A Poetic Poioumenon: Coterie and Ekphrasis in David Lehman's "The Breeders' Cup"

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ABSTRACT

A POETIC POIOUNEMON: COTERIE AND EKPHRASIS IN DAVID LEHMAN’S

“THE BREEDERS’ CUP”

Anna Beth Rowe

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David Lehman’s poem “The Breeders’ Cup” uses cross-generational coterie and ekphrasis to create a poetic poioumenon. When read in terms of art criticism, Lehman’s “The Breeders’ Cup” models creative processes from the past and calls for a rehabilitative ethic in postmodern poetics. Lehman follows the ekphrastic form, which associates a poem with a work of visual art, from his New York School predecessor Frank O’Hara. “The Breeders’ Cup” addresses Édouard Manet’s 1865 painting *Olympia* through ekphrasis, and the painting of a prostitute becomes a patron saint of parody for postmodern poetics. The poem introduces lust as a metaphor for creative energy whose productive potential inspires meaningful works of art. The speaker self-consciously references lust as creative energy for producing “The Breeders’ Cup” and artworks of the past while modeling a process of rehabilitation for the future.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT......................................................................................................................................ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS..................................................................................................................iii

A POETIC POIOUMENON: COTERIE AND EKPHRASIS...................1

IN DAVID LEHMAN’S “THE BREEDERS’ CUP”

APPENDIX.......................................................................................................................................26

WORKS CITED..................................................................................................................................29
A POETIC POIOMENON: COTERIE AND EKPHRASIS IN DAVID LEHMAN’S

“THE BREEDERS’ CUP”

David Lehman’s poem “The Breeders’ Cup” from his 2013 collection The Escape Artist takes its title from a thoroughbred horserace of the same name. As horse racing expert Cindy Pierson Dulay explains, The Breeders’ Cup World Championships began in 1984 after John R. Gaines was inspired to begin a single championship event in the fall to replace the various championship races across the country. Gaines’s consolidation of the championship races intended to move the focus of the event from gambling to the achievements of top horses and jockeys in the competition. Horses of fine pedigree win races and eventually breed to produce the next generation of champions. The concept of breeding in the world of horseracing underlines the importance of heritage as a source of power and success. Many of the achievements of “The Breeders’ Cup” result from Lehman’s artistic lineage, which are established through ekphrasis and cross-generational coterie. The utilization of this self-referential metaphor gives the first signal that “The Breeders’ Cup” may be read as a poetic “poioumenon,” a term coined by Alastair Fowler to describe a specific type of metafiction. Fowler explains that metafiction “is characterized by features, such as damaged verisimilitude, that draw attention to the work’s artefactual status” and that in a poioumenon the “work makes itself” (“Genre,” 160). Fowler further explains that “the poioumenon is calculated to offer opportunities to explore the boundaries of fiction and reality—the limits of narrative truth” (A History of Englis Literature, 372). A poioumenon is self-conscious of the process of creation. When read in terms of art criticism, Lehman’s “The Breeders’ Cup” models creative processes from the past and calls for a rehabilitative ethic in postmodern poetics. Lehman follows
the ekphrastic form, which associates a poem with a work of visual art, from his New York School predecessor Frank O’Hara. “The Breeders’ Cup” addresses Édouard Manet’s 1865 painting *Olympia* through ekphrasis, and the painting of a prostitute becomes a patron saint of parody for postmodern poetics. The poem introduces lust as a metaphor for creative energy whose productive potential inspires meaningful works of art. The speaker self-consciously references lust as creative energy for producing “The Breeders’ Cup” and artworks of the past while modeling a process of rehabilitation for the future.

Poet David Lehman carries on the tradition of the poet and art critic figure that can be traced from Charles Baudelaire to T.S. Eliot and Frank O’Hara, the latter of whom was the major luminary of the first generation New York School of poets. O’Hara’s poetry consciously broke from the aesthetic of T.S. Eliot, and David Lehman continues the pattern of breaking from poetic ancestors. Lehman posits that the first generation New York School poets were the last avant-garde movement. In *The Last Avant-Garde*, Lehman states, “If we are all postmodernist, we are none of us avant-garde, for postmodernism is the institutionalization of the avant-garde” (11). Avant-garde art sought to break from tradition by looking forward into the future and creating innovative aesthetic forms. This impulse to overcome tradition to be original is itself a tradition, and the poetic lineage from Baudelaire to Lehman demonstrates the pattern of breaking from one’s artistic ancestors even as one seeks inspiration from them. The poets who came to be known the New York School of poetry consciously sought to break from the tradition of current poetic practices. This subversion of previous art is central to their identity as avant-garde.
The avant-garde artist wanted to detach from tradition, but the successful avant-garde artist eventually sold his work to an art dealer or patron. Once the work is purchased and circulated, it is absorbed into the very artistic tradition it wished to subvert. Once it is canonized, the subversive energy of the avant-garde work is muted. Even in attempting to break from tradition in order to be new, art will always grow out of past traditions. Rosalind Krauss’s “The Originality of the Avant-Garde: a Postmodernist Repetition” further situates my discussion of David Lehman’s ekphrastic poem “The Breeders’ Cup.” Krauss argues that while modernist avant-garde movements repressed the notion of the copy in art, postmodernism does not. Even in the avant-garde’s impulse to break with tradition, emerging art movements in modernism repeated an art historical pattern in which new traditions attempted to break away from past ones. Krauss describes the avant-garde impulse to break with tradition in this way:

Now, if the very notion of the avant-garde can be seen as a function of the discourse of originality, the actual practice of vanguard art tends to reveal that “originality” is a working assumption that itself emerges from a ground of repetition and recurrence. (7)

As a postmodern poet and art critic figure, David Lehman is aware of the fraudulent “discourse of originality,” and his work reveals the logic of the copy in a way that modernist artists would conceal. “The Breeders’ Cup” uses the ekphrastic form to show how “originality” is a “working assumption” in the choice of art object confronted in the poem, Manet’s “Olympia” (1865) “The Breeders’ Cup,” is what Krauss would call “truly postmodern art” because it “establishes a schism between itself and the conceptual domain of the avant-garde, looking back at it from across a gulf that in turn establishes a
historical divide” (66). “The Breeders’ Cup” looks back at past avant-garde art through ekphrasis, itself a tradition which Lehman self-consciously practices after Frank O’Hara. This choice of form aligns Lehman’s work with the New York School and creates a cross-generational coterie between past art traditions. The poem’s association with Manet’s *Olympia* exemplifies the notion of the copy in visual art, and the painting serves as an expression of the avant-garde that carried subversive energy in its time, though some of that subversive energy has been muted by canonization. Rather than seek to overthrow past tradition, Lehman’s “The Breeders’ Cup” models a rehabilitative cross-generational coterie between the present and avant-garde art from the past in order to dynamize subversive energy into postmodern repetition. The utilization of *Olympia* as an ekphrastic object results in a parody in action of the painting. The poem creates its own parody of *Olympia* through ekphrasis, and this creation models the rehabilitative process dictated by the poem.

As a postmodernist, David Lehman does not subscribe to the artistic creed of originality, and thus his work does not attest to be avant-garde. While avant-garde work looked to the future, postmodernism looks to the past out of reverence and irreverence for history. In “The Questions of Postmodernism,” Lehman agrees with Krauss regarding the myth of originality:

> The governing feeling is that originality is impossible. Reality is a matter of repetition […] The poet Andrei Codrescu has summed up one major difference between modernism and postmodernism: "The modernist command was Pound's 'Make It New'. The postmodern imperative is ‘Get It Used’."
Lehman’s ekphrastic poem “The Breeders’ Cup” uses avant-garde artwork from the past to demonstrate the impossibility of originality and to show the rehabilitative productive potential of cross-generational coterie between art traditions. The poem engages with Dante, Shakespeare, Édouard Manet’s Paris as well as Frank O’Hara’s New York City, and the 48 lines move across time and genre. Manet’s *Olympia* (1865) models an avant-garde gesture and demonstrates the notion of the copy in art. The inclusion of *Olympia* in “The Breeders’ Cup” fulfills the “postmodern imperative [to] get it used” and creates a reference to and parody of *Olympia*, who becomes the poem’s patron saint of parody. To demonstrate this reading of “The Breeders’ Cup,” I will begin with a brief history of the New York School avant-garde and discuss the associative properties of the ekphrastic form through Frank O’Hara’s “Digression on Number I, 1948.” Then I will turn to the first section of “The Breeders’ Cup,” which cries out to the fates regarding deadly sins. This section brings the problematics of lust to the forefront, and the poem transitions to its ekphrastic second section. The first and last stanzas of this section confront Manet’s *Olympia*, and this repetition creates the poem’s own parody of *Olympia*. Though some of *Olympia*’s subversive energy has been muted by canonization, the original painting still has the capacity to shock and inspire. This capacity may be demonstrated through Larry Rivers’s parody of *Olympia*, a provocative installation entitled *I Like Olympia in Blackface* (1970).

The New York School coterie emerged in the 1950s in postwar New York City and included poets James Schuyler, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and the charismatic center of the group, Frank O’Hara. The New York School of poets were given their name by analogy with The New York School of Painters—and, though they have variously
disclaimed being a “school” in the usual sense of the word, they are united in their attitudes toward art—perhaps chiefly in their performance of art as a collaboration between friends and between genres. Of these four major figures, O’Hara most forcefully embodies the poet/art critic figure so central to avant-garde movements that preceded him. The New York School poets may be characterized by their frequent use of free verse and the vernacular, as well as their interest in making everyday experience the focus of their poetry. As Lehman describes in *The Last Avant-Garde*

> While they could be silly, they were artful in their silliness; they used playful means to arrive at high aesthetic ends. They formed a movement not by design but by a kind of group momentum fostered by friendship and propelled by their growing confidence in the value of their works. (9)

The New York School poets did not set out to define themselves as an organized group. Rather, their shared aesthetic emerged from their coterie of personal friendships. The New York School poets were inspired by Abstract Expressionism, a movement in painting that developed in the 1940s and 1950s in New York City and was led by vanguard artists Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. Abstract Expressionism has been considered part of late modernism, a vital movement that helped to make New York City the new cultural epicenter of the postwar western world. The Abstract Expressionists may also be called the first generation New York School painters, and the second generation of these painters—Mike Goldberg, Larry Rivers, and others—were contemporary with the first-generation poems. The painters and poets of the New York School benefited from friendships and collaborations with each other that allowed for inspiration as well as continuing the tradition of ekphrastic poetry.
The coterie of painters and poets in the New York School led to associations between the arts that came to be demonstrated in the ekphrastic form and set the New York School poets apart from other poetry of this time period. “Coterie” may be understood as chosen families within the arts, while traditional artistic lineage is based on what Lytle Shaw calls a “filiative model” in her book *Frank O’Hara: The Poetics of Coterie*. O’Hara’s role in avant-garde coterie helped him to produce work that

[R]ecodes alliances by replacing the organic and fixed social model of the family with a contingent and shifting association of friends. He recodes filiation not merely by refusing to produce offspring but also by refusing to be one. O’Hara’s attempt to exit the filiative model of the Great Tradition is coincident both with his cultivation of obscure, often campy, genealogical precedents and with his frequently heretical readings of canonical authors. (29)

O’Hara’s “contingent and shifting association of friends” is visible in his poetry through its inclusion of names and details of interactions. The New York School situated themselves outside of accepted traditions in poetry as set forth by T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, poet predecessors to O’Hara. The New York School’s avant-garde, then, broke from traditional poetry by both using what Lehman describes as “playful means to arrive at high aesthetic ends” and by “exit[ing],” as Shaw explains, “the filiative model of the Great Tradition.” The names in O’Hara’s poetry vary from the first names of his friends to the last names of other artists, particularly painters in the New York School. These references are important for my discussion since they relate specifically to the ekphrastic
form. O’Hara’s coterie flourished through relationships between painters and poets in the process of forming their own tradition.

O’Hara’s interest in Abstract Expressionism inspired him to write criticism as well as ekphrastic poetry about Jackson Pollock’s paintings. O’Hara’s poem “Digression on Number I, 1948” confronts Pollock’s 1948 painting Number 1 (Appendix B) and is a useful example of O’Hara’s employment of last names:

I am tired today but I am not too tired. I am not tired at all.

There is the Pollock, white, harm will not fall, his perfect hand and the many short voyages. They’ll never fence the silver range.

Stars are out and there is sea enough beneath the glistening earth to bear me toward the future which is not so dark. I see. (14-23)

Frank O’Hara looks back to his painter predecessor, Jackson Pollock, before looking “toward the future / which is not so dark. I see.” Here O’Hara suggests that he and the other members of the New York School coterie are making artistic history alongside the painters they turn to for inspiration. The formation of a new tradition stems from a desire to subvert past artistic generations. Looking “toward the future” exemplifies the avant-garde’s innovative attitude. O’Hara engages yet another Pollock painting in his
ekphrastic poem on Number 1. When O’Hara writes: “there is sea / enough beneath the glistening earth” before looking “toward the future,” he references Pollock’s 1947 painting Sea Change. This act of looking also constitutes seeing, a clever play on the word “sea” by O’Hara, which he sets up in the second stanza of the poem with “A fine day for seeing” (5). The poet’s digression in 1956 on a painting produced in 1948 leads him to yet another painting from 1947. The poet’s “Digression” exemplifies the associative properties of the ekphrastic form. O’Hara can “see” the two Pollock paintings and confront them in his avant-garde poem. O’Hara wrote “Digression on Number I” after Pollock’s death. O’Hara’s inclusion of Pollocks’s last name in a poem about the recently deceased painter’s artwork demonstrates O’Hara’s model of coterie. Shaw explains this model “not as a symbolic stand against time but as a fluid and experimental way of conceptualizing literary and social linkage” (37). “Digression on Number I” is, in part, O’Hara naming Pollock as his artistic predecessor. The poet links himself and the rest of the New York School to Abstract Expressionism. Pollock’s legacy provides O’Hara with a sense of ancestry as well as inspiration for his own work. O’Hara links himself explicitly to Pollock to canonize the painter and to look towards his own death and canonization—which he might imagine comically, in a characteristic mix of reverence and irreverence. The avant-garde coterie of the New York School provided O’Hara with the means to experiment in “conceptualizing literary and social linkage[s],” and these experiments are made explicit in the poet’s named evocation of friends and in the ekphrastic form.

David Lehman’s poem “The Breeders’ Cup” takes O’Hara’s experiments in artistic lineage through coterie and ekphrasis and brings them further into the postmodern
period in the form of a poetic poioumenon. While O’Hara looks to an immediate predecessor in “Digression on Number I, 1948,” Lehman looks to the recent and distant artistic past to create a cross-generational coterie between high modernism, the New York School’s avant-garde, and postmodernism. “The Breeders’ Cup” is divided into two sections, “1. To the Fates” and “2. Olympia” (Appendix A). The first section cries out to “the Fates,” three mythological goddesses who spun and controlled the “thread of life,” determining the lifespan of humans. These Fates represent unseen powers dictating our individual lives before they even start. The speaker is telling the Fates that mankind has been unable to “keep the peace” and has also been unable to “keep their hands off each other” (l. 1-2). Humans have been unable to fully collaborate and establish social equality and peace. Despite these problems of social alienation and unrest, they “breed not, yet preach / the old discredited creed” (l. 3-4). One who breeds is a breeder, which on a literal level may be understood by the OED definition, “That which breeds or produces offspring” (1a). The traditional, heteronormative understanding of breeder is indicated by these lines literally, but another OED definition of the word reveals the poem’s metaphorical understanding of breeding, “That which produces or originates; the author, source, or cause” (1b). The speaker of the poem uses the metaphor to self-referentially discuss the process of creation for past art, future art, and the poem itself. “The old discredited creed” refers to the modernist myth that represses the notion of the copy in art and on another level to the “creed” which classifies the sin of lust with other deadly sins. We can connect these two interpretations by considering the concept of lust as creative energy. Lust is considered a deadly sin, but it is a basic human requirement as it leads to propagation. In order for an artist to be productive, he or she must find inspiration from
other artists, a tradition, or a coterie. Modernists repressed the notion of the copy and “preach[ed] / the old discredited creed” of originality. However no art is truly original, as the work must be inspired by or created in reaction to an existing art practice.

The New York School wished for their work to escape traditional art practices, and as we have seen in the discussion of O’Hara, part of this escape was established through coterie and O’Hara’s experiments in “social and literary linkages” through the ekphrastic form. Ekphrasis requires a “lust,” or desire for another work of art that results in a productive engagement between two mediums. Lust as creative energy brings about new art traditions and energizes avant-garde movements. However, the source of that creative energy is credited to originality. But as we have seen, originality is a “working assumption.” In the ekphrastic form, the “lust” between various works of art results in a productive engagement between them.

As the speaker explains to the Fates in line 5, humans also have “Love” which is “charity.” Charity is given to those who are in need and is a gift given without the expectation of reciprocity. “Reason not the need” for love, because love can be given without reason, and feeling love for someone does not constitute a transaction. This line is also a direct reference to Shakespeare’s King Lear. The aged and mentally deteriorating king pleads with his unfaithful daughters Regan and Goneril to let him keep a number of knights in his company. The daughters question why the king needs his own knights, and Lear responds:

O, reason not the need! Our basest beggars
Are in the poorest thing superfluous.
Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man’s life’s as cheap as beast’s. (2.4.261-264)

Lear has no reasonable need for his knights, but his company is his retinue and an indicator of the king’s power and masculinity. If the king loses his company, then this signals his loss of power over his kingdom. Lear emphasizes not the power his knights symbolize, but that they allow his nature “more than nature needs,” and that without an allowance for his servants, the king’s life is “cheap as beast’s.” The speaker in “The Breeders’ Cup” references Lear’s speech with the line “Reason not the need” in order to demonstrate that human love operates outside of logic and helps to make us more than biological automatons. The production of art sets humans apart from animals, and lust as creative energy helps to produce the work of art. “Love is charity,” and the various forms of love allow for humans’ charitable potential. Reasonless charity does not follow logic, but as Sigmund Freud describes in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, humanity’s drive to civilization is rooted in the various forms of love:

> Love with an inhibited aim was indeed originally full sensual love and in men’s unconscious minds is so still. Both of them, the sensual and the aim-inhibited forms, reach out beyond the family and create new bonds with others who before were strangers. Genital love leads to the forming of new families; aim inhibited love to friendships, which are valuable culturally because they do not entail many of the limitations of genital love, for instance, its exclusiveness. (20)

As charity can drop “a coin” in “a beggar’s cup” (l. 7) so do the forms of love “create new bonds with others who before were strangers.” The traditional heteronormative family unit was formed on bonds of love and designed for procreation, and “genital love
leads to the forming of new families.” The literal interpretation of the word “breeder” fits into this mold of love—in a traditional, heterosexual and monogamous marriage, a man and a woman (ideally) love each other, marry, and have children. However, love possesses the power to break outside of traditional heteronormative relationships to “create new bonds.” This love leads to relationships that benefit the self. The different forms of love can lead to charity between people who have no personal connection. A beggar on the street may be a stranger, but love as charity may manifest itself and cause you to give the beggar some of your money. The metaphorical interpretation of “breeder” as an originator or author sheds light on the role of aim-inhibited love as friendships in the New York School coterie. The friendships between poets and painters allowed the artists to experiment with “social and literary linkages” and form their own artistic lineages. The New York School poets and painters not only collaborated in their work but also provided each other with emotional and artistic support. Love is emotional, and aim-inhibited love may be reasonless, but it plays an important role in both human civilization and specifically in affiliating an artist within an artistic tradition. For the ekphrastic poet, association across the arts forms relationships between different artworks that would have not otherwise existed.

The speaker of “The Breeder’s Cup” then continues to describe problems of humanity to the Fates at the close of the poem’s first section, “Gluttony is no nicer than greed / or wrath, but lust / is our categorical must” (l. 9-11). This hierarchy within the deadly sins mirrors the experience of Dante in The Inferno. As the poet travels through the circles of hell he finds that the carnal sinners are in a circle above the gluttons, the greedy, and the wrathful. In Canto V, Dante sees the lustful in the second circle of hell,
and he is empathetic towards them: “I, through compassion fainting, seem’d not far / From death, and like a corse fell to the ground (l. 137-138). In “The Breeders’ Cup,” the speaker maintains a similar hierarchy within the deadly sins and is also compassionate towards the lustful. “Gluttony is no nicer than greed” because gluttony represents greed as indulgence, often enacted at the expense of someone else’s fair share, such as the beggar’s in line 7. Thus gluttony reflects extreme self-centeredness, prioritizing consumption over production (of love or art). Love, on the other hand, benefits the self because it is given away as charity (l. 5). Love is not selfish, and the bonds of love allow humans to form relationships with one another, and these social experiences in turn strengthen the self. The speaker continues: “lust / is our categorical must. / We have no choice but to breed.” On a literal level, humanity must propagate itself to continue civilization, and since lust leads to breeding, it is a “categorical must.” On a metaphorical level, “We” as artists must find lust as creative energy to inspire the work. Art movements require the same productive potential. Originality is a myth, and the artist must turn to traditional or, in the case of the New York School coterie, self-selected experimental artistic ancestors and contemporaries to find lust, or creative energy, for the work.

In the second section of the poem, “2. Olympia,” the speaker then translates lust as creative energy through the ekphrastic form. I turn now to an examination of Olympia to provide context for the poem’s engagement with the painting. The first critical reactions to Manet’s Olympia when it was presented in a Parisian salon in 1865 were almost entirely negative. Theodor Reff traces these reactions to Olympia in his book Manet: Olympia and quotes Mina Cartiss regarding audience shock upon viewing
Olympia: “but a family man, whether accompanied by his wife, his children, or his mistress, was inevitably embarrassed by Olympia’s bold acceptance of her own nudity, by the challenge on her impertinent little face” (17). Rather than show shame over her status as a prostitute, Olympia shows “bold acceptance of her own nudity,” and why shouldn’t she? As the poem’s speaker states, “lust / is our categorical must” (l. 10-11).

According to Theodor Reff, critics failed to recognize that the depiction of the prostitute Olympia is an homage to the pagan goddess Venus, and that she is a direct call to The Romans of the Decadence, a painting by Manet’s teacher Cantone. Even Manet’s original Olympia was not original; rather, the painting places itself within tradition while also deviating from it. T.J. Clark’s chapter “Olympia’s Choice” in The Painting of Modern Life explains why the theme of Manet’s Olympia made it so provocative. In the mid-nineteenth century, Parisian prostitutes who were “formerly confined to the edges of society, had more and more usurped the centre of things [...] as the difference between the middle and the margin of the social order became blurred” (79). The nineteenth century bourgeoisie experienced social anxiety regarding the disruption of social boundaries, and the transaction with a prostitute for her body constitutes a crossing of social classes associated with the rise of capitalism. The prostitute, or courtisane, was “supposed not to belong at all to the world of class and money; she floated above or below it, playing with its categories, untouched by its everyday needs. It was not clear that Manet’s prostitute did any such thing” (87). The bourgeois purchase of a courtisane’s services was predicated on the illusion that the prostitute desired her client as a result of his seduction. As Clark explains:
the Bourgeoisie believed in Desire[...] In the 1860s there began to be visible as a consequence a new kind of demand from the prostitute’s client, one which eventually altered the whole trade—a demand for intimacy, for the illusion of seduction. (107)

This “illusion of seduction” conceded the transactional quality of the sexual encounter as well as the blatant mixing of social classes. A courtisane was obviously not a member of the bourgeoisie, and a sexual encounter with a prostitute embodied the crossing of the boundaries of social class. Courtisanes were commonly depicted in painting in the 1860s, but “she usually did so in some kind of antique or allegorical disguise” (111). Additionally, nudes at this time did not directly express sexual desire, rather, that desire would be encoded mythologically. Olympia’s sexuality is contained in her own body rather than in the gaze of a male. Traditional art depicts the courtisane in terms of mythology to distance the artwork from the reality of commodified sexuality and the crossing of social boundaries between client and prostitute. The courtisane was depicted as coy and virginal, and all sexual desire was coded in the male gaze. The illusion of seduction between prostitute and client as depicted in art at this time denominated male lust as the primary force behind the impending sexual encounter. However the courtisane’s sexual labor power drove the interaction, and a prostitute’s sexual knowledge would not require the guidance of male seduction. Furthermore, the courtisane’s own lust would be irrelevant to the transaction, for she is only trading her sexuality for payment. The client could only delude himself into believing that his lust not only caused the sexual encounter but also caused the prostitute desire of her own.
The speaker of “The Breeders’ Cup” confronts the significance of *Olympia*’s gaze in lines 13-14, “Olympia lies on her couch/with an insolent stare.” *Olympia*’s “insolent stare” belongs to her and takes away the illusion of seduction usually depicted in other paintings of prostitutes. Clark describes the stare as, “candid but guarded, poised between address and resistance […] it is her look, her action upon us, her composition of herself” (113). *Olympia*’s stare takes away the male illusion that he is seducer and removes the *courtisane* from the normally depicted bourgeois illusion of prostitutes. The next line of the poem, “her hand hiding her crotch” (l. 15) also suggests how Manet’s *Olympia* breaks the usual rules of painterly representation of the nude. According to Clark:

The nude has to indicate somehow the false facts of sexual life, and pre-eminently that woman lacks a phallus […] The nude, [Lemonnier] says, hides nothing because there is nothing to hide […] the hand placed over the genitals in Titian’s *Venus* or Giorgione’s: the hand seemingly coinciding with the body, enacting the lack of the phallus and disguising it. (135) *Olympia* correlates to Titian’s *Venus* in several ways, but the placement of the hand in the former does not indicate a lack as the placement does in the latter. In the case of *Olympia*, the “genitals are in the hand, toadlike; and the hand is tensed, hard-edged, and definite; not an absence, not a thing which yields or includes and need not be noticed” (135). *Olympia*’s “hand hiding her crotch” simultaneously draws attention to and hides her genitals, but this attention does not show “an absence.” Rather, since “the hand is tensed,” the prostitute’s genitals are definitively clutched under the hand that hides them. Therefore her hand placement does not constitute a lack, as was the convention in other nude paintings at this time. The final line of this stanza also calls attention to a significant
detail in Manet’s painting. Olympia has “a flower in her hair” (l. 16). The prostitute’s facial expression is made “insolent” partially by the masculinity in the expression. The flower appears to rest on the side of her head, and Olympia’s long hair is disguised by the screen behind her. As Clark explains:

> the neutrality of that background [...] is one of the things that make the address and conciseness of the face the sharper. But the blankness is illusory: to the right of Olympia’s head is a shock of red-brown hair, just sufficiently different from the screen’s dull color to be visible with effort [...] this body has abundance after all, it has a familiar sex [...] but in 1865 it was not seen. (137)

Olympia’s hidden hair softens her expression, and its hidden quality allows the painting to have two faces of Olympia. The speaker of Lehman’s poem draws attention specifically to this hidden hair underneath the flower, “a flower in her hair” (l. 16). Clark explains that this doubleness further complicates *Olympia*. While her facial expression appears masculine and impertinent, the hair feminizes the gaze. The nude fails to be clearly masculine or feminine, which “are equations the nude ought to prove or provide” (Clark 137).

The speaker of the poem continues the story of the reactions to *Olympia* in the second stanza of this section of the poem, “She splits the lot of us with a sneer” (l. 17). “Splitting” may be understood as a sexual action, and for the prostitute Olympia, her clients would pay to “split” her legs for penetrative access to her genitals. Yet Olympia “splits the lot of us,” instead of her clients “splitting” her. The next line states “We are either breeders or queer” (l. 18). Olympia’s splitting is a critique of the crassness of
normality. “Breeders” are traditionally understood in the heteronormative sense, and the prostitute’s splitting causes “us” anxiety, for we must be “breeders or queer.” *Olympia’s* “insolent stare” allows her to take the power of splitting that is normal reserved for her male clients and challenge traditional heteronormativity, class, and gender. *Olympia’s* facial expression alone caused outrage in the audience viewing the painting, and this outrage caused critics to “fight wars because of her.” *Olympia* “tempts like a sin” (l. 28), and the speaker of the poem uses her to embody the problem of lust as a deadly sin and a “categorical must” presented in the poem’s first section—“we crave contact with her skin / and the jewel in the mouth of her cave” (l. 26-27). The “jewel in the mouth of her cave” is the impertinent prostitute’s clitoris, covered by *Olympia’s* hand in the painting—her hand placement simultaneously hides and draws attention to her genitals, which “we crave.” This line further emphasizes Manet’s subversion through *Olympia’s* hand placement as in line 5.

Just after the speaker of the poem states, “we crave contact with her skin/and the jewel in the mouth of her cave,” the energy of *Olympia* is subdued in the next lines, “we fall / into a deep enchanted sleep” (l. 31-32). Instead of hearing “Olympia’s” call upon waking, the speaker of the poem states “now we’re alone, / a platoon of ex-pals in Manhattan” (l. 33-34). The *courtisane* Olympia’s call was only an illusion of seduction in the first place, and as her clients awake from a postcoital “enchanted sleep,” the reality of her illusion is made clear. The muting of *Olympia’s* subversive energy upon canonization mirrors the experience of the depressed husband who visits a prostitute. On a literal level, he spends money to release his lust energy through an encounter with a prostitute, but the experience is hollow. When he awakens from the post-coital sleep, his lust energy is
gone. Furthermore, the illusion of the prostitute’s lust for him is shattered. *Olympia* is post-coital, and the bouquet of flowers in her servant’s hand serve as a stand-in for her covered genitals as well as the payment for her client’s access to them. A prostitute’s client loses lust energy after sleeping with her, and some of the subversive energy of avant-garde art is similarly lost upon purchase and subsequent canonization. When the artist has creative energy, or productive lust, that energy can be channeled into a work of art. The avant-garde work has subversive energy as a result of the creative energy of the artist. Once the work is purchased and admitted to the canon, it may enter the lineage of art traditions that were subversive or profane in their own time.

Olympia tempts the husband in the poem and all of her clients, “but then sends us home to the wife, / commands us to resume the life / we had planned to give up in her honor” (l. 37-39). The husband spends money on a prostitute’s labor power, but then he must return to the life he wished to escape. The poem’s speaker describes the husband as “dutiful” and “a modest success / in his profession,” while “in mood depressive / (but nothing that a pill won’t cure).” The particulars of the husband’s personal situation, which the poem does not share, surely contribute to his “depressive” mood, but societal conditions offer no outlet through which the husband’s psychic intensities can be channeled. The husband’s daily environment only exacerbates his depression “(but nothing that a pill won’t cure)” (l. 43). His depressed mood in line 42 is nearly written off by the parenthetical afterthought about his antidepressants. Line 44 gives an unsettling resolution to the husband’s condition: “You ask if he is happy? ‘Sure.’” This husband answers “Sure” to a question about his happiness as if he himself is not convinced that his “modest success” and antidepressants have allowed him to feel happiness. His “mood
depressive” is described in the present tense, and his depression is “nothing that a pill
won’t cure,” rather than “nothing that a pill [has] cure[d].” Thus, the husband figure is
kept in a sedated state of mediocrity.

*Olympia* was subversive, even profane, in 1865, causing an upheaval in the
Parisian salon system. Manet’s painting was an avant-garde gesture in 1865, but much of
its subversive energy has been dulled as it acquired canonical status as a major painting
of the Impressionist period. Yet, at the end of the poem, the prostitute still “lies on her
couch / with an insolent stare” (l. 41-42). *Olympia* still has the capacity to shock, even
though the story of her original scandal has become classic. As an iconic work of
modernist painting, Manet’s *Olympia* has been parodied and re-imagined by many artists.

“The Breeders’ Cup” creates its own parody of *Olympia* through ekphrasis, and *Olympia*
becomes the poem’s patron saint of parody. By looking to *Olympia* for inspiration in
2013, the poem is requiring a rehabilitative cross-generational coterie between
modernism and postmodernism. Larry Rivers’s installation *I like Olympia in Blackface*
(1970) is a useful example of an *Olympia* parody, and as part of Lehman’s circle of
friends in New York, Rivers was undoubtedly a source of energy and inspiration for the
poet. The installation is also most consonant with the poem’s own strategy of doubling. *I
like Olympia in Blackface* (Appendix D) updates the politics of the first “Olympia” by
engaging the issue of race that dominated the sixties and motivated the Civil Rights
Movement. Here, Rivers gives the power of white Olympia’s “insolent stare” to a black
figure. Milly Heyd describes the race relations in River’s work in her “Hot versus Cool”
like Olympia in Blackface” is “not just an antithetical response to Manet’s masterpiece
[...] it is also a statement about the social stratification of Western society, in which traditionally the Black is the slave or servant” (169). In Manet’s *Olympia*, agency is given to the white prostitute through her gaze, but the black servant does not receive this same power. In “I like Olympia in Blackface,” the servant behind the white prostitute remains black, but the prostitute at the forefront is black while her servant and cat are white. Manet’s “Olympia” presented a feared crossing of social boundaries between the bourgeoisie and Parisian courtesans, but it also demonstrated the “social stratification of Western society” through the inclusion of Olympia’s black servant. Both white prostitute and black servant are subject to the same ruling class, but only the prostitute is given agency through the ownership of her gaze. Manet’s painting ignores the illusion of desire as outlined by T.J. Clark, and the feared crossing of social boundaries is made prominent. The Civil Rights Movement demanded a breakdown of social boundaries as blacks who were traditionally “slaves or servants” fought for equal rights with white citizens. *I like Olympia in Blackface* relies on *Olympia* as a patron saint of parody to produce a work that demonstrates a repressed history of crimes against blacks in Western society due to a legacy of colonialism, slavery, and institutionalized racism. In Rivers’s installation, the black Olympia is given the same powerful stare that only white Olympia possessed in Manet’s painting. The installation is not sensually gratifying or pleasurable. The figures in the poem are constructed with severe outlines. Black Olympia comes out at a viewer through the front of the installation, and her gaze paired with the ugliness of the work’s construction demands attention to black experiences that have not received adequate historical representation. Larry Rivers’s black Olympia earns equal representation alongside the white Olympia, and reflects not only a crossing of racial
social boundaries, but sexual ones as well. Susan Gubar argues that Rivers’s installation turns white Olympia’s prostitution into a “whorehouse or harem, complete with titillating interracial lesbian overtures” (*Racechanges* 217). The western social stratification which deprives the black community of their rights also problematically eroticizes black women. Sexual desire in Rivers’s installation is encoded more exclusively in black Olympia than it is in the white prostitute. As Marianna Torgovnick explains, “To change the color is to change them all: when in the foreground, Olympia becomes black, her maid and cat become, as if by magic, bleached white. Blackness equals sex for sale, equals eroticism—and more directly than white can” (*Gone Primitive* 102). Black labor power has traditionally been exploited by the interests of whites, and the black servant in Manet’s painting represents this reality. Rivers takes the painting’s reality a step further by demonstrating the problematic sexual politics in the white ownership of black bodies. The sexuality of black women has been exploited and eroticized in western culture, and this reality is provocatively demonstrated in Rivers’s avant-garde installation. By relying on the patron saint of *Olympia*, Rivers’s installation is able to parody art history in order to give *Olympia*’s powerful gaze and subversive, shocking energy to a black Olympia with the potential for a rehabilitation of historical representation as well as present issues of Civil Rights. The parody allows for a reimagining of history with intent for rehabilitating the future.

“The Breeders’ Cup” must be read as a poetic poioumenon in order to reveal its model of creative processes from the past and its call for a rehabilitative ethic in postmodernism. The poem “makes itself” in its poetic parody of Manet’s *Olympia* through ekphrasis that in turn designates *Olympia* as a patron saint of parody. The
speaker self-consciously reveals the myth of originality repressed by modernism and postmodernism’s embrace of artistic repetition. The poem exemplifies the notion of the copy in art in order to create a cross-generational coterie that is made possible by postmodern repetition. The first generation New York School’s avant-garde work self-consciously breaks from traditional poetic lineage. In this way, Frank O’Hara’s poetry follows the avant-garde tradition of subversion while also suggesting an alternative to patterns of institutionalizing the avant-garde. This suggested alternative is possible for O’Hara because of the New York School’s coterie. Coterie provided creative energy for O’Hara, and his use of naming in his poetry demonstrates how social relationships translated to his art. O’Hara breaks from Pound and Eliot and also positions Jackson Pollock, the Abstract Expressionist, as his predecessor in “Digression on Number 1, 1948.” O’Hara can align himself with Pollock through the ekphrastic form. David Lehman’s poetic predecessor is Frank O’Hara, and this lineage is shown through Lehman’s position in the New York School and through his selection of the ekphrastic form for “The Breeders’ Cup.” Lehman’s coterie of influence in “The Breeders’ Cup” differs from O’Hara’s through the inclusion of Manet’s Olympia, a painting separated 150 years from Lehman’s work. The choice of iconic ekphrastic object allows the poem to demonstrate the postmodern disillusionment with originality and to position an ethic of rehabilitative parody. This model is effectively confirmed by a reading of gender, class and racial politics in Larry Rivers’s I Like Olympia in Blackface. Rivers’s parody of art history gives Olympia’s powerful, subversive gaze to black Olympia with a potential for rehabilitation of historical representations as well as present issues of Civil Rights in the United States. The installation’s reimagining of art history reveals the rehabilitative ethic
modeled in Lehman’s “The Breeders’ Cup.” The influences for and similarities between *Olympia* and *I Like Olympia in Blackface* self-consciously show the pattern of inspiration and repetition in art. The parody of *Olympia* created in the poem is connected to the depressed husband figure, who purchases commodified, hollow sex in an attempt to break from his depression and mediocrity. The avant-garde artist, filled with productive lust as creative energy, attempted to break from accepted patterns by channeling that productive lust into subversive artwork. Once that artwork was purchased and canonized, the avant-garde artist’s pattern of breaking tradition is revealed in art history. The speaker of “The Breeders’ Cup” looks on this pattern in avant-garde art as a detached postmodernist that can see the patterns in art’s history. Rather than attest to originality, “The Breeders’ Cup” seeks inspiration in the form of a collaborative, productive lust for existing art from modernism and beyond. Lehman takes the cue from O’Hara to establish his own coterie and artistic lineage, and as a postmodernist, Lehman realizes that his lineage spans all of history. The ekphrastic form allows him the productive potential to recombine fragments into postmodern repetition that revitalizes the past’s fragments and establishes a timeless coterie between art traditions and mediums.
APPENDIX

A.

“The Breeders’ Cup”

1. To the Fates

They cannot keep the peace
or their hands off each other,
breed not, yet preach
the old discredited creed

Love is charity conceived
as a coin dropped
in a beggar’s cup.
Reason not the need.

Gluttony is no nicer than greed
or wrath, but lust
is our categorical must.
We have no choice but to breed.

2. Olympia

Olympia lies on her couch
with an insolent stare,
her hand hiding her crotch,
a flower in her hair.

She splits the lot of us with a sneer
We are either breeders or queer.
We will fight wars because of her.
She will root us on. We will win.

The face in the mirror is not brave,
but we crave contact with her skin
and the jewel in the mouth of her cave.
She tempts like a sin

and we fall
into a deep enchanted sleep,
wake up ready to make the leap,
ready to heed her call,

only now we’re alone,
a platoon of ex-pals in Manhattan
on streets less friendly than wilderness.
She tempts like a sin
but then sends us home to the wife
commands us to resume the life
we had planned to give up in her honor
the life of a dutiful husband, a modest success

in his profession, impressive
in credentials, in mood depressive
(but nothing that a pill won’t cure).
You ask if he is happy? “Sure.”

And Olympia lies on her couch
with an insolent stare
her hand hiding her crotch,
a flower in her hair.

B. Jackson Pollock, “Number 1,” 1948
C. Edouard Manet *Olympia* (1863)

D. Larry Rivers *I like Olympia in Blackface* (1970)
WORKS CITED


