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Frank O'Hara's New York:

The Avant-Garde, Urban Sites, and Whitman

Bachelor's project in English

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The reception of Frank O'Hara has shifted dramatically over the years. Initially mainly recognized as an informal, pococurante poet, his work was mostly unrecognized by the academy, becoming a name-stay only within New York during his lifetime. As such the scholarly work on O'Hara is characterized more by its quality than its quantity. Beginning with Marjorie Perloff in 1971, 11 years after O'Hara's death.¹ This authoritative book traced his influence from the visual arts with some biographical notes and began the assertion of O'Hara as a part of the English literary canon.² The emergence of new O'Hara criticism from the nineties and forward is in due in no small part due to the evolution of poststructuralist and postmodern perspectives such as queer-theory, which O'Hara's poems at times lends themselves better towards than traditional prosody. Also, his relationship with contemporary avant-garde movements, his love of film, music and foreign poetry all contribute to a collected work that signal to the reader someone who was in many ways way ahead of his times, with his non-conformist approach to poetry.

One of the things you will notice when reading O'Hara is his use of free verse. This way of structuring a poem, particularly combined with references to his real friends (most of which were not famous) and camp movie icons has led many to believe that he is only a casual poet, and someone who treated poetry dismissively. As aforementioned this impression has lessened over time, and although he does use free verse his poems often have natural rhythm or flow to them, even though it does not confide to academic standards. Take his widely anthologized poem "The Day Lady Died" for instance. It is worth quoting the poem in full here:

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

I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun
 and have a hamburger and a malted and buy
 an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets

¹ Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

² The initial reception of *The Collected Poems Of Frank O'Hara*, is discussed at length in the first chapter of the book, however, due to the age of the book it does not interact with newer, post-1977 criticism (although a 1997 2nd edition did add a new introduction .)

in Ghana are doing these days

I go on to the bank
and Miss Stillwagon (first name Linda I once heard)
doesn't even look up my balance for once in her life
and in the GOLDEN GRIFFIN I get a little Verlaine
for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do
think of Hesiod, trans. Richmond Lattimore or
Brendan Behan's new play or Le Balcon or Les Nègres
of Genet, but I don't, I stick with Verlaine
after practically going to sleep with quandariness

and for Mike I just stroll into the PARK LANE
Liquor Store and ask for a bottle of Strega and
then I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue
and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and
casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
while she whispered a song along the keyboard
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing³

"The Day Lady Died" is one of O'Hara's many "I do this, I do that" poems, that is poems where he narrates the urban space of New York City, often incorporating references to real places, people and are often definitely autobiographical or speculated to be as such.⁴ Since his poems are in free verse, there is no fixed meter or rhyme here; however, as in many of his poems, there is a certain rhythm, flow, and sense of urgency. This poetic immediacy comes mainly from his use of the word "and" which increases as the poem goes on. Read out loud it creates a shortness of breath which mimics the experiences of the speaker as he learns about the death of Billie Holiday. He reflects on this way of writing in his (mock)manifesto "Personism: A Manifesto," where he writes: "I don't even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve. If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don't turn around and shout, "Give it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep."⁵

³ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1995), 325.

⁴ Joe Lesueur, *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O'Hara* (New York: Fsg Adult, 2004), 191–96.

⁵ O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, 498–99.

Returning briefly to the subject of O'Hara and his contemporaries, this way of writing is a part of a larger whole of what separates him from the more formal school of poets that includes the likes of Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath. Although the manifesto is at least tongue-in-cheek (and at most a parody) it does reveal some of O'Hara's poetic ideas. Most of his poems were written rapidly, often with little or no revision, which is how you get poems that have that vibrating feeling of immediacy such as in "The Day Lady Died"⁶. He goes on to write in the manifesto:

Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody knows about, interests me a great deal, being so totally opposed to this kind of abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry. Personism is to Wallace Stevens what la poésie pure was to Béranger. Personism has nothing to do with philosophy, it's all art. It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it! But to give you a vague idea, one of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet's feelings towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person.⁷

O'Hara's blend of sincerity and irony is apparent throughout his poetry and also this manifesto. He states that it is not about intimacy at all, that it is just about art, which is only partly true. When reading O'Hara, the poems are often personal in tone and subject matter, but they never cross the line to becoming confessional. Moreover, O'Hara both individually and as a part of The New York School stood in opposition to the confessional poets which as well as the one mentioned earlier also would come to include the likes of Anne Sexton and John Berryman. His poems are often very personal, but seldom self-indulgent or tries to situate internal agony with greater tragedies, such as Sylvia Plath does in "Daddy".⁸

In addition to his influence from the visual arts, film, and music, the poet that O'Hara might draw the most from is Walt Whitman, as he says: "And after all, only Whitman and Crane and Williams, of the American poets, are better than the movies."⁹ Whitman's catalog

⁶ "I do this, I do that" poems are a large part of O'Hara's catalog, most of which appear in the *Lunch Poems*. These types of poems are some of O'Hara's most beautiful, and more examples include: "Poem (Lana Turner has collapsed!)", "A Step Away From Them," "Steps" and "Music."

⁷ O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, 498–99.

⁸ Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 49.

⁹ O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, 498.

is something you will also notice in O'Hara's poetry, but whereas Whitman sought to encompass the nation or even the entire universe, O'Hara is more concerned with what is essential and near him in his life. An O'Hara poem will often include a catalog of people such as in "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul" which he hastily wrote before meeting a friend for lunch: "and Allen is back talking about god a lot/ and Peter is back not talking very much/ and Joe has a cold and is not coming to Kenneth' s/although he is coming to lunch with Norman". The poem is classic Whitmanian in the heavy use of and clauses, its free verse and personal tone. Hazel Smith in her book *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara* writes that this is an example of how the chattiness of O'Hara's poems also come to possess their own little world.¹⁰ This talk as gossip is often masqued as inconsequential, but it is at the same time a way of passing judgment. Smith sees this in the context of an overarching "hyperscape", that is a postmodern site characterized by difference, breaking down unified concepts of text, city, subject, and art, and remolding them into new textual, subjective and political spaces. O'Hara also creates a catalog of French cultural institutions in the last "stanza" that chronicles some of his French influences, while also becoming a meditation on the passing of time and the extravagance of life, and although it starts optimistically it ends more mistrustful:

we are all happy and young and toothless
 it is the same as old age
 the only thing to do is simply continue
 is that simple
 yes, it is simple because it is the only thing to do
 can you do it
 yes, you can because it is the only thing to do
 blue light over the Bois de Boulogne it continues
 the Seine continues
 the Louvre stays open it continues it hardly closes at all
 the Bar Américain continues to be French
 de Gaulle continues to be Algerian as does Camus
 Shirley Goldfarb continues to be Shirley Goldfarb
 and Jane Hazan continues to be Jane Freilicher (I think!)
 and Irving Sandler continues to be the balayeur des artistes
 and so do I (sometimes I think I'm "in love" with painting)
 and surely the Piscine Deligny continues to have water in it
 and the Flore continues to have tables and newspapers
and people under them
 and surely we shall not continue to be unhappy

¹⁰ Hazel Smith, *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara: Difference, Homosexuality, Topography*, 1st ed. (Liverpool University Press, 2000), 149.

we shall be happy
 but we shall continue to be ourselves everything
continues to be possible
 René Char, Pierre Reverdy, Samuel Beckett it is possible isn't it
 I love Reverdy for saying yes, though I don't believe it¹¹

The catalog of real names can be confusing and challenging for a reader, who is Jane Hazan? What does it matter if she has retained her married name or not? These real references to places and people might be influenced by the Dada poems of Pierre Albert-Birot¹² Moreover, being specific about names and places gives the poem an aura of authenticity and immediacy, while also cataloging his influences Whitman-style. O'Hara blends all the references to create a body of work that rarely distinguishes between the notion of high and low culture. He gives as much love to Hollywood as he does to the experimental French poets, as he says himself both in "Personism a manifesto" and in "To the Film Industry in Crisis":

Not you, lean quarterlies and swarthy periodicals
 with your studious incursions toward the pomposity of ants,
 nor you, experimental theatre in which Emotive Fruition
 is wedding Poetic Insight perpetually, nor you,
 promenading Grand Opera, obvious as an ear (though you
 are close to my heart), but you, Motion Picture Industry,
 it's you I love!¹³

This blend of high and low culture goes for O'Hara beyond just a love for movies and campy movie stars; it is a statement about the range of the human experience that should not be limited to specific standards. Hazel Smith argues that O'Hara's poems also mimic that of Pop Art, but it also deviates with the addition of high-culture references.¹⁴¹⁵ The blend of high and low culture also speaks to O'Hara as a poet in that he is simultaneously an insider and an outsider. Often regarded as a part of the Beat generation (although as a poet he is a definite

¹¹ O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, 328.

¹² Perloff, *Frank O'Hara*, 128–29.

¹³ O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, 89.

¹⁴ Smith, *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara*, 182.

¹⁵ Smith, drawing on the theories of Andrew Ross, suggests that pop-camp offered a negotiated way by which this Pop ethos could be recognized by more skeptical intellectual. For a more in-depth discussion on this see chapter 6 in the book.

part of the New York School), O'Hara's poetry is vividly different from the rebellious and anti-institutional poetry of the likes of Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. A poem like "Howl" bears little resemblance to O'Hara's longer poems (of which there are few, none of which are of similar length) both structurally and thematically. Whereas the Beats rejected standard values, explored eastern religions, opposed materialism and explored sexual liberation by explicit details, O'Hara has hardly any of that at all.¹⁶ In *Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets*, Helen Vendler notes that: "The reason O'Hara can be truly aerial is that he genuinely has no metaphysical baggage. No religion, no politics, no ideology, no nothing."¹⁷ The statement is somewhat of a hyperbole, but in essence, O'Hara never has an agenda that he tries to impose onto his readers: "But how then can you really care if anybody gets it, or gets what it means, or if it improves them. Improves them for what? For death? Why hurry them along? Too many poets act like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat, and potatoes with drippings (tears). I don't give a damn whether they eat or not. Forced feeding leads to excessive thinness (effete)."¹⁸ This all accumulates in his poem "My Heart":

I'm not going to cry all the time
nor shall I laugh all the time,
I don't prefer one "strain" to another.
I'd have the immediacy of a bad movie,
not just a sleeper, but also the big,
overproduced first-run kind. I want to be
at least as alive as the vulgar. And if
some aficionado of my mess says "That's
not like Frank!", all to the good! I
don't wear brown and gray suits all the time,
do I? No. I wear workshirts to the opera,
often. I want my feet to be bare,
I want my face to be shaven, and my heart—
you can't plan on the heart, but
the better part of it, my poetry, is open.¹⁹

¹⁶ Although O'Hara frequently uses sexual imagery, they are never for shock value.

¹⁷ Helen Vendler, *Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980), 192.

¹⁸ O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, 498.

¹⁹ O'Hara, 194.

Critics have nonetheless noted social commentary in O'Hara's work, on topics such as consumerism, racism, machoism and free market capitalism.^{20 21 22} If one were to state a coherent ideology in O'Hara's work, it would be one of an America that allows for inclusion. Helen Vendler also makes a note of how in O'Hara's poems there is everywhere a breaking down of logical categories, which she sees as "a true attempt to synthesize all of American experience, taking an even wider field than Whitman." The influence from of and similarity with Whitman has already been discussed, but Vendler also comments on how neither Whitman nor Williams took as much pleasure in the city as O'Hara did.²³ Walking and thinking are closely related in the Western tradition, and the first book of poetry he published which received considerable attention *Meditation in an Emergency* signals his love for the city and also breaks down and becomes a meditation on the many facets of the urban spaces in 1950's New York.²⁴ A great example of this is found in the book's title poem (note the allusions to *Leaves of Grass* here):

However, I have never clogged myself with the praises of pastoral life, nor with nostalgia for an innocent past of perverted acts in pastures. No. One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes—I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally regret life. It is more important to affirm the least sincere; the clouds get enough attention as it is and even they continue to pass. Do they know what they're missing? Uh huh.²⁵

Most of his walk poems occur in the *Lunch Poems*, but he firmly establishes himself a city poet much earlier. With the correlation between walking and thinking, and the mentioned breaking down of logical categories, the urban sites that the speaker visits during the poems as

²⁰ Michael Clune, "'Everything We Want': Frank O'Hara and the Aesthetics of Free Choice," *PMLA* 120, no. 1 (2005): 181–96.

²¹ David L. Sweet, "Parodic Nostalgia for Aesthetic Machismo: Frank O'Hara and Jackson Pollock," *Journal of Modern Literature* 23, no. 3/4 (2000): 375–91.

²² Ira Sadoff, "Frank O'Hara's Intimate Fictions," *The American Poetry Review* 35, no. 6 (2006): 49–52.

²³ Vendler, *Part of Nature, Part of Us*, 189.

²⁴ Roger Gilbert, *Walks in the World - Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry* (Princeton University Press, 1991), 11.

²⁵ O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, 196.

such get broken down. O'Hara frequently juxtapositions sites in New York City with surreal imagery, blending the near and foreign, real and surreal in actual locations. One of his most complex poems "Rhapsody" is a complete example of this, with its blend of near and foreign location, travel to near and far sites all while never allowing the reader to rest:

515 Madison Avenue
 door to heaven? portal
 stopped realities and eternal licentiousness
 or at least the jungle of impossible eagerness
 your marble is bronze and your lianas elevator cables
 swinging from the myth of ascending
 I would join
 or declining the challenge of racial attractions
 they zing on (into the lynch, dear friends)
 while everywhere love is breathing draftily
 like a doorway linking 53rd with 54th
 the east-bound with the west-bound traffic by 8,000,000s
 o midtown tunnels and the tunnels, too, of Holland

where is the summit where all aims are clear
 the pin-point light upon a fear of lust
 as agony's needlework grows up around the unicorn
 and fences him for milk- and yoghurt-work
 when I see Gianni I know he's thinking of John Ericson
 playing the Rachmaninoff 2nd or Elizabeth Taylor
 taking sleeping-pills and Jane thinks of Manderley
 and Irkutsk while I cough lightly in the smog of desire
 and my eyes water achingly imitating the true blue

a sight of Manahatta in the towering needle
 multi-faceted insight of the fly in the stringless labyrinth
 Canada plans a higher place than the Empire State Building
 I am getting into a cab at 9th Street and 1st Avenue
 and the Negro driver tells me about a \$120 apartment
 "where you can't walk across the floor after 10 at night
 not even to pee, cause it keeps them awake downstairs"
 no, I don't like that "well, I didn't take it"
 perfect in the hot humid morning on my way to work
 a little supper-club conversation for the mill of the gods

you were there always and you know all about these things
 as indifferent as an encyclopedia with your calm brown eyes
 it isn't enough to smile when you run the gauntlet
 you've got to spit like Niagara Falls on everybody or
 Victoria Falls or at least the beautiful urban fountains of Madrid
 as the Niger joins the Gulf of Guinea near the Menemsha Bar
 that is what you learn in the early morning passing Madison Avenue
 where you've never spent any time and stores eat up light

I have always wanted to be near it
 though the day is long (and I don't mean Madison Avenue)
 lying in a hammock on St. Mark's Place sorting my poems
 in the rancid nourishment of this mountainous island
 they are coming and we holy ones must go
 is Tibet historically a part of China? as I historically
 belong to the enormous bliss of American death²⁶

The poem is broken down into a series of walks, moving from The DuMont Building, through Manhattan in a cab before taking us to the imagined foreign locations of Niger and Madrid. These sites are juxtapositioned and break into each other in a series of vivid, surreal images, starting with the question of a door to heaven exists on Madison Avenue and ending with the speaker positioning himself as part of the bliss of American death. Hazel Smith comments on how for O'Hara the city and nature blend into each other, and that "the shifts and juxtapositions produce a multivalent sense of place as local and global, familiar, yet exotic, real but surreal."²⁷ Moreover, this strays away from the similarities with Whitman, as O'Hara here is not looking to unite city and nature, but instead, he plays each off each other in a series of blending imagery and juxtapositions.

The sites in O'Hara's Manhattan, with their blend of cultures and background, also become what Michael Foucault calls heterotopias, that is sites that are somehow "other." Worlds that exist within other worlds, that simultaneously reflect and disrupt what is outside them.²⁸ An example of this in "Rhapsody" is the speaker's conversation with the cab driver. Difference in race, economic and cultural capital is exposed as the driver details an apartment where you cannot walk across the floor at night. However, in usual O'Hara fashion, there is no clear agenda here, the differences are just there with little social commentary. Instead, these counter-sides that one finds throughout *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* are sites that disrupts the visions of a city as lesser than nature. Poems such as "How to Get There" and

²⁶ O'Hara, 325.

²⁷Smith, *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara*, 64.

²⁸ Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27.

without any real resolution. That speaks to his poetry as a whole as well, continually pulling the reader in all sorts of different directions, but rarely arriving at a steadfast conclusion.

“Fantasy” also leads us towards witnessing what is happening as something surreal, and if there is something an O'Hara poem never stops doing it is surprising us.

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