—many of who are on difficult life journeys, often in quest of the sublime. Examples include Gauguin, Orpheus, and the mysterious pilgrims cited in the short poem "Prologue." Similar to Gauguin, Tony's decision to leave Monica and their infant son in Washington D.C. and move to New York to be a poet can be understood as a quest to find erotic, social, and aesthetic inspiration. The poems radiate energy and immediacy, as if writing them was a matter of life or death. And indeed it was. In *Memoir*, again, Tony writes that he was impelled to leave his life with Monica. Suicide struck him as one alternative, and poetry unexpectedly provided another.

At first through disciplined reading, and then through his relationships with O'Hara and other artists, Tony began cultivating a writing technique that became less reliant on "sudden illumination." Through Joe Brainard, for instance, Tony learned about the collage method. He tells stories of "lifting… sentences and sections from all sorts of popular publications and juxtaposing them for effect." These efforts, populated with multiple voices, views and emotional tones, are remarkably fluid sounding—evidenced, for example, by lines from his 600-plus-line poem "Lines for the New Year," written between '64 and '65. He wrote the poem after being dared by Frank O'Hara to pull off a collage poem that was long—

> By the end of the day the plain was covered with mist. The men
> Looked upward into the heavens, and downward, into the green
> depths of the ocean. They were continually amused and amazed by
> their children's imagination. As the opera begins, they
> hide in the shadows and await their chance.

This method for making a poem was "validated" by the New York School. As

Tony put it in an interview, "One was given permission to tap non-literary outside sources by both the New York School (some of the poems in Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath*, for example, which had come out the previous year), and the French Surrealists." Based upon this comment, I image Tony as a young poet who was determined to write poems within specific aesthetic parameters—parameters that were largely determined by the literary sensibilities of Ashbery, O'Hara, Koch, and to a lesser degree Schuyler.

Given the fragmentary nature of his life at this time (the early New York years), it makes sense that he felt impelled to sweep juxtaposed and diverse elements into a fluid swerve. The multiplicity of sources and voices may also reflect the urban experience of New York—that is, a young man's encounter with a major American city during the early and mid-60s, which was a dynamic, painful, and creative period of social ferment. The collage technique fits the experience of a young poet barraged by an endless stream of new personalities, scenarios, stimuli, desires, setbacks, and discoveries. But Tony looks to "Lines for the New Year" as having been the end of "this way of working." A year or so after completing the poem, Frank O'Hara was killed in a beach accident on Fire Island. Tony abruptly found himself without the closest thing he ever had to an affirming father figure. The loss was a significant—and one he never entirely got over. Frank's mentorship and the implications of his death and Tony's place in the New York poetry world post-Frank pervade the interview transcripts, in addition to appearing as tropes through the later work.

Although he continued to experiment with form, voice, language and tone through the second half of the sixties, he was borrowing less frequently from external sources. Of the poems written between '65 and '69, Charles North has written that "their cohesive

look masks a pervasive and frequently enigmatic disjunction featuring surreal and cinematic jumps, dramatic shifts in voice, narrative that doesn't add up, strings of participial phrases that don't clearly refer, false parallels, and the like. Yet the poems have an extraordinary depth of feeling" (North in Towle, 2001, 49). The work is not easy to grasp. Lines, for instance, from "Today," read: "Today the phantoms pass through rock. / The phantoms move higher in the rock, the smoke, / the fumes, and the powdered ash. / Instinctively I scale a tree, I vanish. / The clouds are torn apart to show the moon; / he drops to a bench; the telephone rings, / a hypnotic background for the words." There is an abundance of movement upward: e.g., the scaling of a tree, phantoms moving up through rock, the quickening of instincts. The poet-speaker vanishes, and then returns two lines later in the third person singular, as if the "scaling" culminated in a momentary escape from subjectivity. Along these lines, Tony writes that his earliest attempts at poems constituted "an escape."

Compared to his lyrically abstract beginnings, much of the work he was writing by the early seventies was becoming increasingly autobiographical. Tony supposes that he was probably trying to write poems in a style and voice influenced by Frank. Like O'Hara and his "I do this, I do that" poems, he was finding materials in personal experience, whether real, or fictional, or both—and writing in a voice that swerved from the satirical to the comic, tragic, or celebratory in the space of a single poem—as did Frank. This is not to say, however, that Tony was becoming as personal a poet as Frank had been. Poems from this period continued to be varied, imaginative, and elusive. The long poem "Works on Paper," for example, assumes the voice of Renaissance Florentine who never identifies himself outright. The first six of the loosely knit tercets go—

Columns and pilasters, in general
spread over much of the composition,
then periodically erased, by sweeping reforms,

and when I climbed to the first of the pinnacles of recognition,
the highest tower I had so far caused to be made,
there was all that I could see, and the rest, which I could not

but which I took surely to be not much different,
years and miles from where I confer
with a virtual small army of workmen, who hold strong beliefs,

and wait with the tools of their trades
to affix themselves to my genius.
And let them wait, like relatives,

knowing the decisions are up to me by what I am wearing,
and by the fact that the aristocracy will talk to me.
And I don't mind talking to them,

though they have no idea of what I'm talking about,
not even taking a cumbersome guess;
they await the purely visual…

Playful, ironic, funny, and imaginatively rich, these are lines written by a poet with more confidence than ten years earlier. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Tony sees the seventies as the decade in which he did his best work. And he is not alone in thinking this. Paul Violi, for example, has written: "…Towle's style evolved and culminated in his finest achievements. To what a degree a poet can be conscious of his own development is hard to tell, but Towle seems to have known what he was after all along" (Violi in Towle, 2001, 85). And also: "The 'Towle poem' is often an exploratory account of its own making, a search for meaning or, when none turns up, dealing with the inconsequential. The tone shifts, a blend at times remote and passionate, colloquial and

eloquent, self-deprecatory and inspirited. His freewheeling narrative line encompasses the metaphysical and the immediate, and is open to any possibility between…" (Violi in Towle, 2001, 86). To this I would add that the poems are propelled by desire for something perpetually out of reach, a deep yearning for a receding horizon. In many of his best poems from this era, the poet-speaker moves through the city, propelled by desire, and often lonely or else overwhelmed. A poem that comes to mind immediately is "The Morgan Library" (1970), the opening of which goes—

> Up, gracing the void with intellect, I noticed a ring,
> encircled by rows of shimmering diamonds,
> walking, feeling prosperous and losing weight,
> to the Morgan Library. For young people there was a pin,
> expressing love in simple cascade of diamonds,
> on 34th Street
> which we give no relief walking and walking,
> looking for something to stick it into,
> women and children first, apples, walnuts, melons,
> the calm transparency of plastic, the grudging
> response of lead, or the rolling fog or even a jar of worms!

Although sticking apples, walnuts, melons, plastic, lead, fog, and a jar of worms with a pin is funny, the poem has a serious undercurrent. The poet-speaker, now no longer one of the "young people," has nowhere to put his desire. Like a hungry ghost, his encounter with the void brings him to the incomparable Morgan Library. Here, he sees the fragile manuscripts of Romantic masters like Keats and Shelley. The poet-speaker proceeds to feel as if he too is trapped under the glass. From a synchronic perspective, it bears mentioning that it was around this time that Tony began having affairs during his marriage to Irma, who I recently learned was nearly ten years his senior. The final lines of the poem are—

At times I would like to go to a foreign country
and forget myself and America;
American women are complicated and beautiful,
and their soft arms cling in loving silence,
but at times I feel there are other women
who wait for me in vain.

When desires go unmet—which isn't an infrequent experience—the "Towle" speaker deals with the "inconsequential," to borrow from Violi. A poem that fits this description is "A Note To Charles North," which Tony began writing in early January 1973. This three-page poem, a framed broadside of which hangs in Charles and Paula's living room, was written to thank Charles for having come out late on Christmas Eve in 1972 to help him. Charles was settling in for the night with Paula, having just gotten Jill to sleep, when Tony phoned drunk and depressed from a bar, prompting Charles to put on his coat and travel across town to help his friend. The second stanza goes—

It's approaching death of course, if you want to know,
and I don't think you want to know,
which makes two of us, at least,
lying like rugs, under threat of economic difficulty
and caught in the threads of a major civilization,
but a stone's throw from the perimeter, a new
world for the stone, the upper half of him,
parted by the city's colored street, the city's terrace
where roses bloom so many times, in reminder,
in spades, of the spring that destroys me.
Thank you, by the way,
brooding on the darkest ruins in time imaginable,
another eve of Christmas and too much smoke,
from the hearth and from the far zone
which to reserve me for itself for later
preserved me.

Here, there is no shortage of existential disappointment. The poet-speaker is

depressed by the holidays, by his "approaching" death, by "economic difficulty," and by "the spring that destroys me." Regardless of the gravity of his struggles, it was through the act of writing itself that Tony was able to overcome the obstacles that fell across his path. As he puts it, wryly, in "Nearing Christmas:" "no event in your life is of the slightest importance, / but there is nothing you cannot use; / the unceasing events of your boring life / occur only for the success of a particular poem / awaiting your efforts on the horizon." Despite the marital problems, employment irregularities, and alcoholism that complicated the seventies, Tony was more prolific during this decade than he would ever be again.

As the seventies came to a close, Tony was continuing to change poetically. "His work became more audience friendly," a longtime reader explained to me recently. "And, from my perspective, it also darkened," he added. In his introduction to Tony's work from the 80s until the present (which was then 2001), Jack Kimball emphasizes the increasing presence of satire as his work developed into and beyond the 80s. Kimball suggests four keys that define much of this work: (a) fulfilled premises; (b) narration flowing forward and back in time; (c) a slapstick engagement with tradition; and (d) what he calls "deep punning." And as Kenneth Koch pointed out (2001), the later poems are as incisively witty as they are dark. Although many are playful and breezy, many are marked by an elegiac tone and a preoccupation with self-defeat, transience, and mortality. The poem "July 6th," written in 1983 after the death of the Tulsa-born second generation New York School poet Ted Berrigan, reflects such preoccupations:

> And there is the soft thump of insects
> on sandy skin, while I absorb the news,

two days after Ted Berrigan dies

and the sky seems to sag
and open up a space, the one in which
we didn't really know each other,
though for twenty long years,
which are suddenly shorter.
At this point a painter
could reach down
for a little cerulean blue
to cover the hole in the sky
while I search out a caption for the scroll below.

The image of the painter conjures a hope that artists can cover emptiness with life-affirming colors. Perhaps poetry helped Tony to do the same in his own life, albeit to varying degrees of success? Tony said on two occasions that writing has helped him work through thoughts, feelings, and pressures that might otherwise plunge him into despair. And in the later work, despair often crouches behind humor and satire, ready to pounce and possibly crush the creative impulse altogether. The 1993 poem "Thoughts At Frank O'Hara's City Poet Party, 6/9/93" chronicles Tony's attempts to make small talk at a book launch for Brad Gooch's biography of Frank O'Hara, *City Poet,* in a voice as humorously self-effacing as it is anguished. The long-dead O'Hara speaks directly to Tony at the end of the poem, as he does in "Nearing Christmas." Frank tells Tony that he can no longer help him in the ways he did when he was alive—

"Don't be truculent, you're not young enough anymore –
in fact you're thirteen years *older* than I am now, so act it. There's
John Ashbery, go over and say Hello. It's thirty years later
and I'm *still* getting you invited to parties, but this
is the *last time*. As Siegfried said to Brünnhilde on the way up to Valhalla,
You're on your own for the rest of this saga, baby,
I'm going to get a *drink*!"

Yet again, O'Hara comes to Tony's rescue. Frank gives Tony a funny pep talk while Tony wanders around a gathering of New York School artists who knew him when he was young and new to the scene. Despite the fact that Tony spent decades affiliating himself with this particular grouping of artists, no one at the party seems interested in his presence. To make matters worse, everyone is milling around claiming Frank as his or her own. (Here, it bears mentioning that according to Joe LeSeuer's memoir of O'Hara (2006), Tony was part of a sizable entourage of younger poets who surrounded O'Hara starting in the early 60s, many of who have subsequently engaged in turf wars over their proximity to Frank and his literary legacy.) In the poem, O'Hara's reference to Siegfried and Brünnhilde refer to lovers in the final opera of Wagner's *Ring cycle*. Siegfried leaves Brünnhilde behind for an adventure on which he is killed, which breaks her heart. Given the general discomfort with which Tony writes about O'Hara's homosexuality in *Memoir*, and the emphasis he places on his own heterosexuality and womanizing throughout the transcripts, I find it striking that Tony has Frank compare their relationship to a mythological couple engaged in a sexual relationship. Is it wishful thinking on the part of Frank, or Tony? But, of course, the dynamic need not be sexual. It can also be understood as a desire for the loving paternal figure Tony lacked growing up.

The mid-nineties was an especially lonely time for Tony. After a string of painful breakups and a drunken fall that nearly took away his ability to walk, he met and fell in love with an actress named Diane Tyler, who lived above a bar in Tribecca where Tony and his x-girlfriend Jean used to drink. His life began to improve and he gradually weaned himself off of alcohol, drinking only moderately. Diane, ten years younger than

Tony, was recently divorced when they met and eager to start a new life. Within months, Tony moved into her loft. Four years later, he marked the millennium with the publication of a substantial volume of selected poems: *History of the Invitation* (2001), which he dedicated to her. But this period of relative happiness was soon complicated by health problems.

Although he continued to produce work over the eight years after it came out—publishing the chapbook *Nine Immaterial Nocturnes* in 2003 and *Winter Journey* in 2007—he wrote with decreasing frequency. In fact, after finishing the proofs for *Winter Journey* in 2007, he stopped writing for over a year, his longest hiatus since 1960. He wrote his first new poem as his seventieth birthday approached, and read it to a gathering of close friends over dinner on a humid night in June 2009. I can report firsthand that his voice, which was thin at times, faltered on several occasions—so much so that he mentioned it in an email sent a week later with the poem as an attachment: "I'm attaching a copy of the poem I didn't read very well last week." A section of it goes—

> To the long stretches of time
> of paying little attention
> to what might be going wrong inside —
> farewell. And here's
> to the restoration of cause
> in its ratio to irascibility
> to something more than absolute zero.
> As for the growing assemblage of pills,
> I take heart in the words of the Earl of Rochester to Charles II:
> *I mean really, Sire, if we couldn't wash down*
> *our Atenolol and Coumadin*
> *with a decent Châteauneuf-du-Pape,*
> *what the devil would be the point of going on?*
>
> And although I don't have to answer just *yet*,
> there are many more things I could drink to
> than my capacity these days can support…

But by October 2009 he had written seven new poems, one of which he read at a retrospective of his work held on December 2, 2009 at Saint Mark's Church. This event, which occurred shortly before the completion of the first draft of this dissertation, was a success. It consisted of tributes from fellow poets followed by a seated reading by Tony. Part of the announcement read: "If there is a New York School of Poetry, Tony Towle has been involved in it for over 45 years, having taken workshops with Kenneth Koch and Frank O'Hara at the New School in 1963." Present in the large audience were: Paul and Charles; Monica, Tony's first wife; their son Scott, now a middle-aged middle school history teacher in the Washington D.C. area; his daughter Rachel, recently back in New York from Los Angeles to settle the estate of Irma Towle, who died last summer; his brother and sister; his current girlfriend, Diane; and many friends. He seemed tremendously moved by the event. His health, though, didn't strike me as particularly good. In addition to walking with a cane, his hands were shaky.

Progressive Energies

A number of observations can be made about the life that Tony's poetry engenders. [1] His narrative work presents readers with a *discordant concordance* (Ricoeur, 1992). The psychological implication here is that poetry provides Tony with a flexible means of narrating a life that has been neither predictable nor easy. This ability has helped him maintain a stable identity amid an array of life-disrupting experiences. [2] The social nature of the poems—many of which are written as direct addresses, elegies, dedications, and social reportage—creates a thick social ecology. In the

transcripts, Tony underscores how lonely he felt through stretches of his life. I believe that poetry has consistently helped Tony to create a thicker social network than he actually possessed, especially given the distance he maintained from his family and a long history of relational discord. The social realities in his poems allow him to foster a nontraditional family of fellow artists and writers.

[1]

Ricoeur (1992) conceives of a personal narrative as a *discordant concordance* "between the mawnifold of events and the temporal unity of the story recounted" (Ricoeur, 1992, 141). He claims that "the genuine nature of narrative" is to "integrate with permanence in time what seems to be its contrary in the domain of sameness-identity, namely diversity, variability, discontinuity, and instability" (Ricoeur, 1992, 140). Drawing from Aristotle's *Poetics*, Ricoeur demonstrates how *discordant concordances* are able to achieve dialectical balance between diversity and consistency without breaking down into rigidity, silence, or chaos. Personal narratives are progressive insofar as they help individuals construct new versions of the self without losing temporal totality. According to Ricoeur, an absence of temporal totality may suggest that a person is unable to contend with the contradictions and reversals in fortune that threaten identity.

Many of Tony's narrative poems—specifically the ones that draw from autobiographical events like "The Morgan Library" and "Nearing Christmas"—present the reader with *discordant concordances* in miniature. The "selves" presented in these poems are flexible without losing personal consistency. A reader will encounter both

finite and expansive swaths of Tony's life in a single poem—although the events included and the significance assigned to each vary. Furthermore, the poems are constructed around significant and banal episodes alike, in addition to sequences from dreams and daytime fantasies. There are poems built around the act of eating a hamburger ("New York"), walking to the Morgan Library ("The Morgan Library"), Christmas shopping drunk at Macy's ("Nearing Christmas"), or visiting a new Korean laundry in the neighborhood ("Ethnicity"). Poems like "Recapitulation" and "(April)" move fluidity across the threshold between wakefulness and dreams alike, often blurring the line between the two. In short, every "autobiographical" poem presents a slightly different autobiography of Tony, culling together a discordant constellation of scenes, sequences, thoughts, and associations into the concordance of a single poem.

Despite this diversity of events, thoughts, images, and associations, the poet-speaker maintains a consistent personal chronology. For starters, the poems are meticulously dated—as are many of the events described in them. The long poem "Autobiography" (1970-73), for example, is peppered with "dated" material—e.g., wheeling his daughter Rachel through Washington Square Park in 1970, a moment in 1950 (when he was eleven years old) standing "in the playground next to my school," and several fleeting memories of Queens Boulevard and Rego Park from the "late forties." Here are other examples from "Autobiography"—

> Long before 1950 I knew that one of the numerous years
> would bring death, as 1939 brought life,
> in the way that two poems on universal themes
> open and close an important collection…
> —from "Autobiography" (1970-73)
>
> I walk into the wind, continually,

have lunch on velvet burgundy tablecloths with friends,
dress for dinner in elegant striped jackets,
or fabulous gray suits,
a pestilent green hat or short furry slippers,
fashion with charm like the perennial sea
in that it is always pulling at your leg,

or concocting a simple soup.
I enter another year, 1973…

"Autobiography" is considered by many to be one of his greatest poetic achievements. And it is significant that Tony chose to write it in verse. In addition to the obvious fact that he was a poet and therefore in the habit of making poems, verse, especially free verse, allowed him to tell his story in a flexible and imagistic manner—and to punctuate it with absurdist, surrealist, and free associative flourishes. We must remember that Tony's life didn't follow a predictable course—nor was it particularly easy. In addition to his own struggles with marriage and fatherhood, he lost his mother to cancer relatively early, was separated from his brother and two sisters through the foster care system, and had a troubled relationship with his father, who was unequipped to raise his younger siblings after his wife's death. Furthermore, Tony's twenties were marked by a cluster of personal and social traumas and uncertainties. As a result, his life story lacks the conventional hetero-normative/masculine identity signifiers—e.g., professional superlatives, projects, and women/family (Bateson, 1989). The formal and thematic flexibility of poetry provided Tony with a space within which to tell the story of his "self," no matter how disrupted and/or distributed that self was, and to infuse it with the temporal totality found in poems like "In the Coffee House" (2001)—

I told Diane I'd be here 'til six. Waiting
for a girlfriend literally is a great improvement

> over the afternoons at the Figaro;
> and in fact it's cool to have a girlfriend at my age
> I think amusedly to myself
> behind the overpriced coffee,
> 2.95 to contemplate the traffic
> fleeing down the avenue and into the past
> which has brought me up to the present,
> where I put down my pen, figuratively.

Attention to chronology is also seen across the interview transcripts, and throughout *Memoir* (2001), which has temporal markers on nearly every page. Here are just a few examples—

> I had begun, surreptitiously, writing poems in 1960, in Washington, in reaction to and escape from a two-and-a-half-year-long teenage marriage that had become unendurable (14).
>
> Sometime in 1961, after finding Carol was no longer a factor, I had started going to the Cedar Bar… (36)
>
> It was sometime in May that I fell in love (61).
>
> Even though it would be another five years – only after I had a book published – before I would answer the question "What do you do?" with "I'm a poet." – it was *then*, as 1963 drew to a close, that I knew it was so (xx).

According to Ricoeur (1992), though, the "character" at the center of a personal narrative can rarely achieve sameness of identity through a "numerical identity" alone (e.g. repetition of age and personal chronology, etc.). Ricoeur defines character as "…the set of distinctive marks which permit the *reidentification* of a human individual as being the same. By the descriptive features that will be given, the individual compounds numerical identity and qualitative identity, uninterrupted continuity and permanence in time" (Ricoeur, 1992, 119). Thus, one or more qualitative features/tropes are required to maintain a cohesive narrative of self.

For Tony, this qualitative feature is his self-identification as a poet. The identity and practice of poetry help him to piece together a narrative that – without a center – might have met the requirement for a "broken" and/or "contaminated" narrative (McAdams, 2006), especially considering the regrets and life-disrupting struggles he talked about during our conversations. In his own words, "…through the relationships, the bad relationships, jobs, losing jobs, and not having money, or very little, *poetry* has been the only constant thread." Enough said. It is no wonder that his fears of meaninglessness, worsening health, and death are especially acute during periods when he isn't writing. For instance, when we met for our fifth interview in May 2009, he hadn't written anything in over a year and was in the lowest spirits I had ever seen him in.

[2]

My second point was that the social nature of many of Tony's poems—in the form of direct addresses, elegies, dedications, and social reportage—has helped him to create a thicker social ecology than might actually be present. Tony has lived alone intermittently since leaving his parents household as a teenager. There is a history of broken relationships, and a recurring theme of having been disappointed and letdown by others. Other than his daughter, Rachel, and girlfriend, Diane—who is thought by Charles and Paul to be "the best thing that ever happened to Tony"—Tony's most lasting relationships have been with poet and artist friends. As a reader, I am struck by the number of names strewn across his corpus, including but not limited to Charles North, Paul Violi, Larry Rivers, Robert Motherwell, Frank Lima, Ted Berrigan, David Shapiro,

Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler. Many of these friendships were fostered through his affiliation with Saint Mark's Church and also from the years he spent working for Tanya Grossman at UALE. To this day, and despite his precarious health situation, he attends the readings, dinners, and book openings of his friends.

Some of his more "social" poems contain conversations that he probably couldn't easily have in real life. Either the material is too personal—such as in "A Note to Charles North"—or else the person in question is no longer living—such as in "Nearing Christmas" or "Thoughts at Frank O'Hara's *City Poet* Party, 6/9/93." Perhaps in the absence of a traditional nuclear family unit (at least a consistent one), poetry has helped Tony to cultivate a different kind of family—a homo-social gaggle of men? Poetically honoring and elegizing poet friends and mentors may provide Tony with a means of infusing these bonds with new "imaginative possibilities"—e.g., continuing a conversation with Frank decades after his death, in addition to expressing affections and sentiments that are traditionally anathema for American heterosexual men of his generation to express. Take the first lines of the second stanza from the poem excerpted from earlier, "A Note To Charles North"—

> It's approaching death of course, if you want to know,
> and I don't think you want to know,
> which makes two of us, at least…

Or, the final lines of "Nearing Christmas"—

> You call that lyric you big bag of shit?
> I am not talking to myself,
> or in that manner to a great poet of the past,
> that must be Frank, talking to me;

> I am at last fully awake in this mortal life,
> for the few years in the middle,
> and I keep myself opaque and I don't regret it,
> on the promontory.
>
> Frank you've got to help me
>
> and there is an answer but not at this moment.

In *Between Men* (1985), Sedgwick discusses how male desire is often channeled into socially orthodox forms (e.g., sports, activities, womanizing) so as to shield male-on-male affection from the stigmatization of homosexuality. It is interesting to point out that three out of the four founding male members of the New York School were gay. On the contrary, almost all of the male poets who cluster in and around the second generation are heterosexual. Perhaps the affections expressed in Tony's poems might reflect a heterosexual attempt to conform to the rules of conduct within a homosexual male subculture.

Charles' poetry: an introduction

A reader in search of autobiographical confession may initially leave Charles' work disappointed, especially if that reader is a psychological researcher like myself; after all, I've been reading and rereading the poetry of Charles and his friends for clues to help explain aspects of their lives. Aside from the possible exceptions of "A Note on Labor Day" (1989) and "The Summer of Living Dangerously" (2007), few of his poems are autobiographical, at least not in a self-revelatory manner. A few fragments typify the closest Charles gets to the type of personal confession found in Tony's middle and late poems. "A Note on Labor Day," a long poem which took nearly a decade to complete,

and which is dedicated to his wife, Paula, is personal without relying on an egocentric point of view.

> And I seem to be
> lost again, if that doesn't
> sound too dramatic,
> and this time seems worse,
> or around the slightly silvered bend
> slightly blurred in late sun
> that has some whirling filters over it
> mostly for the jackets and the books.

And in "Summer of Living Dangerously (2007)," the objective correlative is at work; tumultuous emotions are expressed as threatening weather patterns. Although biographical information is unnecessary for a rich experience of this lengthy poetic daybook, it bears repeating that the poem was written over two of the most emotionally subdued summers of Charles' life—a period marked by his recovery from open heart surgery—and then, one summer later, the death of Kenneth Koch from Leukemia:

> Aug. 6. A pretty good morning: clear, well-defined clouds; no overreaching. Towards midday less well-defined so the reach was ambiguous—ultimately prophetic as it darkened uncontrollably and began to pour and never stopped. So: an alert start, followed by a short but emblematic gray area, and a largely bitter, peaty finish.

The non-confessional nature of Charles' work can be explained by the type of person he is, in addition to his aesthetic preference for how a poem *works* over what a poem is *about*. A rather poetic-looking list he designed for the initial meeting of a new honors literature class at Pace University illustrates this preference nicely. An emphasis on "function" is apparent in the two contrasting lists—both of which present pleasure-

producing poetic attributes. The lists suggest that aesthetic pleasure can be produced in an infinite number of ways.

LIT 211 D: A Very Partial List of Some Pleasures of Poetry (with overlappings)

Pleasures Of	Pleasures Of
Flow, melody, cohesion	Disruption, dissonance, dislocation, parataxis
Clarity	Mystery, confusion, suggestion, evocation
Form	Formlessness, invented forms
Feeling, emotion	Story-telling, description, intellect, imagination
Logic, reason	Association, illogic, "craziness"
Seriousness	Humor, parody, wit
Adulthood	Childishness, silliness
The private (secret)	The public
Quietness, modesty	Loudness, egocentricity
Familiarity, expectation, tradition	Originality, surprise
Depth, profundity	Surface, superficiality, jotting
Easiness	Difficulty, challenge, provocation
Good taste	Bad taste, outrageousness
Brevity	Length, "ongoingness"
"Subjects," making sense	Word-play, music of the language
Rule-following	Rule-breaking
Truth	Fiction, lying
Verse	Poetry written in prose
Beauty	Realism, difficult experience, unpleasantness
Elegance	Awkwardness, jarring, colloquialism
Satisfaction, conclusion	Just stopping, being left "up in the air"
Reading poetry	Hearing poems read, writing poems
Good poetry	Bad poetry

In response to a question I posed about what he thinks readers get from his poems—(after all, only a minority of readers think about function)—Charles referred to his "Pleasures of Poetry" course and its premise that poems can offer a great variety of pleasures on many levels. "As I've written before, I like to surprise myself in the hope that I will surprise readers, among other things by making poetry out of unlikely materials. What I *hope* is that they're stimulated, or moved, or amused, or encouraged to look at something in a fresh way, or appreciative of a new sort of poem or new way of using language, or provoked, thrilled, etc." Although he doesn't know if his poems will cause readers to live more fully, he hopes that they cause pleasure in some of the same ways that a painting or sonata might, not merely at superficial levels. He pays

attention—sometimes with a fastidiousness that can border on the obsessive—to line breaks, word choice, and to how a poem looks on the page. Although he believes he's getting looser about it, he still finds that getting a poem right can entail a multiyear or even a decade-long process. As he put it in a 2001 interview with Ange Mlinko published in the Poetry Project Newsletter, "I don't write slowly, but I *finish* slowly. Too slowly. I don't labor over poems, but I'm always putting things into a drawer and then not liking them enough when I pull them out again. At my worst, it can take years of putting in and taking out!... I do scribble in notebooks, but only a small portion of the scribbling amounts to anything. As you can see, I don't believe in Ginsberg's 'First Thought. Best Thought' [laughs]" (North in Mlinko, 2001, 13).

Like Paul Violi, Charles is an experimental formalist, at least in part; he has written in rare and/or under-utilized forms (e.g. the Japanese Haibun), added something fresh to familiar poetic forms like the villanelle, sestina, and pantoum, in addition to creating new ones altogether. In addition to his well-known lineups, the long poem, "Building Sixteens," has a form that is entirely his own making. As put it in an explanatory email: "As to 'Building Sixteens,' you're welcome to know what I know about it… sixteen 16-line stanzas (the title and original idea are from the card game Casino, which I played endlessly as a child). I thought of them as sonnet-like, and the extra impetus (the "building") was to have each section come to a conclusion but then turn out to continue in the next. Someone once said to me that with the indented lines they had the look of "building blocks," but if so, that was unconscious on my part." Here's the last of the sixteen stanzas—

[16]

and let's hope, given the nature of light
and *its* celestial ambitions that the
time doesn't simply erode, but offers
shoppers the chance to pile into their
    wagons and the row-houses
    ahead, evicting above all
    the object-less now that
    some of the foolish ideas have
    been doffed for what they
    are, assemblages whose
    flickerings of life and color
    preclude the ship and its margins.
Forkfuls in shady plots, toward acreage
above all the bars and reflected sunsets,
the chief cup for mailmen here on earth,
decanters filled with wine and express civic virtue.

In these lines I hear a pronounced metaphysical yearning—a yearning, whether tongue-in-cheek, earnest, or a touch of both, for "acreage / above the bars and deflected sunsets" of popular American culture. The poem points to an "object-less" reality beyond a consumerist, American scene populated by "shoppers," "wagons" (station wagons, I presume), "row houses," and "foolish ideas." It's nothing short of a cultural and architectural wasteland. Not coincidentally, the form of the poem is as new as the acreage it hungers for. This language and images remind me of metaphysical poets such as Donne, Marvel, and Herbert. Not surprisingly, Charles cites Donne as an early influence. In particular, I see something of Donne's metaphysical and religious explorations of the observable world in Charles' work.

In addition to form, Charles cares deeply about the sonic quality of his work. He has a reputation for making lyrical poems out of material that is anything but lyrical. Music, again, figures prominently in his work—as much in theme as in sound. Reviewers have commented on this over the years. For instance, another excerpt from

Barry Schwabsky's review of *The Year of the Olive Oil* (1989), reads, "And then this poetry was very funny, but with a somber undercurrent of the kind that runs through the gaiety of Mozart. (Music, incidentally, provides nearly as important a source of reference for North as poetry….") And in the 2004 interview with Sarah Fox quoted from earlier, Charles said that although paintings influence his work, music was a *larger* influence. From my perspective, it's the musicality of his verse that helps carry readers through the difficulty of his language, which can be heady and abstract, and sometimes to the point of inaccessibility. Thus, it is not uncommon for his work to be described as demanding (e.g. Devaney, 2007). Take, for example, the second section of the new poem "Advice" (2009)—

> 2.
> Jason lassos Medea
> and winter piles up, distinguished
> by its rich inner life from
> thieving sunset. Bring it
> in a little? Would Scarr and
> Sue please mug more directly—not more—
> into the camera? Bulk as
> waywardness, waywardness under the romance
>
> of whatever branches it chooses,
> in most of the constructions.

Even his most challenging poems have the feel of carefully constructed things—and almost never come across as extemporaneous or stream-of-consciousness in an unintentional way. This being said, Charles sees the style of his recent work—specifically the poems in *Cadenza* (2007)—as "freer" than they used to be. In a statement on recent work for the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, he wrote: "I think

my poems these days are "messier" than they used to be, which I hope is a good thing, some sort of departure. The long poems that begin and end the new book, *Cadenza*, are, in this sense, more cadenza-like…" A cadenza is a musical term that refers to a section of a concerto when an orchestra stops, leaving a soloist to play in free time, alone. When the cadenza ends, the orchestra usually reenters and finishes the movement on its own. Charles' work remains alive to poetic tradition while simultaneously exploring new territory. In this way he is very much an American poet.

Charles explores new territory, or more accurately *creates* it, by consistently challenging himself to write poems that do new things. A quick chronological gloss of his selected poems (1999) confirms this. As a young poet (judging from the work in *Elizabethan and Nova Scotian Music* (1974)), he was influenced by the naturalism of James Schuyler, and the lyrical abstractionism of John Ashbery. According to Jacob (1998), Schuyler and Ashbery – and the "fanciful and droll" of Frank O'Hara – continue to be a guiding influence. Charles confesses to being disappointed when his work is too closely identified with Ashbery's work. And though he admits to being "in awe" of much of the Ashberian oeuvre, in particular the relatively early poems, he thinks that his own work is distinct and finds it surprising when others don't.

Schuyler's influence is especially detectable in Charles' early work—apparent in poems such as "Lights," which Charles dedicated to Schuyler in 1970, before they first met at Morris Golde's apartment. Charles, though, made the decision not to include it in his selected poems (1999) because he thought it was *too* derivative of Schuyler's work. As he put it in a short note to me, "As you know, I consider it imitative, "student" work!" The final seven lines read:

now the lights go out in Poughkeepsie
Tarrytown turns down the television
Ossining and Dobbs Ferry
the light in a window
and the darkness
and over there
another light

Charles's published work swerves from the lyrical abstractions and baseball lineups of his twenties and thirties to the more experimental work he wrote through the late 70s and 80s—up through the philosophy-infused *The Nearness of the Way You Look Tonight* (2001) and conversational openness of *Cadenza* (2007). Throughout, a defining characteristic has been his steadfast ability to reinvent the poem while remaining remarkably consistent as a poet. His penchants for experimentation, abstraction, rapid shifts in thought, and formal innovation have yielded a wide variety of poems; but his willingness to experiment, and the lucid musicality of his "relaxed lyrical line" have remained constants. A similar relationship between tradition and experimentation can be located in the shape of his life. Unlike Tony, whose life course eschewed a more traditional path and shape, Charles' life is socially normative in that he has been married to the same woman for over 45 years, and is dedicated to his career and children. Although choosing the life and career of a poet was a bold move, his identity as a poet has a traditional quality to it. As for his own reputation nationally, he confesses to moods in which he regrets not being better known than he is. However, most of the time he finds his satisfactions in writing what he feels are successful poems.

Progressive Energies

Charles' work begs an interesting question: Does abstract art offer a window into the life of a poet, or – to paraphrase Freud – must analysis in these cases lay down its arms? Ricoeur (1970) rejects the idea that poetic imagination creates unreal things; to the contrary, he celebrates that poet as the figure "…who shows us the birth of the word, in its hidden form in the enigmas of the cosmos and of the psyche" (Ricoeur, 1970, 16). No matter how abstract a poem is, it will express significant things about internal (psychic) and external (cosmic) forces that inspire its inception. Ricoeur (1970) also believed that artistic creations (and he specifically cites Michelangelo's *Moses*, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) "are not mere projections of the artist's conflicts, but also the sketch of their solution" (Ricoeur, 1970, 521). Taking these ideas to Charles' life and work, I see [1] a man who feels emotion more freely than he once did as a result of his writing practice, as well as [2] someone who has maintained a sphere of imaginative freedom that supersedes the circumscribing influence of professional specialization.

[1]

During interview #3, Charles described himself as relatively quiet and, at least until fairly recently, somewhat withdrawn emotionally. Quite shy even into his adult years, he feels that he is now able to open up in the presence of others. Although he believes he was perceived as well adjusted and successful in high school, he reported feeling anxious and melancholic "underneath." Poetry, for Charles, became a space within which he was able to feel more freely, breaking the emotional containment that characterized the first thirty years of his life.

His poems contain frequent moments of joy, much of which is expressed in the

form of frenzied verbal excitement—such as found in the opening three couplets of "Chain" (2000):

> Russia is the doomed incantation of Kansas
> As oceans burn in the individual day.
>
> All day they came and went, sheep dog
> Dogged social climber, sedulous
>
> Luster after the Maison d'Infinite
> In fine (it looks like) print, the curse of snowflakes.

These lines reflect what James Schuyler meant when he wrote that "His (Charles') *joy* in words, and the things words adumbrate, is infectious: we catch a contagion of enlightenment." The idea of Russia as "the doomed incantation of Kansas" is as strange and original as the image of oceans burning "in the individual day." And the ideas of a sheep dog as a "dogged social climber" or snowflakes as a "curse" are as funny as they are unexpected. Although critics may find themselves stymied when it comes to analyzing these and other lines, the exuberance they convey needs little explication because they aren't describing a state of being (e.g., joy), *they are that state*.

In addition to joyfulness, the work also contains moments of laugh-out-loud of hilarity, such as when he asks the question "Does the name R. Penis Blavatsky mean anything, at all, to you?" in the poem "Day After Day The Storm Mounted. Then It Dismounted," (2000) the title of which was inspired by a voice-over in a Woody Woodpecker TV feature. But ebullience and humor seldom last long before becoming something else. Charles is a poet of emotional and imagistic flux. Several pages into "Day After Day The Storm Mounted. Then It Dismounted (2000)," there's a melancholic

shift punctuated by a strange, surrealistic image. Together the emotional swerve communicates the following sequence: life is exciting; no wait—life is exceedingly sad; no wait—the strangeness of life continually overwhelms us.

> In fact, for a long time
> I've felt like apologizing
> For what seem to me excessive references to darkness
> As though the available light were on trial.
> Sometimes it's virtually impossible
> To get up in the morning. The days in
> The middle of winter when it doesn't begin
> To get light till 7 a.m. or even later,
> The swirl commandeering hydrants, curbstones,
> Stoops, etc. To brush back the shadows
> From the cheek of night. "To be,"
> As Thomas Browne wrote, "a kind of nothing
> For a moment," a balloon with a beard…

The need to apologize for "excessive references to darkness" and the confession that "Sometimes it's virtually impossible / To get up in the morning" reflect the state of a individual who is no stranger to depression, a fact that Charles alluded to, though declined to elaborate on. There was clearly much to say on the topic of depression, but he resisted sharing details.

Charles's lengthy "Summer of Living Dangerously (2007)," written while "death was in the air" (both his open-heart surgery and the imminent death of his mentor, Kenneth Koch), has a good deal of melancholy. Charles sees this along with certain other poems in *Cadenza* (2007) as the most emotionally forthcoming work he has ever written. He was surprised when a New York poet and publisher he knows fairly well told him that reading the book from start to finish was like sitting through a stand-up comedy routine; from Charles' perspective, much of the poem is dark, haunted by the idea of dying. I find

the poem's gravity lightened, in the manner of a Shakespearean tragedy, by comical and absurdist interludes, which provide relief. Two entries from "Summer of Living Dangerously (2007)" demonstrate this point:

> Aug. 24. A long line of vehicles, from 18-wheelers to mountain bikes
> and those silver scooters that were so popular a couple of years ago,
> stacked up in front of a rural railroad crossing, ridge of foothills in the
> distance. Two large heavyset men in dark business suits and white
> socks, pants a little too short, lying on their sides on the grass intent on
> fixing something at track level.
>
> The postcard version of life gets an unnecessarily bad rap. It's one
> among many, not necessarily false or reductive. To say it distorts the
> *tone* of life is to describe in a realistic manner an aspect of life that is as
> real as any other.
>
> Aug. 25. Rain promised again—strange sort of promise—but zilch so
> far (mid-afternoon). Whole blocks of sky moving slowly as if painfully,
> or as if hiding something that would be painful if revealed.
>
> just before dusk a strip of bluish acetate like the thin wash of clouds
> the saints go marching in.

In addition to the funny image of the "Two large heavyset men in dark business suits and white / socks, pants a little too short…" I am struck by "the postcard version of life." Like a poem, or a painting for that matter, it is a fallacy to say that the postcard distorts life because it is "an aspects of life that is as / real as any other." The shape it takes, whether "false" or "reductive," is itself a form of life—and one that emerges from a specific set of circumstances, which—in turn—it ends up influencing. Along these lines, Ricoeur (1970) cites the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard who wrote that the poetic image "expresses us by making us what it expresses" (Ricoeur, 1970, 16). This idea is conceptually analogous to statements made by Stein (1926) and Wittgenstein (1953), and is central to my theoretical argument.

There is no single emotional tone that pervades a given poem; instead, emotion gives way to emotion in a manner that contrasts with the "bottled up" way of living that Charles associates with his younger self—that is, the self he described being until he married Paula and until his life and career as a poet began to pick up some momentum. It is plausible to argue that Charles' mother and father were avoidant parents and discouraged him from confiding in them. This would help explain the emotional containment he associates with his childhood and adolescence. It was through the love and companionship of his wife, the birth of his two children, and his increasing confidence as a poet that Charles became more expressively emotionally. Although I cannot argue that poetry was the sole cause for this change, it certainly played a role.

This process has had implications for him on the narrative level. Of his recent work, once again, he wrote: "I think my poems these days are "messier" than they used to be, which I hope is a good thing, some sort of departure. The long poems that begin and end the new book, *Cadenza*, are, in this sense, more cadenza-like, freer and more inclusive than I used to be." A significant part of this freedom involves being more open, which, in addition to making his work more "cadenza-like," has influenced his willingness to talk about himself. As he said, "I was bottled up for years. I wasn't very verbal… I mean outwardly. Probably if you had known me twenty years ago you would have found me still fairly withdrawn. And now [echoing Frank O'Hara's poem "Autobiographia Literaria"] here I am at the center of language. Imagine!"

[2]

My second claim is that poetry enabled Charles to cultivate a sphere of

imaginative freedom that supersedes the circumscribing influence of professional specialization. Put differently, his poetic practice helped him to justify a life in which value was granted to a free play of the imagination. Thus, the "imaginative variations" that Ricoeur believed literature carried out on the real can do more than transform consciousness; these "variations" can lead to lifestyles that are themselves progressive in nature. Nielson (1996) writes about how conscious and unconscious structures of meaning can led to socio-cultural change by influencing individuals to build their lives and their interactions with others according to values that transform traditional roles and practices. Charles' life as a published writer and teacher of poetry expands narrow notions of what it means to be a poet. A poet can be a socially relevant figure, who, in addition to writing and publishing poetry, might teach, publish essays, and remain enthusiastically engaged with a community of fellow writers. Far from being a mere hobby, poetry can and should be seen as a viable vocational choice—and one that potentially benefits society in an ethical manner. As philosopher and poet Joan Retallack argues in her book *Poethics* (2003), the poet is in a good position to help individuals become aware of the contemporary in new and life-affirming ways.

At least in part, I interpret Charles' struggle to find a fulfilling career in his twenties as a reluctance to limit his imaginative life to a single area of specialization—e.g., music, analytical philosophy, law, the academic study of literature, or editing. Although he could have had financially and socially rewarding careers in several of these areas, he *chose* to become a poet. So instead of writing legal briefs, or academic papers, or editing reference books, he invested his imaginative life in the construction of poetic artifacts—the perimeters and rules of which were determined by "a tone or kind of

language, or even a vague shape or length" (North, 1998, 118), as opposed to financial and/or social gain. The progressive implication here is that Charles chose not to devote his energy and talent to a vocation that might have diminished, or at the very least harnessed**,** his imaginative potential to an end other than poetry. He rejected his father's middle-class values of success and security in favor of a way of living that emphasizes the artistic and contemplative. These values have marked his identity as both a father and a teacher at Pace University. Unlike his own parents, Paula and he have remained supportive of their children's varied interests. Whereas some artists and poets see family as a chronic distraction from their work (e.g. Tony), Charles looks back upon the infancy, childhood, and teenage years of Jill and Michael with joy, pride and nostalgia. He also takes pride in the work he has done to encourage (in many cases) first-generation college students at Pace to write and appreciate poetry, as well as to help to increase the cultural life at the university. As he said some years ago when interviewed by the Pace Press: "Pace has become a lively place for poetry."

Paul's poetry: an introduction

Paul's work is the best known of the three, and perhaps more entertaining when read aloud than the work of Charles and Tony, both of which require more concentration to appreciate. Paul's work is as stylistically varied and imaginatively rich. A number of his poems are autobiographical—that is, written in a first-person narrative voice and populated by figures, episodes, and references from his life (e.g. *Harmatan* (1976)). On one occasion he explained that—"[p]oems are based on feelings. And whether those feelings are conveyed in a personal sense or as a product of what the imagination can turn

those feelings into: that's the beauty… that's the pleasure of writing poems." More often than not, Paul is a poet who uses his imagination to create new things from experience, as opposed to merely reporting on it. In fact, he is outspoken, both in print and conversation, about his distaste for poetry that is too serious and self-referential. "You get these poets, and I mean all the time," he explained, "and they are funny, charming, complex people; but for some reason when they get up to read it's in this serious, self-obsessed, stolid voice. And then as soon as they're done the voice disappears [laugher]!" Paul is all too aware that current directions in American poetry preclude the craft and intelligence it takes to make people laugh. The age of the eighteenth-century satirists is long over. Even Romantic poets like Lord Byron are experiencing attrition among contemporary non-academic readers. Instead, the major journals, magazines, and presses publish work that languishes in pathos and "manufactured trauma," as if life weren't traumatic enough. Paul feels similarly about activist/political poetry. He is all behind nuclear disarmament, but doesn't need to read a book-length poem on the topic, such as Allan Ginsberg's *Plutonium Ode* (1981).

Unlike the familiar voice of a poet like Ginsberg, a Violi book consists of a chorale of different voices—some absurdist and funny, some tender, some sober. His poems range from the lyrical to the indexical, and are influenced by everything from the eighteenth-century satirists to Renaissance memoirs and Soviet avant-garde poetry. As in the work of Tony and Charles, the breadth of learning in Paul's poetry is as impressive as it is unsystematic. His work is peppered with allusions to masters such as Homer, Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare—in addition to an eclectic plethora of historical and cultural references. Like Tony, he also draws heavily from personal experiences, whether

mundane or significant: e.g., a trip to the deli, memories from his travels across Africa, India, and Afghanistan, romantic/erotic experiences, fender-bender car accidents, television programs he has seen, overheard language fragments (e.g., found poems), and countless other sources. But more than mining these sources for material, Paul creates new forms from them, many of which are familiar within the American cultural landscape, though un-poeticized until he gets his hands on them. Thus, Paul is very much of an American poet, assigning poetic significance to contemporary life. More than Tony or Charles, he is a populist poet insofar as many of the forms he writes in, and subjects he writes on, are familiar parts of the contemporary American cultural landscape, and do not require a college education or penchant for abstract art to appreciate.

In addition to *Index* (quoted from in Chapter Four), "On an Acura Integra" from *Fracas* (1999) is an example of his ability to poeticize the un-poetic. In it, he makes a poem from the genre of note that is typically left on a parked car after a fender bender without witnesses:

> On an Acura Integra
>
> Please think of this as not merely a piece
> Of writing that anyone would fully
> Appreciate, but as plain and simple
> Words that attempt to arouse whatever
> Appetencies you, especially, depend
> Upon language to fulfill; that drench you
> In several levels of meaning at once,
> Rendering my presence superfluous.
> In other words, welcome this as a poem,
> Not merely a missive I've slowly composed
> And tucked under your windshield wiper
> So that these onlookers who saw me bash
> In your fender will think I'm jotting down
> The usual information and go away.

This poem comes from an inventive mind—and one that's intent on finding humor in a humorless episode of modern life. In a *Newsday* review of *Splurge* from 1982, New York School critic David Lehman wrote, "Paul Violi is the most inventive poet around. His poems can take on the form of television listings ("Triptych") and zany definitions ("Rifacimento"); he can speak with the voice of a veteran fortune-teller ("Dry Spells") or that of a racetrack announcer ("Exacta"). The results are vital, brash, and often very funny" (*Newsday*, 12/19, 1982). Although Paul, once again, does not like being introduced at readings as funny, humor is the touchstone of his work. A mutual friend said to me recently that Violi was the closest thing contemporary American poetry has to a Lord Byron figure. I agree with this assessment. Looking across decades of reviews, humor is the aspect that most critics single out first. Paul *is* extraordinarily funny, as both a poet and a person. He loves to laugh, and make others laugh as well. Take the end of the poem "Counterman" from *Overnight* (2007) as an example. The first half of the poem chronicles the poet-speaker's difficulty ordering a simple "roast beef on rye, with tomato and mayo" from a deli counter. The customer behind him has more luck despite a comically outlandish order:

> Roast beef on whole wheat, please,
> With lettuce, mayonnaise and a center slice
> Of beefsteak tomato.
> The lettuce splayed, if you will,
> In a Beaux Arts derivative of classical acanthus,
> And the roast beef, thinly sliced, folded
> In a multi-foil arrangement
> That eschews Bragdonian pretensions
> Or any idea of divine geometric projection
> For that matter, but simply provides
> A setting for the tomato
> To form a medallion with a dab
> Of mayonnaise as a fleuron.
> And — as eclectic as this may sound —
> If the mayonnaise can also be applied

Along the crust in a Vitruvian scroll
And as a festoon below the medallion.
That would be swell.

You mean like in the Cathedral St. Pierre in Geneva?

Yes, but the swag more like the one below the rosette
At the Royal Palace in Amsterdam.

You got it.
Next.

Paul's poems are reader/audience friendly. In his most recent collection of poems, *Overnight* (2008), readers are invited into the space of the poem itself, almost as a collaborative exercise. The collection's second poem "Finish These Sentences" asks the reader to finish a series of revealing and pithy single-sentences about existence:

The qualities I look for in a subordinate are

A situation in which humor might be most unwelcome is

After considering which is better, to be wealthy or wise

My greatest sense of personal fulfillment depends on

Conversationally, Paul engages in a similar practice, laughing at the observations and stories of interlocutors as often as he chuckles in response to his own. Humor, though, is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. In a citation written for the occasion of Paul's being awarded the seventh annual John Ciardi Award for Lifetime Achievement in Poetry, in 2005, Michael Palma wrote that "Although often breezy and occasionally flip, as well as frequently laugh-out-loud funny, he is also capable of strong passion and surprising tenderness." The *coda* to his long poem "Sputter and Blaze" demonstrates this

capability. The first fifteen of the fifty-one continuous, unpunctuated lines read:

> Now on this cool narrow lake
> your absence at evening
> below the immeasurable in-between of twilight
> I lie in parentheses
> amused by how I can trace
> in the glistening lines of this canoe
> such a dear part of you
> and between night and day
> sweep up an armful of immediate odes
> imagining I can lay them
> before you and say
> Here sift through these in the nibbling dark
> There are more too many
> for me to follow as they drip
> off the dwindling light…

Considering that a coda is the concluding part of a statement, the poem's form is significant. Unpunctuated and without a single stanza break, the poem possesses an openness and verbosity that verges on the comical. Together, the ironic form and tender, image-rich content—e.g., lines like: "…as they drip / off the dwindling light / or rise as the ridge darkens above the pale water / the first house lights begin to appear / below the low dark hills / and the willows lean father over the shore"—convey an experience of emotional complexity. "Coda" is tongue-in-cheek and heartbreaking at the same time.

A similar depth of affective complexity also pervades the long poem "Wet Bread and Roasted Pearls," published in *The Curious Builder* (1993). It begins in a specific place—a Metro-North train stalled in the long, dark tunnel leading into Grand Central Station. Restless, the poet looks at a crossword puzzle in the newspaper he is holding. He begins to fill in the "maze of blanks" while simultaneously thinking over an episode of marital discord, which, quite beautifully, culminates in a moment of erotic

reconciliation: "in darkness and the curve and line / of your spine, your neck / your chin, your ears, your / legs and breasts and my open hands / —Hands, rough, callused, / sliding over your taut silk / they sound like breath."

Even though specific personal details are omitted (e.g. who did what to whom, when, and why), the poem is personal in that it captures the amorphous, non-linear way a life episode is remembered by the individual who lived it. Paul is able to weave the crossword into the story by using its clues and answers to determine the swerve of the narrative:

> Days I didn't hear
> you speak except in your sleep,
> so that one morning I woke
> to the sound of your voice
> and a cold draft
> and the noisy sparrows
> at the window.
> I lay there cold and tired
> Listening to Five down: The first sign
> of spring, cheap talk
> in the dismal, breaking light.
>
> And when the smoke alarm,
> its battery worn down,
> began to beep, the signal
> at first indistinguishable
> from the birdcalls
> but then growing louder,
> triumphantly monotonous
> in their absence, I remained
> Three down:
> A man of my word.
> And that word is
> Fifty-five across: Disingenuous.

This poem illustrates what Tony Towle means when he speaks of Violi's ability to "[slip] between internal perception and external observation so easily that they become

one." It also illustrates how, for Paul, nothing is off limits; as in Tony's work, every lived or imagined experience becomes a candidate for inclusion into a poem—from the morning commute to a life-changing epiphany. And Paul's life story suggests that he knew from an early age that the more experiences he was able to pack into his life the better his writing would be. Recall again that he rejected Yeats' dichotomy between the life and the art, insisting that the two actively nourished one another. In his very own words: "Energy is energy, and experience generates experience, and if you're writing you're writing… I wanted it all. It wasn't a dichotomy. I wasn't being torn by bullshit. I wanted a family; I wanted children; I wanted a job; and I wanted to write. *That Yeatsian perfection of a life or perfection of an art*—I don't buy it and I don't think he did either." Enough said.

Progressive Energies

Paul's creative life embodies Faulkner's notion that it was the writer's job is to create out of the materials of the human spirit something that did not exist before. The practice of creating new things can be seen both in his work and the shape of his life story. The psychological implication here is that [1] Paul's imaginative life influences the way he lives and goes about narrating his life. I also believe that [2] as Paul has aged, his poetic practice has taken on an increasingly important psychological role. Writing has helped him to maintain a redemptive narrative, especially in response to life-disrupting experiences. Paul and his family have faced several major life struggles in recent years. McAdams (2006) writes about a phenomenon he calls the *redemptive self.*

Such individuals are generative—*in an Eriksonian sense*—and tell redemptive life stories. Although they are no strangers to setbacks, deprivation, loss, and pain, their stories are characterized by themes of early advantage, an awareness of the suffering of others, moral depth, power vs. love, redemption, and future growth—and possess a narrative tone characterized by positive affectivity. It is hard to say whether or not Paul's life narrative, which meets McAdams' (2006) structural and thematic requirements for redemption, would have remained redemptive had he curtailed his poetic practice; however, it seems safe to argue that the humor and absurdity endemic of his work helps him remain open to the beauty, serendipity, and possibilities of living, especially in the wake of setbacks and adversity.

[1]

In *Composing a Life* (1989), Bateson suggests that life stories differ in shape according to a host of intersectional identity variables (e.g. sex/gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, etc.). She writes, "Just as the design of a building or of a vase must be rethought when the scale is changed, so must the design of lives. Many of the most basic concepts we use to construct a sense of self or the design of a life have changed their meanings: Work. Home. Love. Commitment" (Bateson, 1989, 2). On the topic of "design," I was struck by how Paul's life story differed from those of his friends. Comparatively, he spent less time discussing his career, and often had difficulty remembering specific dates. And as opposed to constructing a detached overview of specific epochs of life (as Charles did), or narrating a chronologically detailed autobiography (as Tony did), Paul's preference was to share comical and imagistic

personal anecdotes. Funny and absurdist as they were, many were constructed around – or in direct response to – threatening circumstances. Here are five examples from the interview transcripts:

> Paul tells the story of being slapped by a teacher at Mount Saint Michael's Academy and then getting revenge by taking the same brother out of a student-faculty football game months after.
>
> Paul tells the story of catching two young men robbing his home and injured his toes when he decided to kick the young man in the butt with his bare foot.
>
> Paul tells the story of his wife Anne being bitten by a snake in nearby woods one summer evening shortly after they listened to a recording of *Paradise Lost*.
>
> Paul tells the story of his family renting a house for the 2008 Christmas holidays in West Palm Beach and the entire family, excluding himself, getting devoured by fleas.
>
> Paul tells a funny story about drinking too much coffee and being unable to read his poems well at a public reading in Bryant Park in spring 2009 because his hands were shaking.

In 2002, Paul published a collection of prose sketches called *Selected Accidents, Pointless Anecdotes*. The structure mentioned above can be found in many of these sketches. Taken from episodic journal entries dating back to the mid-60s, the selections, which range from one to four pages in length, involve humiliating and/or dangerous circumstances in which the first-person speaker narrowly escapes a compromising fate. The life of the narrator is populated with accidents and macabre surprises at every turn. Examples include giving a poetry reading to a small audience of "sub-verbal" and "semi-verbal" adults at a community library in 1981 that yields "a nod and a nervous laugh, a loud snort and two full smiles;" an altercation with an officious cyclist while driving up Hudson Street in 1990 that concludes with the cyclist inadvertently peddling into an open dumpster; and the predicament of teaching a writing workshop and nearly breaking into

hysterics when a student reads a heart-on-the-sleeves piece of fiction about a job he had as a rent-a-clown.

Threats and/or explicit dangers are infused with humor and absurdity, which pacify a dangerous and threatening world. An identical phenomenon marks a sizable number of his poems. For instance, "Extenuating Circumstances" chronicles a conversation between the poem's speaker and a police officer who pulls him over for speeding on the Taconic Parkway. Although a routine traffic stop is not nearly as dangerous as other obstacles, the Taconic is a notoriously hazardous road with a high annual mortality rate and Paul is driving at night and in wintry conditions. Despite these dangers, the poem is funny and entertaining. The second half goes—

> …If we accept that a parkway
> is a work of art, the faster
> we go the greater the tribute
> to its power of inspiration,
> a lyrical propulsion that approaches
> the spiritual and tempts demands
> the more intrepid of us
> to take it from there.
> That sense of the illimitable,
> when we feel we are more the glory
> than the jest or riddle of the world
> that's what kicked in, albeit
> briefly, as I approached
> the Croton Reservoir Bridge.
> And on a night like this, starlight
> reignited above a snowfall's last
> flurry, cockeyed headlights scanning
> the girders overhead, eggshell
> snowcrust flying off the hood,
> hatching me on the wing
> like a song breaking through prose,
> the kind I usually sing
> through my nose:
>
> So much to love,
> A bit less to scorn

What have I done?
To what end was I born?

To teach and delight.
Delight . . . or offend.
Luck's been no lady,
Truth a sneaky friend.

Got the heater on full blast,
Window jammed down,
Odometer busted,
Speedometer dead wrong:
Can't tell how fast I'm going,
Don't care how far I've gone.

"The jest or riddle of the world" is a reworking of Alexander Pope's line "The Glory, jest and riddle of the world" from "Essay on Man" (1734). Written in heroic couplets, Pope's poem was meant to "vindicate the ways of God to man." Likewise, Paul exhorts the patrolman to interpret his speeding as a peccadillo within a divinely perfected order—which was precisely what brought on the "sense of the illimitable" that caused him to speed in the first place.

In addition to infusing danger with playfulness, his life story and poetic work eschew reporting on the "peak" and "nadir" moments of a life in favor of a quirkily incidental portrait of being in the world. Over our conversations, Paul chose not to open up about personal struggles, nor was he interested in talking about the superlatives that mark his career as a poet. Instead, he told entertaining stories from the materials of his everyday life—e.g., something he remembered his father saying in response to one of Edward R. Murrow's televised interviews, memories of exploring the then rural north shore of Long Island in the fifties, the time his young son referred to a school of fish as "wobbly boys," or something outrageous he once overheard while commuting from

Beacon to Manhattan on the Metro-North train. A similar observation can be made about his work. Like the poem "Counterman" quoted from in the previous section, "It's a Wonderful Life" involves a fantastical trip to the local branch of his bank, the "National Bank of Westchester:"

> After the national fanfare died down, the quintuplets grew up protected from further exploitation in the safety and privacy that state funds and public donations ensured. But, inevitably, they had to enter the real world. On their eighteenth birthday they went to work as tellers in the same bank, my bank, the National Bank of Westchester. The first time I walked in and saw them behind the counter my heart skipped a beat: Veronica, Vanessa, Vivian, Next Teller Please, Valerie, Vicki. With their dark complexions, ruffled white blouses and full red lips -- like petals from a mythical flower, like the tens they plucked from their tills, they were identical down to the last curlicue. All I could think was that it would take a lifetime to explain this moment, an eternity to explain a lifetime. All I could say was, "Marvelous, incombustibly marvelous!" Words that echoed down the line as people from all walks of life couldn't help but agree. Behind his desk smiled B. Yourgrau, Manager, assured that another customer had found the answer to all his banking needs.

This poem elevates an everyday suburban American world to high comedy, and by doing do, encourages the reader to see the all-too-familiar ritual in an entirely new light.

Finally, Paul's more "personal" poems feel as if they were written in response to something beautiful or tragic, but seldom reveal what that thing *is*. His love poems rarely reveal the name of the beloved; and poems about worry almost never include the source of his concern. The poem—"Written In A Time Of Worry And Woe"—quoted in full at the end of the biographical chapter—fits this description. Here it is again—

> I stopped and leaned over the footbridge rail.
> Far below, roaring by the library,
> The stream plunged through deep winter with the force
> That follows a spring thaw, re-enacting

> In a short stretch its ever-varied course.
> I watched it flow clear under clear black ice,
> Churn frothy under gray, tunnel and swirl
> Under snow, pool and spill, then slide over
> And under overturned stumps and debris.
> I watched until I thought: February—
> The apex of the year, and felt so far
> Above the sum of whatever I've known
> Or seen or done that I couldn't care less
> What I must have lost to feel so cold and free.

What's causing the worry and woe? What is it that the poet "must have lost?" These types of questions can also be asked of his life story. For instance, when I nudged him to elaborate upon the event he mentioned mourning in the Leo Edelstein interview he declined. "Can you tell me about it?" I asked. "I'd rather not today," he replied. He also declined to say anything specific about the erotic poems he has written. Being sensitive to his comfort level, I refrained from pressing the issue, but left our conversations feeling that a good deal was left unsaid.

In these and perhaps other ways, I believe that the shape of Paul's poetic work has influenced the shape of his life story. This would not have surprised Gertrude Stein, who, in "Composition As Explanation" (1926) wrote, "Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen…" (Stein, 1993, 495). Stein believed that the thing (whatever the "thing" happens to constitute) was *made* to be seen in the act of composition. Thus, aspects of one's condition are a product of one's aesthetic judgment. In "How Writing Is Written" she writes that it is the business of the writer to live one's contemporariness in the composition of one's writing. For Paul, the telling of a life story is very much of a poetic endeavor, embodying Bateson's (1989) notion that—"Each of us has worked by improvisation, discovering the shape of our creation along the way, rather

than pursuing a vision already defined" (Bateson, 1989, 1). The production of this shape has been influenced by his lifelong activity of composing language poetically.

[2]

Like the curious builder described in the arcane-sounding final stanza of his long poem "The Curious Builder" (1992)—lines that are taken from "To the Reader" by Samuel Daniel—Paul is the craftsman of his own life:

> Behold once more with serious labor here
> Have I refurnished out this little frame,
> Repaired some parts defective here and there,
> And passages new added to the same,
> Some rooms enlarged, made some less than they were
> Like to the curious builder who this year
> Pulls down, and alters what he did the last
> As if the thing in doing were more dear
> Than being done, and nothing likes that's past.

As mentioned earlier, McAdams (2006) writes on how redemptive adults employ narrative strategies to actively *transform* bad into good, or at the very least into something livable. Although Paul does not use poems as sites in which to insist that, say, a disease is some kind of "blessing in disguise," his work is life affirming. A poem from *Overnight* (2008) called "Brief Lives…" is an outstanding example. It is based on the life of a Polish dwarf named Joseph Boruwlaski who was born in 1739 and lived "to be almost 98, a record for a dwarf." The reader learns that he is buried in Durham Cathedral "Under a slab marked JB. / In St. Mary-the-Less Church / A memorial tablet says he faced changes / In fortune with cheerful resignation." The poem then proceeds to itemize the events of his remarkable existence—e.g., being taken in by aristocrats after being

orphaned at the age of nine; being taught violin by the musical masters of his day; being given a diamond ring by a young Maria Antoinette; being "continuously fondled by ladies" and marrying one; being named a count by King Stanislaus II; touring the courts of Europe and Asia Minor with his wife; and being deserted by his wife, whom he outlives by decades. The final 13 lines of the poem go—

> Long after she dies she still complains about his wife,
> How when he annoyed her she would put him
> On a high shelf and leave the room.
> The actor Stephen Kemble (who
> At 476 pounds played Falstaff
> Without stuffing) becomes a dear friend.
> Both of them die on the same day.
> He travels often in his life, as far as Lapland
> And Nova Zembla, where fascinated natives
> Keep him awake day and night,
> And in their songs thank the sun (which they
> Politely decline to believe is a star)
> For allowing them to see this man.

Although I am not suggesting that Joseph Boruwlaski is Paul Violi, there are similarities between the dwarf's story and Paul's own—mainly the epic, fun-loving tone with which the narrative is told. Despite limitations, setbacks, and tragedies, for both, changes in fortune are faced with "cheerful resignation." Along these lines, the poem "September 13, 2001" involves taking a cab uptown "to teach another class," two days after the September 11th terrorist attacks. There's no mention of 9/11; instead, the poem constitutes a reaffirmation of the city at a moment of fearfulness and uncertainty. Here it is in its entirety:

> "When you leave New York, you're not going anywhere,"
> Del tells a bunch of customers leaving The Grange.
> Leaving New York…? What a strange notion.

> I'm out the door, too, uptown to teach another class.
> Cabbies so annoyingly polite they throw me off my stride.
> They're stopping at stop signs for Christ's sake.
> On Commerce Street a building, narrow, tower-like—I
> Never noticed it before—a great flaming rooftop grove
> Of birches soaring in the wind. Phoenix…Phoenicity…
> Is there such a word? Felix…Felicity—Anyway,
> Something for this city to set its watch by.
> Uptown early enough for another coffee, I stop
> At the West End, keep a weak joke about Oswald Spengler
> To myself, and ask Jay to translate what he's chalked up
> On the slate board behind the bar. *Veni, Vidi, Velcro:*
> "I came, I saw, I stuck around."

There is psychological significance in Paul's assertion that felicity—defined as a source of happiness—is "Something for this city to set its watch by." Despite the calamity of 9/11, Paul, the poet, is busy using his linguistic imagination to generate affirmative possibilities in an environmental context marked by terror, anxiety, fear, and retributive anger. The message chalked up on the slate board behind the bar, *Veni, Vidi, Velcro* ("I came, I saw, I stuck around"), is a fitting mantra for a man who sticks around through the twists and turns of life and can still laugh.

The opposite of a generative life story, writes McAdams (2006), is a "contaminated" or "broken narrative," which is a narrative marked by repetition, existential despair, and a pattern in which good things almost inevitably turn out bad. Recall Paul's two Vietnam veteran friends, both of who possess "contaminated" narratives as a result of combat trauma and alcoholism. One of the friends couldn't communicate in proper sentences, preferring to "make sound effects." His narrative had quite literally broken down. Also recall the dreams Paul elaborated upon in the Leo Edelstein interview. In one of them he was "trying and failing to understand, to decipher a language that I couldn't use to articulate the sorrow I felt." For Paul, there's trepidation

surrounding the breakdown of expressive language.

Concluding Remarks

Project Objective

The objective of this project was to show how art plays a role in the processes of living. In the tradition of William James (1902), I chose a qualitative, idiographic method because I was interested in understanding my subjects and their artistic creations from a phenomenological perspective. My subjects were three older adult male friends who all self-identify as poets—and more specifically, as New York City poets. Parting ways from a psycho-biographical tradition that tends to ransack the works of writers for clues to help locate underlying fears, preoccupations, and neuroses, my analyses were more progressive than regressive. I wanted to learn about how the activity of writing, the content and form of the textual artifact, and the social ramifications of self-identifying as a poet affected my subjects on a psychological level, with an interest in whether or not being a poet offered them psychological utility. This required that I stop thinking about poetry as merely representational, and consider how it was being used, regardless of whether this *use* was intended by the poet. Ricoeur's (1970) double hermeneutics influenced my interpretations immensely. Whereas my interest in the emergence of a poetic identity employed a regressive lens, my analyses of the grammar of the poetry used a progressive one.

Findings: the Regressive

Although I eschewed the question of why my subjects wrote, I discovered a fair

amount about the manner in which and when their artistic identities emerged. Perhaps not surprisingly, and despite demographic similarities, the shapes of their poetic vocations differed on account of differing sets of psychological, social, and developmental variables.

Paul and Charles were able to finish college, whereas Tony dropped out during his first semester to support a pregnant teenage wife. Unlike either Charles or Paul, who were able to make a living wage through work, marriage, and later, inheritance, Tony struggled with "borderline poverty" for stretches of time during his early adult years, and remains in a tenuous financial place now at the age of seventy. Paul and Charles have been married for forty or more years to their wives, Anne and Paula. Tony, on the other hand, was married twice, in addition to having two consecutive fourteen-year relationships. Professionally, Charles and Paul are self-identified teachers, and talk about teaching as a "calling" and a "vocation." Charles is fulltime poet-in-residence at Pace University, and Paul teaches poetry and literature classes at Columbia, The New School, and at New York University's School for Continuing Education. Tony, on the other hand, has worked as a private textbook editor since leaving his job as the secretary of ULAE in the early 1980s, a decision he continues to regret—referring to it as "something I fucked up."

As for demographic and other similarities—all three had parents with upwardly mobile values and who raised their families in the early suburban communities that began to dot Long Island and Westchester County in the decade following WWII; they are all white and heterosexual; they were all influenced to varying degrees by the countercultural movements of the late 50s and 60s and were drawn to the downtown

NYC arts scene because of its reputation; they are all between the ages of 65 (Paul) and 70 (Tony) [Charles is 66]; none served in the military; none of their families was particularly religious; they all think of themselves as "left-of-center" Democrats; they all have two children (Tony has three including a hydrocephalic child, Melissa Ann, who was institutionalized shortly after she was born); they were all socially affiliated with one or more of the four founding male poets of the so-called New York School of poetry: John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler; all three continue to be known commodities at the Saint Mark's Church poetry project in downtown Manhattan; all three have published with the same literary presses—principally, Swollen Magpie Press, Kulchur Books, Adventures in Poetry, Sun Press, Hanging Loose Press, and Pataphysics Magazine.

The notion of being a poet emerged at different moments for each. Paul thought of himself as a writer from late childhood on. The encouragement of his parents seems to have played a significant role in this developmental portrait. Unlike Charles and Tony, Paul was never pressured, explicitly or implicitly, to pursue a more traditional vocational path. A child and teenage clarinetist, Charles pursued poetry against the wishes of his father and after a series of other identities. Tony, whose story points to more of a crisis model, started writing in response to a series of life-disrupting events drove him to a suicide attempt during his early 20s. All three were encouraged to write and think of themselves as poets by at least one older and more established poet "on the scene"—meaning someone who had status around Saint Mark's, who had published work in the project's magazines and pamphlets, and either *were* or *had access to* Ashbery, O'Hara, Schuyler, or Koch. Tony, again, was taken on by O'Hara; Charles was encouraged by

Koch and then by Tony; and Paul was championed by Tony, and then in the early 90s by Koch.

Therefore, being a poet was not only a personal choice, but also a social/relational process that required the aesthetic and personal affirmation of an older master. The social portrait that emerges here is reminiscent of the workshops of great Dutch painters such as Rubens and Rembrandt (Schama, 1999). In these workshops, favor equaled survival. Younger painters ingratiated themselves to established painters in hopes of acquiring the private and publics commissions necessary to perpetuate their careers. Similarly, Tony, Charles, and Paul were given varying stamps of approval by Ashbery, O'Hara, Schuyler, and/or Koch. And all three continue to publish the older generation's blurbs on the backs of their books. Their affiliations with these men continue to help them network with an array of poets, artists, students, and publishers.

Here, a question must be asked: *What did it take to win the favor of the older generation?* Acceptance involved more than literary merit, although that needed to be part of the larger package. Looking over the interview transcripts, I found several clues to help explain the social and material conditions behind being "chosen," so to speak. (1) Physically being around New York to take workshops at either the New School or Saint Mark's and to attend readings; (2) following the work of the older generation and writing criticism and reviews on occasion; (3) dedicating poems to them; (4) teaching their work to younger generations of students, and thus ensuring an ongoing readership, especially in the northeast; and (5) maintaining lasting social bonds with other students, disciples, and admirers of the first generation.

There are also specific demographic factors that helped my subjects to join the

"scene" when they did. Aside from LeRoi Jones, an African American poet and friend of Frank O'Hara, and the Chinese-American poet John Yau, a student of John Ashbery's at Brooklyn College, the New York School is almost entirely white, and predominantly male. Although Barbara Guest is at times included alongside Ashbery, O'Hara, Schuyler, and Koch as a founding member of the first generation, and female poets like Eileen Myles, Anne Waldman, and Ann Lauterbach are considered by David Lehman (1998) to be members of the "second generation," this subculture is chiefly male. And though three of the four founding male members of the first generation (Ashbery, O'Hara, and Schuyler) were homosexual, the larger "scene" is comprised of many heterosexual men. Still, all three of my subjects were aware that there were limits to how close they could get to their literary heroes on account of not being gay. Take Tony's comments in *Memoir* about realizing that he could only get "so close" to O'Hara on account of O'Hara's sexuality, or Charles concluding that one could be a poet in New York and "not be gay" after a party at Anne Waldman's apartment.

Interestingly, this highly regional and social way of becoming a poet is a relic of the past. At least three factors explain this shift: the rise of the poetry MFA, significant changes within the publishing industry, and the ways that the internet has influenced the poetry market. There were virtually no MFA programs for poets when my subjects were young; whereas since the mid-80s aspiring poets frequently attend MFA programs as a means of gaining access to writers whose work they admire and whose influence may help them get into print. Also, the relatively recent proliferation of first books contests and blind editorial reading have lessened the social dimensions behind getting into magazines and producing books. These changes have, in a sense, refashioned poetry into

an activity that is less relational/social than it once was.

Findings: the Progressive

Above and beyond regressive observations, my primary objective was to make psychological claims about the forms of consciousness (Ricoeur, 1970), or new way of being (Stein, 1926) that poetry helped each of my subjects to create. Here, once again, is what I discovered—

Tony's early abstract work signaled a deflection from a series of life-disrupting experiences; as he gradually self-identified as a New York poet, the work—in the tradition of Frank O'Hara—became increasingly autobiographical. Poetry provided him with a flexible means of narrating a life that was neither predictable nor easy. Thus, no matter how disparate and depressing living may have seemed, life was meaningful insofar as it provided material for poems—or, as he puts it in "Nearing Christmas:" "no event in your life is of the slightest importance, / but there is nothing you cannot use; / the unceasing events of your boring life / occur only for the success of a particular poem / awaiting your efforts on a horizon." Tony's poems are hermetic spaces within which he organizes discordant fragments into a meaningful narrative and imagistic totality. I also claimed that poetry helped him create a thicker social network than he actually possessed. This network constitutes a surrogate family. Given the reckless behavior of his father, and Tony's own decision to leave two sets of wives and their children, it makes sense that he would attempt to construct a close-knit group of friends with whom to associate. In Tony's case, poetry played – and continues to play – an important psychological and social role. It has been the most constant thread in his life, and literally "makes life

bearable."

Looking across the decades of Charles' work, I see a man who has used a poetic practice to feel emotion more openly than he once did, as well as to cultivate a sphere of imaginative freedom that supersedes the circumscribing effects of professional specialization. Due to a combination of dispositional shyness and a familial environment that lacked nurturing, Charles felt "bottled up" for much of his life. Poetry helped open him emotionally—evidenced by the ever-shifting affectivity that characterizes his work. His newly found ability to write "freer" and "more emotionally" coincides (perhaps causally) with his willingness to share his life story. My second claim was that becoming a poet signaled a radical departure from the expectations of his parents. I argued that Charles' poetic practice helped him to create a life in which value was given to imaginative play. This led to personal and vocational choices that allowed him to build a life distinct from the one expected of him by his domineering father. Thus, I concluded that the "imaginative variations" that Ricoeur believed literature carried out on the real can do more than transform consciousness; these "variations" can lead to lifestyles that are in themselves progressive in nature, especially when they invite younger generations to live their lives in a similar fashion.

Finally, I argued that Paul's poetic style—both in form and content—influenced the way he narrates his life story. The stories he shared during our lengthy conversations bore an uncanny resemblance to his work—principally insofar as the stories were humorous and incidental and omitted details pertaining to professional status and superlatives in favor of an absurdist and comical narrative mosaic. Furthermore, I claimed that poetry for Paul has taken on an important psychological role as he has aged.

Whereas it was a source for adventure, joy, and experimentation as a young man, it has increasingly become a space within which he mollifies tragedy and danger through absurdity, humor, and tenderness. This ability enables Paul to maintain a redemptive narrative, even amidst a cluster of ongoing concerns and struggles.

These claims constitute a profoundly psychological approach—and one that finds its roots in an existential philosophical framework (e.g. Sartre, 1968). Unlike Marxist-influenced Social psychologists (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979), my approach takes seriously the possibility that human personality isn't principally determined by social/environmental forces, but is equally open to change from within. The existential philosopher Maxine Greene (1988) has argued for a dialectical understanding of freedom that balances environmental and situational determinism with personal agency. Although I don't believe that narrative—and in my particular case poetry—has the ability to change everything, I am chary of underestimating its transformative capacity.

Implications for Personality Psychology

If this project has been at least moderately successful, it has made a case for understanding the role art can play in the construction and experience of selfhood. In order to be as explicitly theoretical as possible, I will now explain how my findings expand upon a popular conceptualization of personality within academic psychology.

McAdams and Pals (2006) developed a five-point framework toward an "integrative science of personality" (McAdams & Pals, 2006). Personality is defined as (1) an individual's unique variation on the evolutionary design for human nature, expressed as a *developing* pattern of (2) dispositional traits, (3) characteristic adaptations,

and (4) self-defining life narratives situated in specific (5) socio-cultural contexts. The authors conceptualize level one as grounded in the evolutionary imperatives of biological survival and reproduction. Personality is likely to be affected if either survival or the ability to reproduce is threatened. Level two is comprised of dispositional traits, which are broad, non-conditional, de-contextualized, and heritable dimensions of human individuality that form the foundations of personality. Above the foundational levels (one and two), McAdams and Pals (2006) understand level three to be made of social-cognitive, developmental, and motivational adaptations—all of which are contextualized in time, space, and social environment. These adaptations are referred to by Cantor (1990) as *middle-level units* of personality and include goals, motives, plans, strategies, strivings, virtues, values, cognitive schemas, developmental tasks, and mental representations of self and others. Level four is made up of the stories individuals tell as a representational means of conveying identity to themselves and others. Life stories, which are mutable, attempt to maintain a relatively stable identity, or what Ricoeur (1992) calls a *discordant concordance* of self and sameness. Ricoeur (1992) thought of narrative as being continually "after" a life. Put differently, life stories are not mimetic reflections of objective experience; they are an attempt on the part of the speaking subject to construct and convey meaning to himself/herself and others. The fifth and final level proposed by McAdams and Pals (2006) is *culture*, or what Shweder and Sullivan (1993) describe as a complex mix of meanings, existential practices, and discourses about human existence that exist within a given group or society.

My study challenges the McAdams and Pals (2006) model in three ways. [1] It challenges the definition of a narrative; [2] it challenges notions of what *does* and *doesn't*

change across personality; and [3] it suggests a sixth level of personality that should be considered in tandem with the other levels.

[1] McAdams and Pals (2006), again, define narrative as the stories individuals tell as a means of conveying their identities to themselves and others. McAdams (1989, 1996, 2006) has produced an extensive body of qualitative and quantitative literature that attempts to define what constitutes a personal narrative. However, he consistently overlooks non-traditional narrative forms, whether poetic or visual/imagistic, which undoubtedly play a role in conveying who individuals were, are, and are in the process of becoming. In addition to a life story, diary entries, stories, paintings, poems, drama, letters—really any expressive genre that employs the symbolic (Lacan, 2007)—may constitute a means of constructing and conveying identity. Along these lines, Freud (1895) believed that *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet* were textual sites within which the mental functioning and psychic histories of Sophocles and Shakespeare could be located.

[2] In terms of personality change, McAdams and Pals (2006) write that change over time is most evident across the third and fourth levels of personality:

> The framework described herein points to other features of personality—characteristic adaptations and narrative identity—that are likely to show considerable change over time, in accord with shifting developmental demands and maturation. More so than trait models, furthermore, approaches that feature characteristic adaptations and narrative identity can shed light on processes and mechanisms of developmental change (McAdams & Pals, 2006, 214).

To the contrary, my findings suggest that language can cause pervasive change across at least four levels. Take the case of Charles North, for example. I argued that writing helped him open up emotionally and move beyond life-long struggles with

depression and shyness. This transformation, albeit gradual, involved changes at the dispositional, characteristic/adoptive, narrative, and socio-cultural levels. The philosopher Garry Hagberg (2008), cited in Chapter One, argued that language, from the perspective of Wittgenstein, was the primary vehicle of selfhood, and that persons came to resemble the life-defining pictures they narrated. A new life-defining picture influenced how they perceived and acted in the world, determining "…which experiences are salient and which not, thus shaping, at least partially… subsequent choices in response to the picture, the unfolding narrative" (Hagberg, 2008, 221).

From a psychological perspective, it is interesting to wonder how pervasive these life-defining pictures are when it comes to genotypic dimensions of personality. Gregg (2007) divides personality into two categories: *core-level personality*, which he defines as "affective states and tensions that characterize the genotypic or core level" and *social personality*, which he defines as an ongoing reconfiguration of the core-level personality "in congruence with a set of cultural prototypes and moral sentiments" (Gregg, 2007, 213). A change of identity will cause changes to personality in the sense that one's core-level personality is reconfigured into a new *social personality.* Whether a new social personality can, in turn, change a person at the core level remains a topic of debate. I am inclined, though, to believe that it can.

[3] Lastly, my findings point to the presence of a possible sixth level: the artifact. That is, creations as "ways of being" that influence who we become. The form of life that is created via a particular use of language—as theorized by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953)—is informed by extra-textual contexts (e.g. social/environmental conditions), but also actively informs these contexts, potentially

changing them. Quoting again from Gertrude Stein's *Composition as Explanation* (1926), "The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything." In *Six Memos* (1988), Calvino quotes Gadda as saying, "To know is to insert something into what is real and hence to distort reality" (Calvino, 1988, 108). Or, as Charles North writes in "Summer of Living Dangerously: "The postcard version of life gets an unnecessarily bad rap. It's one / among many, not necessarily false or reductive. To say it distorts the / *tone* of life is to describe in a realistic manner an aspect of life that is as / real as any other." The artifacts people create are as much a part of a life as the life that the artifacts seek to represent.

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