

# Mess and Message: Ted Berrigan's Poetics of Appropriation

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*"Because he included, he was a poet."*  
–David Shapiro, "On a Poet" (226)

*"Berrigan's work...can most usefully be read not as a document of a life in writing but, inversely, as an appropriation of a life by writing."*  
–Charles Bernstein, "Writing Against the Body" (154)

"Mess and Message," the final three words of a poem in Ted Berrigan's 1969 book, *Many Happy Returns*, describe perfectly and succinctly what makes his poetry compelling. The message of his poetry is the mess that is life. Appropriation figures in large and fascinating ways in this message. The very words "mess and message" are copied, as is the entire poem in which they appear, "Frank O'Hara's Question from 'Writers and Issues' by John Ashbery" (*Many Happy Returns* 43; *Collected Poems* 159-60). Berrigan produced surprisingly numerous kinds of meaning by pilfering all sorts of pre-existing sentences, fragments, and whole passages of writing (literary and prosaic), not to mention visual imagery. Focusing on Berrigan's "Frank O'Hara's Question," I offer here an account of the complexity of his poetics of appropriation, and a case for how the significance of this poetics resides equally, and together, on the page and in the world.

## 1.

This dual significance is evident on multiple levels in "Frank O'Hara's Question." Berrigan took the words of this poem from a short prose piece by John Ashbery that originally appeared in the "Writers & Issues" section of the September 25, 1966 issue of *Book Week* (Kermani 83). Berrigan copied the lines exactly as they had appeared in *Book Week*.<sup>1</sup> It is well known that Ashbery and O'Hara were two of Berrigan's great literary heroes. Earlier in the 1960s, he already jotted down in his journal that Ashbery, O'Hara and Kenneth Koch "are the most original, most exciting, most talented men writing," and he laid out a plan of action to which he would remain true: "From them I will take much" (Journals July 22, 1962). On occasion he made reference to this practice in his poetry, as in these lines (which parallel his journal entries in the recording of current literary interests) from "Personal Poem #7": "...read Paterson, parts/ 1 & 2,

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<sup>1</sup> Although much of Ashbery's essay was reprinted on the jacket and wrapper of the 1967 edition of Frank O'Hara's book of poems, *Meditations in an Emergency* (Kermani 83), Berrigan must have copied the lines directly from *Book Week* because Berrigan's line breaks replicate those in the *Book Week* version of the essay.

poems by Wallace Stevens & How Much Longer/ Shall I Inhabit The Divine Sepulchre/ (John Ashbery). Made lists of lines to/ steal, words to look up (didn't)...." (*Many Happy Returns* 7; *Collected Poems* 117). On one level, Berrigan's copy serves to pay homage to Ashbery, O'Hara, and others as models. Through the example of literal copying, in this poem as well as many others, Berrigan also devised, more broadly, a unique observation about the inevitability of literary influence: paradoxically, the closer the borrowing is to its source, the more honestly it acknowledges this source.

Berrigan later provided an interesting account of his working process:

[This poem] is entirely by John [Ashbery], i.e. some quotes from Frank [O'Hara] surrounded by prose by John, which I 'found' à la Andy Warhol...(that is, I simply put a frame around the particular section which then became my whole poem. I neither changed nor shifted a word). (Kermani 83)

In other words, the poem is a "readymade": a work of art produced through taking an existing thing and putting it into a new context. And because Ashbery quoted O'Hara in the passage in question, Berrigan could appropriate the writing of both poets all at once, in an act of spatial concision and frugality. However, although Berrigan claimed he "neither changed nor shifted a word," he actually did change one word, albeit unintentionally. The poet Alice Notley, Berrigan's second wife, has recently pointed out that the words in the original were not "mess and message," but rather "mess and measure." (Berrigan, *Collected Poems* 679). Instead of the desired word-for-word copy, Berrigan had inadvertently miscopied Ashbery's quotation of Frank O'Hara's poem! Yet this error of transcription is consistent with Berrigan's more conscious and deliberate ideas about transforming existing texts. A good example is this recollection by the poet David Shapiro: "I remember remarks on poetry, as when he commented to someone that he would revise a line of mine about being on a beach to being on a beach ball" (225). (As if to pay homage to Berrigan's poetics of appropriation, Shapiro's use of the introductory words "I remember" allude to the *I Remember* books of the 1970s by Berrigan's close friend and associate, Joe Brainard.)<sup>2</sup>

Notley reports that Berrigan actually had corrected the mistake in "Frank O'Hara's Question" by hand in his own copy of *Many Happy Returns*, but that he retained the error when the poem was later reprinted in two of his other books, *In the Early Morning Rain* (1970) and *So Going Around Cities* (1980). Notley also remarks that Berrigan "was interested in the fact that when he 'appropriated' a text he unconsciously changed it. He considered this tendency to be part of his creative process" (*Collected Poems* 679). The error is a slip typical of the human mind. Such slips are instances of the messiness of life—our inability to be fully in control—that pains most of us but that Berrigan embraced and even celebrated. His preference for the error over the perfect copy is an important facet of his poetics of appropriation, setting it apart from the mechanical reproduction that we expect from this type of creative process. This is a poetics of appropriation that contains an unexpected surprise for both the writer and the reader.

<sup>2</sup> On the emulation by other poets—Berrigan included—of Brainard's *I Remember* volumes, see Ron Padgett's afterword to the 2001 edition of *I Remember*.

The example at hand, though, is particularly fascinating. O'Hara's words, "mess and measure," suggest a contradiction: chaos, confusion, and sloppiness, as opposed to orderliness, meter and rhythm, rules and reason. To guard from mess and measure suggests an impossible situation: A sentence or a space is either messy or it is ordered; lacking either or both, it is nothing. Berrigan's inadvertent revision of O'Hara would seem to eliminate the contradiction. "Mess and message" can operate together rationally more comfortably than can "mess and measure." But Berrigan here creates a different kind of puzzle, within the entire line of the poem, "I am guarding it from mess and message." Can we take this line to mean that Berrigan guards his own writing from mess or message? A look at the historical circumstances behind Berrigan's words suggests the answer is no, and that his sense of his own work as "mess and message" proclaims itself as if by necessity instead of by intention.

The key event behind the composition of Berrigan's poem was the July 1966 death of Frank O'Hara. O'Hara's death had been the immediate occasion for Ashbery's essay in *Book Week*. Berrigan himself was, it would seem, so overwhelmed by this untimely death—O'Hara was 40—that his attempt to record it in his journal failed, resulting in the following incomplete sentence: "Frank O'Hara's tragic death is an incalculable loss to." Berrigan's inability to find words for his loss infuses his appropriation of Ashbery's commentary on O'Hara with a new and poignant significance. He borrows Ashbery's words, that is, because the emotional circumstances render him unable to formulate his own. Indeed, Berrigan also used appropriation a few years later, in 1969, to make note of the death of another literary hero, Jack Kerouac.<sup>3</sup>

Berrigan's meaningful mistake in "Frank O'Hara's Question," in addition, reflects a feature of the very prose he copies. Ashbery himself had already changed the meaning of O'Hara's words by recontextualizing them. Ashbery excerpted the line "I am guarding it from mess and measure" from the end of a stanza in O'Hara's long poem, "Biotherm," in order to make a general statement about O'Hara's poetry, describing it as "a mediating line which might stand to characterize all of Mr. O'Hara's art" (6). Within "Biotherm," the line is not isolated, but belongs to a stanza, and seems to concern not so much poetry as it does an object of the speaker's unrequited love—that object being the poet Bill Berkson, to whom the poem is dedicated, if we can understand O'Hara to be the speaker (see Gooch 382-85). What's more, O'Hara himself appropriated much of the language within "Biotherm" (Gooch 383). The fact that context changes meaning is a lesson Berrigan had learned from Ashbery and perhaps also from O'Hara. Berrigan's use of appropriation to pay homage to both poets, then, is most fitting.

## 2.

Visual art as much as poetry offered Berrigan a model for his appropriations. While purists argue that poetry and visual art are discrete entities, for Berrigan they often spill over into each other—at times in his poetic allusions, and at times physically.

<sup>3</sup> The poem about Kerouac's death is "Telegram"; see *Collected Poems*, 237 and 684. Later still, Berrigan did write a poem, "Frank O'Hara," in memory of O'Hara—included in his 1975 book, *Red Wagon*—and here, too, he borrowed from one poet's (Jean Cocteau's) poem about the death of another poet (Guillaume Apollinaire). On this borrowing, see *Collected Poems*, 692.

These spillages are part of his “mess and message.” We already saw that Berrigan compared his appropriation of Ashbery to Warhol’s practice of making art by copying images that already exist. Berrigan routinely pasted into his journals pictures he had cut out from magazines and newspapers; several of these are of works by Warhol, such as a photograph showing the artist surrounded by stacks of his 1964 Brillo Boxes. This practice was one of many ways he generated meaning by combining pictures and words. Unlike his friend Joe Brainard, Berrigan did not, however, view himself as both a visual artist and a writer—only as a writer. But he liked to “contaminate” words with images, and vice-versa. This contamination is an interesting dimension of his poetics of appropriation. In his diaries, this poetics takes the form of collage, as it often does in his poetry.<sup>4</sup> Like appropriation itself, word-image and poet-painter connections fit into a twentieth-century lineage with which Berrigan identified.

Even Berrigan’s treatment of actual art objects could be marked (literally and figuratively) by his special brand of mess and message. Warhol had given him (as he had a handful of other poets) one of the above-mentioned Brillo Box sculptures, and, as Ron Padgett recalls, “Ted’s was festooned with coffee rings, cigarette burns, scratches, and scuff marks. As we used to say in those days, he ‘personalized’ it” (*Ted* 84). Such “personalization” was a part of Berrigan’s poetics of appropriation. A similar personalization exists in his transformation of the words “mess and measure” into “mess and message.” For Berrigan, poetry and visual art alike were part of the alterable lived world, not precious and valuable objects that should remain in a pristine, untouched state.

In explaining why he copied Ashbery’s words as a method of writing a poem, Berrigan compared visual to literary appropriators, noting that, “I was never trying to hide what I was doing, but thought I was extending (at least sideways) ideas used by Duchamp, Warhol, Johns” (Kermani 83). The idea of copying those who themselves copied had a great appeal to Berrigan (Wolf 94). Already in 1962, he made a list in his journal of “Poems Written in Imitation of Ashberry [sic] so far.” The list is written in two columns, with “Mine” on the left and “His” on the right: Berrigan’s “He” is an imitation of Ashbery’s “He”; “The Anniversary,” an imitation of “Some Trees”; and “In Memorium: Charles,” an imitation of “The Tennis Court Oath,” to cite three examples (Journals December 18, 1962).

Berrigan understood that from time immemorial poets had imitated, if not downright copied, earlier poets in order to establish their literary genealogy. A helpful genealogy of appropriative writing—with the earliest example dating to the late nineteenth century, and including Ted Berrigan—was recently drawn up by the poet and art critic Raphael Rubenstein, who aptly puts himself into the genealogy, just as Berrigan would have done. Berrigan participated in, while at the same time making a joke of, the self-creation of a lineage that is a requirement of inclusion within history—and is necessary to but will not guarantee fame, as Libbie Rifkin argues. His self-consciousness about both his own lineage, and the function of lineage in general, may well stem from his sense of being a literary “outsider.” An outsider, not in the sense that the avant-garde artist is an outsider to mainstream society, but an outsider in terms of social and academic pedigree. Ron Padgett reminisced:

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<sup>4</sup> For an interesting description of Berrigan’s use of collage techniques to write his poems at this time, see Alice Notley’s note on *The Sonnets* in *Collected Poems*, 668.

How many times I heard Ted describe himself as a bumpkin, socially inept, unsophisticated. Many of the contemporary poets he admired had gone to Harvard or Columbia, or at least had an Ivy League sort of aura. Ted admired urbanity.... Ted was, at first, cowed to find himself at a party in 1963, surrounded by the likes of Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, Joe LeSueur, John Button, Jane Freilicher, and Kenward Elmslie, whose dazzling witty conversation made him feel cloddish. A combat boot among ballet slippers. (*Ted* 73-4)

While Berrigan felt his working-class background set him apart from his idols, appropriation afforded him a method of inserting himself into their lineage.<sup>5</sup> In other words, appropriation was a means for creating a level playing field on which he could comfortably move.

Berrigan used visual imagery, as well as words, to make fun of his sense of himself as "cloddish," and to literally put himself into a specific modernist lineage. In a 1978 interview, he explained the appeal of working with pictures in this way:

I love the idea of making art by changing *one* thing in a picture, in someone else's work too, by simply changing one thing and making it be your work. And somehow it's still their work too but now it's all your work. ("Interview with Charles Ingham" 121)

A notable example is the crooked and sloppy way either he and/or Joe Brainard pasted a photo-booth picture of Berrigan on top of, and covering over, a picture of the founder of visual appropriation, Marcel Duchamp, in a 1965 remake of Duchamp's 1923 *Wanted: \$2,000 Reward* included in the literary magazine *Kulchur* (34).<sup>6</sup> Here he appropriates the persona of Duchamp the appropriator, but in a decidedly clownish way. He holds a finger over each ear, as if to "hear no evil"—the "evil" being, we can reasonably guess, the act of stealing that appropriation entails as well as the crime for which Duchamp, and later Berrigan, presumably is wanted. (A second picture of Duchamp in the original of 1923 is covered over, more neatly, by a photograph of Brainard laughing, corresponding in tone to both Berrigan's crookedly positioned image and the Duchamp "original" that is underneath it.)

The inclusion of Berrigan's mug in the "wanted" poster contains artistic and literary as well as real-life associations: he did steal—books, mainly—as he mentioned on occasion in his journals. For example, in late July or early August 1963, he wrote, "[w]ent to steal books today. Got \$10.00 worth." Padgett has described Berrigan's practice of "stealing, reading, and reselling the books he could not buy—an incredible number of those" ("On *The Sonnets*" 9). Elsewhere, Padgett has elaborated on what was behind this practice:

<sup>5</sup> The relevance of Berrigan's working-class background for his links to Jack Kerouac is discussed in Januzzi, who also notes Berrigan's fondness of appropriation "as a method of self-evaluation, or of self-location—in the biographical as well as the aesthetic sense of the word."

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the authorship of this remake of Duchamp as well as a more detailed analysis of it from a different perspective, see Wolf, 102-08. Berrigan's journal entries for 1965 include interesting references to and collage materials about Duchamp. Another use of visual imagery by Berrigan to playfully appropriate an identity is evident in his pose in Alex's Katz's 1967 portrait of Berrigan; see Wolf, 101-2.

Ted and I used to steal books, but we never felt guilty about it. I think we both assumed we had a right to those books, the way a starving man feels about stealing food. The first few years in New York, neither of us had money. (*Ted* 35)

This type of appropriation—the actual taking of objects not belonging to you—is another kind of “mess and message” of Berrigan’s poetics of appropriation (and the term “poetics” should be applied to his life in the world as well as on the page). The “mess,” of course, is in the potential legal consequences of his actions. In a journal entry of October 15, 1963, he recorded, “I get arrested for stealing books at Union Theological Seminary” (note the ethical irony of the site of the crime) and on October 19, that he received “ten days suspended sentence for stealing books.” The “message” is that literature came before the law, as Padgett’s recollection suggests.

In a visual metaphor about appropriation much like the remake of Duchamp’s *Wanted*, Berrigan explored the nature of his literary relationship to John Ashbery, again through the use of gesture. In this case, the work is a photographic portrait of 1971 by poet Gerard Malanga, in which Berrigan and Ashbery stand next to each other. Berrigan is closer to the camera, though, and he puts a hand in front of Ashbery’s face, as if to cover it in order to assert himself, just as he had done in the remake of the Duchamp. Once again the spirit is playful: Berrigan is working hard to keep a straight face, while Ashbery wears a smile of amusement. Both of them know that Berrigan’s gesture parallels his poetic appropriations of Ashbery’s work. Berrigan’s willful covering up of a good portion of the elder poet’s face also makes a “mess” of the convention of the double portrait—which is an added “message” of his pose.

### 3.

In addition to exploring multiple meanings of appropriation in visual imagery and in poetry, Berrigan also explored it in other kinds of writing, such as the interview, a well known example being his “Interview with John Cage,” first published in the collaborative volume, *Bean Spasms* (1967). Berrigan considered the interview to be a poetic form, like the sonnet (“Interview with Barry Alpert” 31; “Interview with CITY” 99). In the Cage “interview,” he later explained, “[t]he short sections were like short poems and the long sections were like long poems” (“Interview with Barry Alpert” 32). In this instance, he took bits and pieces of published interviews—with Andy Warhol and Bob Dylan, among others—and wove them together, making slight changes along the way, either deliberately or, as in “mess and message,” inadvertently.<sup>7</sup> In the following instance, Berrigan puts the words of Andy Warhol into the mouth of John Cage:

I think everybody should be a machine. I think everybody should be alike.

<sup>7</sup> Berrigan recalled, “A lot of the material I used was material that had appeared in famous interviews very recently before...with Bob Dylan and Andy Warhol. I changed very little of it. But I sort of jockeyed the position. I also wrote most of the things that the interviewer said” (“Interview with CITY,” 101). It is hardly an accident that Berrigan appropriated from interviews with Dylan and Warhol, since like Berrigan, each of them treated the interview as a work of art in and of itself (see Reva Wolf, “Introduction: Through the Looking-Glass,” in Warhol, *I’ll Be Your Mirror*, xi-xxxi and 403-09) and each in his own way was a master of appropriation.

And here is the sentence as it appeared in the published interview with Warhol:

I think everybody should be a machine. I think everybody should like everybody. (Warhol 62, 16)<sup>8</sup>

Berrigan's transformation of Warhol's "everybody should like everybody" into "everybody should be alike" produces an intriguing paradox. Copying words would seem to correspond to being alike, or with sameness. Yet Berrigan's various kinds of copying, with their deliberate or accidental mis-copying and with their recontextualizations, show us that this sameness never occurs. This paradox fascinated Berrigan from early on; in one of many notes on "style" in his journals, dated December 27, 1962, he quoted at length from Gertrude Stein's *Composition as Explanation*, including this passage on the apparent contradiction of likeness: "Romanticism is then when everything being alike everything is naturally simply different, and Romanticism." Berrigan illustrates by example that the truth of who anybody is forces itself out no matter what. We are left with "mess and message" instead of with a neat machine-made copy.

This mess and message of Berrigan's poetics of appropriation have made it difficult for some critics to know what to do with his writing. In her 1973 overview of contemporary poetry, critic Marjorie Perloff—a great supporter of the work of Ashbery and of O'Hara—complains that Berrigan's poetry is "self-indulgent" and that it has the "superficial O'Hara trappings," but that unlike O'Hara's poetry, "nothing adds up" (103-4). Two decades later, another critic, Geoff Ward, repeated Perloff's judgment, asserting that Berrigan's writing is too dominated by O'Hara to contain a unique voice. One critic even put Berrigan and Padgett's volume, *Bean Spasms*, on a list of publications that librarians need not bother to acquire (Geffert 56). Slowly, though, the critical scales are beginning to tip in the other direction, and the recent publication of the *Collected Poems* has given some critics a better sense of the breadth and complexity of Berrigan's work.<sup>9</sup>

If in Berrigan's poetry "nothing adds up," as Perloff would have it, then perhaps we ought to say that in life itself, nothing adds up. Perhaps Berrigan's messy contamination of life with art, and of art with life, has made Perloff and other critics uncomfortable. Or perhaps the honesty of this contamination is the source of their unease. The people who knew Berrigan well all have described the full-blown nature of the contamination. Ron Padgett has noted that for Berrigan, writing was "something you did when you read the sports page or ate a donut. It was something you did when you sat at your desk and thought about the gods. It was something you did with scissors and Elmer's glue" (*Ted*, 44). The poet Ed Sanders put it this way: "Berrigan was one of those wall-to-wall poets. He was the guy who made up the dictum that there are no weekends for poets" (271). It is the consistencies between, and fluidity of, art and life that characterize Berrigan's poetics of appropriation and that give it the power of truth.

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<sup>8</sup> On Berrigan's interview and Warhol, see Wolf, 100-101.

<sup>9</sup> Russell recognized that Berrigan's voice is distinct from rather than being an imitation of O'Hara's (148), and Kane has (correctly) questioned Ward's assessment of Berrigan's writing (115). Doreski and Palattella have written largely favorable reviews of the *Collected Poems*.

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