

Dashing Designs:

L-S: are you attracted by Auden's sort of deliberately artificial side. This kind of conscious virtuosity?

O'H: Oh I'm attracted to it because it's something that one should know. But what I'm really attracted to, I guess, more, is a certain dashing, Byronic...you're sort of galloping into the midst of a subject and just learning about you, you know. You're not afraid to think about anything and you're not afraid of being stupid and you're not afraid of being sentimental. You just sort of gallop right in and deal with it.¹

O'Hara's personal style is difficult to separate from his poetic persona; his 'dashing Byronic'; who often seems to be himself: 'I am mainly preoccupied with the world as I experience it'.² Discussions about his poetry tend to be personalized, while biographical observations about O'Hara are frequently treated as keys to unlocking a deeper meaning. Gilbert Sorrentino describes *Lunch Poems* as: 'slightly down at heels and rumpled, but with the kind of style always a step above current 'style',³ and Patsy Southgate, one of O'Hara's friends, talks about 'Frank's bathing suit' through which she 'glimpsed that Frank had a big cock'. She 'loved the idea [as] it went with his flamboyance, his "thrust."⁴ The blurring of artist and art appears to take its cue from what Koch perceives as a fusion that takes place in the way O'Hara lived his life; he had a way 'of feeling and acting as though being an artist were the most natural thing in the world'.⁵ This apparent ease of living and creating emerges again and again in testimonies about him. In the eyes of his contemporaries he seemed to respond to life

¹ Frank O'Hara, 'Edward Lucie-Smith: An Interview with Frank O'Hara', in *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, ed. Donald Allen, (San Francisco, 1983), pp. 3-26, (p. 25), (hereafter cited as *SS+W*).

² 'Statement for *The New American Poetry*', in *SS+W*, p. 112.

³ Marjorie Perloff, *A Poet Among Painters*, (Chicago and London, 1998), p. xi, (hereafter cited as *PoetPainter*).

⁴ 'My Night with Frank O'Hara' by Patsy Southgate, in *Homage to Frank O'Hara*, ed. Bill Berkson, and Joe LeSueur, (Berkeley, California, 1980, originally published as *Big Sky*, 1978), pp. 119-21, (p. 121), (hereafter cited as *Homage*).

⁵ 'A Note on Frank O'Hara in the Early Fifties' by Kenneth Koch, in *Homage*, pp.26-7, (p. 27).

with his raw nerve endings, translating these impulses into words. His ‘dashing’ style invites friends and readers alike to feel a connection with not only the poetry, but with the poet himself. However in discussing his attraction to ‘a certain dashing, Byronic’, O’Hara acknowledges an awareness of a stylistic self-consciousness in relation to the way he presents himself and his poetry, both in terms of a manner ‘characterized by prompt vigour of action; spirited, lively, impetuous’ (OED 2); and his engagement with style and exhibition; he was a man ‘given to fashionable and striking display in manners and dress’ (OED 3). This raises questions as to what extent the ‘real O’Hara’ can be known, or indeed whether his poetic and personal persona are one and the same insofar as his use of the first person, in the most part of his poetry, suggests.

Even whilst discussing his style, he stylizes his discussion with Lucie-Smith through his use of pronouns. He acknowledges the literary and critical timbre set up by Lucie-Smith with his use of ‘one’, and consciously replaces the impersonal with ‘I’. What is remarkable however, is when the ‘I’ becomes ‘you’: ‘you’re sort of galloping in...’ By commingling himself and Lucie-Smith, he disarms the formality of the question and places Lucie-Smith on a level of mutuality with him. This perfectly illustrates the dynamic between the reader and his poetry, in that the reader finds him or herself addressed directly *and* is made a collaborator with the poet. O’Hara’s use of the pronoun ‘you’ is where this dynamic is most visible.

O'Hara's awareness of the power pronouns have upon an addressee is visible in his love poem 'Morning'.⁶ O'Hara places the 'you' and 'I' in close proximity, making a reader feel part of the poem from the start:

I've got to tell you
how I love you always
I think of it on grey
Mornings with death

Because the 'you' isn't initially clarified as an individual separate from the reader, an emotional connection is established between poet and reader. But 'Morning' is about missing someone intensely. O'Hara gives the impression of an absent addressee who is simultaneously being addressed as a present entity:

I miss you always
when I go to the beach

O'Hara's ability to conjure a 'you' who is simultaneously absent and present, means that although a reader is aware another addressee apart from them exists, they step in to fill the void the absent 'you' leaves. The reader is privy to O'Hara's engagement with the unknown addressee, viewing their interaction at a distance whilst also embodying part of the 'you'. The depth of feeling O'Hara demonstrates towards his actual addressee enhances the connectedness between speaker and reader by being playful, rather than alienating or exclusive:

what are you doing now
where did you eat your
lunch and were there

⁶ 'Morning', in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen, (California and London, 1950, repr. 1995), pp. 30-32, (hereafter cited as *Poems*).

lots of anchovies it

is difficult to think
of you without me in
the sentence you depress
me when you are alone

By engaging levity in the form of the incongruous ‘anchovies’, O’Hara bypasses self-pity and displays a certain degree of what Sontag calls ‘Camp taste’, which is ‘above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation – not judgment. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy’.⁷ The generosity towards the figure of ‘you’, characterizes much of O’Hara’s writing. In ‘Morning’ the anchovies imbue ‘you’ with a more particular personality. In fact it is the only point in the poem where the addressee is given an individual character separate from the speaker’s projection of his own feelings for, and impressions of ‘you’, reminding a reader that they are not the addressee, whilst not excluding them.

The experience of a bond with O’Hara in his work is something that Parker calls ‘the American tradition of “personal poetry”’,⁸ however to reduce it to this would overlook what seems to be O’Hara’s personal gift, ‘his radiant magnetism’⁹, his ability to make a reader (and acquaintance) feel singular in his emotional and intellectual esteem; ‘The tête-à-tête until dawn was Frank’s specialty’.¹⁰ This ability seems to stem, in Feldman’s view, from a facility to engage with the world whilst maintaining distance:

⁷ Susan Sontag, ‘Notes on “Camp”’, in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, (London, 1967), pp. 275-92, (p. 291), (hereafter cited as *Camp*).

⁸ Alice C. Parker, *The Exploration of the Secret Smile: The Language of Art and of Homosexuality in Frank O’Hara’s Poetry*, (New York 1989) p. 3, (Hereafter cited as *SecretSmile*).

⁹ ‘A Reminiscence’ by John Ashbery, in *Homage*, pp. 20-2, (p. 21).

¹⁰ ‘Four Apartments’ by Joe LeSueur, in *Homage*, pp. 46-55, (p. 48).

His intense involvement with so many different levels of work, so many different kinds of artist, naturally created great demands on his personal loyalties. But it was part of O'Hara's genius to be oblivious to these demands, to treat the whole thing as if it were some big, frantic, glamorous movie set. To us he seemed to dance from canvas to canvas, from party to party, from poem to poem.¹¹

This comment touches on a question about O'Hara's work; that of depth versus breadth; and whether it is possible for these two aspects to occur simultaneously. Whilst his poems individually hold the gaze of what or who they are looking at, as a whole they jump between different lovers, experiences and impressions.

However breadth and depth are shown as not mutually exclusive in O'Hara's work, through the way his poetry is so closely tied to the moment:

The speed and accidental aspect of his writing are not carelessness but are essential to what the poems are about: the will to catch what is there while it is really there and still taking place.¹²

His focus seems to be on capturing rather than recapturing or perfecting: 'I don't believe in reworking – too much'.¹³ Perhaps it is possible to view O'Hara's off-the-cuff style of writing as a measure of the poem's truthfulness; 'what really makes me happy is when something just falls into place as if it were a conversation or something'.¹⁴ Thus the truthfulness of his work could rest in its novelty and vitality:

¹¹ 'Lost Times and Future Hopes' by Morton Feldman, in *Homage*, pp. 12-14, (pp. 12-13).

¹² 'All the Imagination Can Hold (The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara)' by Kenneth Koch, in *Homage*, pp. 205-8, (p. 206).

¹³ 'Edward Lucie-Smith: An Interview with Frank O'Hara', in *SS+W*, pp. 3-26, (p. 21).

¹⁴ 'Edward Lucie-Smith: An Interview with Frank O'Hara', in *SS+W*, pp. 3-26, (p. 21).

The form of Frank O'Hara's poetry is flexible and consistently experimental – flexible, to accommodate the poem to whatever is taking place; experimental, perhaps for a number of reasons, among them to help awaken, by strangeness of form, new perceptions while he is writing.¹⁵

O'Hara's work seems to reside in the space between taking part in an experience and observing and recording it, suggesting an 'on your nerve'¹⁶ quality that resides within him, a poetry generated from and generating adrenaline:

One of the most startling things about Frank in the period when I first knew him was his ability to write a poem when other people were talking, or even to get up in the middle of a conversation, get his typewriter, and write a poem, sometimes participating in the conversation while doing so. This may sound affected when I describe it, but it wasn't so at all. The poems he wrote in this way were usually very good poems. I was electrified by his ability to do this and at once tried to do it myself – (with considerably less success).¹⁷

Koch's account exemplifies the way in which O'Hara could be idealized; 'Poetry flowed out of him as easily as breath'.¹⁸ The 'legendary' 'insouciance'¹⁹ that many of his contemporaries and critics claim to embody O'Hara's work, can often be misleading and simplifying in terms of what seems to be a more experimental handling of the poetic form and the way in which art can and should be experienced.

In 'Art Chronicle I'²⁰ O'Hara discusses the merits of the design of the Guggenheim Museum, and the way in which 'position in installation and lighting has

¹⁵ 'All the Imagination Can Hold (The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara)' by Kenneth Koch, in *Homage*, pp. 205-8, (p. 206).

¹⁶ 'Personism: A Manifesto', in *Poems*, pp. 498-99.

¹⁷ 'A Note on Frank O'Hara in the Early Fifties' by Kenneth Koch, in *Homage*, pp. 26-7, (p. 26).

¹⁸ , 'Frank O'Hara: A Memoir' by John Bernard Myers, in *Homage*, pp. 34-8, (p. 36).

¹⁹ *PoetPainter*, p. 2.

²⁰ 'Art Chronicle I', in *SS+W*, pp. 126-32, (p. 127).

nothing to do with aesthetic importance'. The vastness of his oeuvre (and therefore the experience of reading *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*) conveys the way in which O'Hara was able to achieve moments of intimacy and importance within a thematically varied and physically huge collection.

...the only truly important new works to be shown in New York last and this season were the Matisse cut-outs at the Museum of Modern Art, and they could have been hung outdoors in the garden without jeopardizing their importance in the slightest (so long as it didn't rain).²¹

According to O'Hara, the enjoyment of art does not have to be limited to the inside of a gallery. If this is applied to his own work, why should poetry only be written in what John Bernard Myers calls 'that necessary quietness' of his 'vocation'?²² By writing in public, O'Hara is performing the creation of his work, stylizing the creative process, and perhaps consciously fascinating onlookers such as Koch, who are charmed by his dashing persona.

This begs the question of whether behind O'Hara's nonchalant front; there lies a more complex relation between his supposed ease of poetic expression and a performance of that ease. Morton Feldman misses the mark when he writes that 'Frank O'Hara dispenses with everything in his work but his feelings'. He suggests that 'this kind of modesty always disappoints culture, which time after time has mistaken coldness for Olympian objectivity'.²³ However, as discussed previously, objectivity and emotion are not mutually exclusive in O'Hara's work. This is evident

²¹ 'Art Chronicle I', in *SS+W*, pp. 126-32, (p. 127).

²² 'Frank O'Hara: A Memoir' by John Bernard Myers, in *Homage*, pp. 34-8, (p. 37).

²³ 'Lost Times and Future Hopes' by Morton Feldman, in *Homage*, pp.12-14, (p. 13).

in 'Poetry',²⁴ a discussion and exploration of his relationship with the form his writing takes; 'The only way to be quiet / is to be quick'. These lines present an anxiety about performing the nigh impossible task of experiencing and recording simultaneously, capturing the surface of the moment whilst infusing it with depth of perception:

All this I desire. To
deepen you by my quickness
and delight as if you
were logical and proven

This 'quickness', the marrying of observation and immersion, is related to what John Button calls O'Hara's 'complete response'²⁵ to life. Larry Rivers says of O'Hara that he 'has taught me to be more keenly interested while I'm still alive. And perhaps this is the most important thing art can say'²⁶; suggesting that art and life can and should inform each other. In 'Poetry', the 'you' could be addressed to a reader to whom his 'quickness' (his poetry) can both 'deepen' and 'delight'. However the alternating rhyme of 'To' and 'you', placed just past the half-way point of 'Poetry' presents the poem both as a gift to the reader and to an addressee, ostensibly a poetic muse; an offering, so that his dashing inspiration does not dry up.

His presentation of the urgency of his composition betrays an anxiety about his 'quickness': 'so I scare / you clumsily, or surprise / you with a stab.'²⁷ He seems aware of an unwieldiness or off-kilter quality in the way he writes. This more anxious aspect of O'Hara's work is often difficult to perceive, as:

²⁴ 'Poetry', in *Poems*, p. 49.

²⁵ 'Frank's Grace' by John Button, in *Homage*, pp. 41-3, (p. 42).

²⁶ *PoetPainter*, p. 20.

²⁷ 'Poetry', in *Poems*, p. 49.

tension in O'Hara's poetry, as well as in his poetic theories, is not expressed as personal dismay, or despair, or individual alienation. His poetry actually celebrates the activity – the motion and commotion – of life while simultaneously inscribing into the poetic text the underlying potential for psychological destruction. This dialectic between presence and alienation contributes to his own sense of poetic equilibrium...²⁸

He rarely personalizes artistic anxiety, opting instead to joke or evade. The 'I' that seems so open, often deflects, especially when there is no clear addressee.

O'Hara's poem, 'My Heart'²⁹ can be viewed in this light, as a personalized poetic manifesto acting both in terms of his life and his art:

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.

The title of the poem suggests that O'Hara is baring himself to all who care to see, however the last two lines of the poem are cagey, the 'dialectic of the heart'³⁰ is more elusive than it seems. He does not engage with the rule of three he sets up: 'and my heart' is not given its own line, but instead interrupted with a dash and the excuse 'you can't plan on the heart'. This adds an extra line to the poem, unbalancing it, so that the Whitman-esque simplicity of the statement 'My Heart' becomes less easy to pin down. He consciously states that it is his poetry that is open, not his heart. O'Hara seems to be motioning towards a self not immediately apparent, one that is encapsulated within his poetry, a self that intends to be partly opaque.

²⁸ *SecretSmile*, pp. 17-18.

²⁹ 'My Heart', in *Poems*, p. 231.

³⁰ 'Lost Times and Future Hopes' by Morton Feldman, in *Homage*, pp. 12-14, (p. 12).

O'Hara plays with this perspective in terms of the way a reader interprets the poet through his work, highlighting the temptation a reader has of engaging with the possible biography within the work, which in turn creates a greater immediacy between poet, (and poem) and reader. In 'Having a coke with you'³¹ O'Hara places a narrator who appears to be himself, next to the figure of 'you'. The title of the poem also acts as the first line, which when coupled with the present continuous tense, pinpoints an instant of stasis within the flux of the moment, (much like the act of writing the poem, or painting a picture of the experience). O'Hara's ability to verbally depict moments as strongly visual, conveys a facet of his engagement with the discussion concerning the differences between visual art and poetry:

I look
at you and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world
except possibly for the *Polish Rider* occasionally

The present tense coupled with the verb to 'look' and the enjambment, acts as the shutter action of a camera within the larger moment of 'Having a coke with you', and then dissolves back into a style that is quick but not quiet. Perhaps it is the light touch of consolidating a moment that separates his art from that of a painter or photographer, a paradoxically ephemeral moment of permanence within the flux of an instant:

and anyway it's in the Frick
which thank heavens you haven't gone to yet so we can go together the first time

The use of 'except possibly' and 'and anyway' belie some discomfort at the concentration of the moment of looking. The iconic red and white of the Coke bottle

³¹ 'Having a coke with you', in *Poems*, p. 360.

combines and clashes with the ‘orange shirt’ and ‘the fluorescent orange tulips’, adding a visual aspect of spikiness to this unusual love poem. O’Hara wants to capture a kernel of intensity between two people but pulls back from it when he achieves it. The immediacy of the poem is communicated precisely in this moment of retraction as it refuses to be vulnerable to the addressee: ‘partly because of my love for you, partly because of your love for yoghurt’. The disparity between the recording of a moment and the evasiveness that exists within the language is the keystone of jarring cohesion that seems to be at the heart of O’Hara’s honesty or openness, an ability for indirection to equal truth; as in any conversation the spoken and the unspoken exist side by side. Intensity of emotion can therefore be expressed indirectly without being rendered grave.

O’Hara’s tone in his reading³² of ‘Having a coke with you’ is relatively nonchalant, conveying his adopted tone of insouciance which overlays a kernel of sincerity:

it seems they were all cheated of some marvelous experience
which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I’m telling you about it

O’Hara stresses ‘telling’ rather than ‘why’, placing the speaker in control. A stressed ‘why’ would imply a more defensive position, however the stressed ‘telling’ is unusual and unexpected. This example indicates the difficulty of reading O’Hara’s poetry aloud, even if it is in a so-called conversational style; ‘the point is really more to establish one’s own measure and breath in poetry, I think...’³³ This makes it harder to interpret

³² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDLwivcpFe8>, [accessed 10 September 2009].

³³ ‘Edward Lucie-Smith: An Interview with Frank O’Hara’, in *SS+W*, pp. 3-26, (p. 17).

verbally as one's speaking voice is deeply personal. When we read O'Hara's poetry aloud we are necessarily adopting his sentiment into our own interpretation of that experience by imposing our voice over his.

The harshness that punctuates the end of 'Having a coke with you', and the poem's unpunctuated last line, jars with the poem's prior motioning towards achieving intimacy and emotional openness. Although 'Having a coke with you' is ostensibly about his addressee, 'you' is strangely absent. From a reader's perspective, 'Having a coke with *you*' might imply our engagement with O'Hara, the narrator. However simultaneously, the 'you' is expounded much more than the addressee in 'Morning'. 'You' is coloured by comparisons to art, to 'Futurism' and to his tastes and style; 'You' hasn't been to the Frick, 'you' loves yoghurt, is wearing an orange shirt and is having a coke with O'Hara 'in the warm New York 4 o'clock light'. In short 'you' can be seen as a vessel whose idiosyncrasies are brought to the forefront in the name of an aesthetic depiction of an experience, 'You' is so prevalent it is deceptive, promoting the 'victory of "style" over "content"'.³⁴

Rather than dismissing O'Hara 'as being simply a "light" poet',³⁵ as Parker argues earlier critics of his work have done, it is more useful to view the way he uses 'style' as a subtle form of self-protection, a 'pose [of] witty insouciance',³⁶ as well as a way of playing with the accepted norms and forms of art. Part of his performative allure is in his audacity to say what could be taken seriously (which in his case means frivolously). The difficulty of voicing O'Hara's writing draws attention to the

³⁴ *Camp*, p. 287.

³⁵ *SecretSmile*, p. 1.

³⁶ *PoetPainter*, p. 16.

continual interchange between the ironic and the serious, a tone he adopts in ‘Personism: A Manifesto’: ‘Nobody should experience anything they don’t need to, if they don’t need poetry bully for them. I like the movies too.’³⁷ ‘Need’ is tinged with a mockery that the simpler use of ‘want’ would gloss over. The implied irony is that this distinction should not be necessary, that enjoyment of the artistic and of popular culture can be synonymous. By mocking the pomposity of the form of a manifesto whilst simultaneously engaging with his literary surroundings, O’Hara is able to express his poetic theories without moralizing or communicating them didactically.

O’Hara appears to want to destabilize axioms that exist within art by not being completely transparent with his views and comments. ‘Ruth Krauss tells us that one of the things Frank taught her at his New School poetry workshop was: “You call it something – i.e., a play – and everyone will accept it as such.”’³⁸ This signals a desire for more freedom, more dashing within all art forms, something that his collaborations with Rivers, Goldberg and Hartigan, and his poem-paintings with Bluhm indicate. Equally, his forays into theatre have an unstageable quality, perhaps a playful reference to the cinema, which he enjoyed immensely:

Act 1

One thousand eight orang-utangs in the corridor of the Hotel
Surprise. A pearl necklace falls on them. They die noisily.³⁹

³⁷ ‘Personism: A Manifesto’, in *Poems*, p. 498-99.

³⁸ Frank O’Hara, ‘Introduction’ by Joe LeSueur, in *Selected plays*, ed. Ron Padgett, (New York 1978), pp. ix-xix, (p. ix), (hereafter cited as *Plays*).

³⁹ ‘Mephisto’, in *Plays*, pp. 71-73, (p. 71).

This is amusing to read, partly because it would be virtually impossible to communicate in any other way, let alone stage. On one hand this playfulness is delightful, however on the other, it displays a self-consciousness that is not inclusive.

The confusing irony of this exclusivity that exists within O'Hara's work seems to be at odds with what appears to be a desire to make art more inclusive. There is a tension within his work that simultaneously says one thing but means another: 'I don't even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve'.⁴⁰ Although this statement cannot be taken at face value, what O'Hara seems to be stating is an interest in something more American, something more vital:

...what we mean by American art is...avant-garde art. It is still alive, it is part of our lives (not nationally – personally), it can be experienced without necessarily being understood completely, it can move us and remain a mystery.⁴¹

In the context of an argument for the differentiation between American and European art, O'Hara's pose of 'witty insouciance'⁴² is provocative in the way it draws attention to the space between what he says and what he means:

I knew instinctively that Frank didn't really believe that *Les Séchées* was greater than *Tristan*, and that he wanted people to understand this, but at the same time he felt it important to make that statement, possibly because he felt that art is already serious enough; there is no point in making it seem even more serious by taking it too seriously.⁴³

⁴⁰ 'Personism: A Manifesto', in *Poems*, pp. 498-99.

⁴¹ 'American Art and Non-American Art', in *SS+W*, pp. 97-8, (p. 97).

⁴² *PoetPainter*, p. 16.

⁴³ 'A Reminiscence' by John Ashbery, in *Homage*, pp. 20-2, (p. 20).

By demystifying art, and attempting to make it more accessible through a playful skepticism, art is paradoxically not simplified, but rendered part of an everyday, personal experience that cannot necessarily be understood completely, but can become and remain part of our lives.

Abstraction (in poetry, not in painting) involves personal removal by the poet...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.⁴⁴

The suggestion is that abstraction can exist in interactions of the everyday, implying that poetry exists in things and conversations that are paradoxically not apparently abstract. It is an abstraction dependent on looking closely, translating the everyday into the poetic. This sensitive perceptiveness is the angle from which a reader should approach O'Hara's poetry, as it is what allows a reader to pierce the depths of O'Hara's opaqueness.

The nature of O'Hara's opaqueness presents a difficulty for those trying to come to concrete conclusions about O'Hara's views or work as Lucie-Smith discovers in his interview: 'L-S: Well, that's as good a question as any to start off with, at least it's concrete'.⁴⁵ In his poem 'On Rachmaninoff's Birthday',⁴⁶ the difficulty of pinpointing O'Hara in his poetry demonstrates the abstraction that resides in his elusive use of the first person that at first seems so simple and autobiographically pertinent:

⁴⁴ 'Personism: A Manifesto', in *Poems*, pp. 498-99.

⁴⁵ 'Edward Lucie-Smith: An Interview with Frank O'Hara', in *SS+W*, pp. 3-26, (p. 4).

⁴⁶ 'On Rachmaninoff's Birthday', in *Poems*, p. 190.

I am so glad that Larry Rivers made a
statue of me

By the end of the poem, the 'I' is hard to distinguish:

I am what people make of me – if they
can and when they will. My difficulty is
readily played – like a rhapsody, or a fresh
house.

The ambiguity of the poem resides in the word 'difficulty', mirrored in the simile of 'a rhapsody' or 'a fresh house'; one is ephemeral, a form of art, one is a concrete, tangible creation. He is playing with the concept of what he finds difficult and what is difficult within him, as well as his poetic 'difficulty' and Rachmaninoff's 'difficulty', and furthermore what a reader might find difficult in a poem that initially starts off with his trademark conversational off-the-cuff style. None of this is stated outright, and the 'difficulty' that lies within his lines can easily be glossed over or made pat by a reader who wants a 'concrete' answer. O'Hara seems aware of this possibility his poetry presents, and although he engages with the reader, encouraging them to read his poetry more carefully, he also pulls back from engaging fully with a reader's understanding, communicated in the line 'I am what people make of me'. Not only does this convey a discomfort with connecting fully with the reader, (as he does with the addressee in 'Having a coke with you'), but the way in which he pulls back contains a germ of sullenness which seems to go as far as fronting a pose of *aggressive* insouciance:

His wit was a sort of wall around him. He showed his brilliance rather than his feelings. – That was a point I often made in talking about his writing. I think,

in fact, it was when he learned to use his brilliance to *convey* rather than to *hide behind* that he found his power.⁴⁷

This assessment of O'Hara's early writing by John Ciardi, one of his professors at Harvard, conveys his particular ability to appear to be, rather than be. Sontag's description of the verb 'to camp', an act 'which employs flamboyant mannerisms susceptible of a double interpretation: gestures full of duplicity...'⁴⁸ seems apt in relation to Ciardi's criticism. Arguably, he never intended to show his feelings but instead got better at performing an openness, posing as himself. The 'brilliance' of his first person is what makes a reader want to interpret O'Hara's work as autobiographical, but is precisely why it cannot be so concisely described as such. His writing is compelling and captivating exactly due to the fact it suggests an uncomplicated 'I' as narrator, hinting at candidness, but remaining distanced and hard to interpret due to shifting narrative perspective, as well as the suggestion of a more performative aspect of embellishment.

Whilst in 'Personism: A Manifesto' he writes that 'the poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages', he specifically separates poetry as an immediate form of address, from the notion of 'personality or intimacy'.⁴⁹ In 'A Pleasant Thought from Whitehead'⁵⁰ O'Hara demonstrates an awareness of a reader's appropriation of sentiment from a poem, whilst paradoxically giving the reader no sentiment to acquire, instead, describing the process of a form of Chinese whisper:

you open the page

⁴⁷ From a letter to Donald Allen from John Ciardi, in *Homage*, p. 19.

⁴⁸ *Camp*, p. 281.

⁴⁹ 'Personism: A Manifesto', in *Poems*, pp. 498-99.

⁵⁰ 'A Pleasant Thought from Whitehead', in *Poems*, pp. 23-4.

my poems stare at you you
stare back, do you not? my
poems speak on the silver
of your eyes your eyes repeat
them to your lover's this
very night.

There is a hostility in the blank two-way stare O'Hara describes between the poet, (the page) and the reader. The intimation is that of two separate intimacies; between the reader and the poet, and the reader and their lover; however they are coloured by surface engagement. The lines merely stick to the watery, silvery substance that keeps the eyeball wet. However on the other hand, the 'silver' could also be the beams that pass between lovers' eyes,⁵¹ which would suggest that O'Hara's poetry acts as a conduit for sincerity and expression. This is the problem with assuming or wanting to assume O'Hara's work is largely autobiographical or that the *joie de vivre* he emanated in life is exactly the same as in his writing.

As important as art was to him, it was after all only part of life and not separate from it so that he had to shift into high gear to get ready for an aesthetic experience. He was in high all the time, high on himself, and his every waking minute, regardless of what he was doing, was vital, super-charged, never boring if he could help it.⁵²

According to Joe LeSueur, whom O'Hara lived with for just under ten years, O'Hara's life and art seem somehow inseparable. His poetry cannot, therefore exist as an open and truthful chronicle of his life if it is amorously part of it, as it cannot be fully objective. The performative aspect of O'Hara is therefore perhaps not a falseness but a means to an end, an attempt to fuse together what is often seen as the conscious

⁵¹ 'Our eye-beames twisted, and did thred / Our eyes upon one double string', John Donne, 'The Excstasy' in *The Complete English Poems*, ed. C.A. Partrides, (New York, 1991, 9th printing), p. 99.

⁵² 'Four Apartments' by Joe LeSueur, in *Homage*, pp. 46-55, (p. 47).

act of creation and a more unconscious act of living, paradoxically, attempting to live life as a consciously artistic and aesthetic experience, and to imbue art with an ‘ease’⁵³ of existence and creation.

There seems to be an attempt to reach a point where an artistic experience of life is achieved; where what is created and the experiences that are informing and inspiring this creation can exist symbiotically; whilst simultaneously being aware of the impossibility of true consistency or permanence in art:

For instance, it was an absolute revelation to me, I think, in a certain light in the Louvre when you see *The Raft of Gericault* and *The Massacre at Chios* that the purples are practically black and there are an awful lot of them. They’re great, slashing hunks of purple. You know at another time of day, let’s say if you go at ten o’clock in the morning, it all looks as if it’s really quite something that Meissonier might be very pleased to have done and would have been in a particularly turbulent mood when he did. But if you see them at another time of day, in the late afternoon, they’re not totally unrelated, say, to something like *The Elegies to the Spanish Republic* or to the late abstractions of de Kooning.⁵⁴

This ‘revelation’ as he calls it, communicates his understanding that a fundamental simplicity in art gives its meaning space to exist as the truth of the moment in which it was created, as well as being free to be seen in a different light by both creator and viewer or reader:

L-S: Well, what’s the criterion of truth in poetry?

O’H: Where you don’t find that someone is making themselves more elegant, more stupid, more appealing, more affectionate or more sincere than the words will allow them to be. Now I know I do it myself, you know. I can see it when I reread some of my poems that I went overboard and that the words are

⁵³ ‘A Note on Frank O’Hara in the Early Fifties’ by Kenneth Koch, in *Homage*, pp. 26-7, (p. 27).

⁵⁴ ‘Edward Lucie-Smith: An Interview with Frank O’Hara’, in *SS+W*, pp. 3-26, (p. 5).

showing quite clearly to anyone who's bothered to look at them closely enough: that it's bullshit, you know. And that's what I don't like.⁵⁵

In 'A Step Away From Them'⁵⁶ O'Hara's unique combination of the literary and the everyday bypasses the 'bullshit' and attains moments of clarity and cohesion within the 'splendid state of confusion'⁵⁷ of New York City. O'Hara's 'lunch hour' and therefore poem, is filled with his observations of the events that are occurring and the people around him. The narrative perspective is relatively passive in the way it lists experiences:

I look
at bargains in wristwatches. There
are cats playing in sawdust.

There is no interaction between himself and the people or animals he is observing, however O'Hara does seem to draw comfort from their presence. All the physical components of the first and second stanzas of this poem, the 'laborers', the 'flipping' skirts, the 'bargain' 'wristwatches', the 'cats', the 'Negro in a doorway', 'A blonde chorus girl', which separately do not seem remarkable, together manage to accrue meaning for O'Hara, or if meaning is not quite the right word, they become imbued with something transcendent. As Perloff argues, he "debunks the 'beautiful' and elevates the obscene to poetic status."⁵⁸ Although what he sees as he walks through the city is not 'obscene' in a physical sense, it is understandable as 'obscene' if viewed from an perspective of a more traditional, poetic institution. The moment where the 'Negro' 'languorously' agitates and 'A blonde chorus girl clicks: he /

⁵⁵ 'Edward Lucie-Smith: An Interview with Frank O'Hara', in *SS+W*, pp. 3-26, (p. 14).

⁵⁶ 'A Step Away From Them', in *Poems*, pp. 257-58.

⁵⁷ 'Larry Rivers: The Next Confederate Soldier' in *SS+W*, pp. 95-6, (p. 95).

⁵⁸ *PoetPainter*, p. 67.

smiles and rubs his chin' is the point of transcendence. Although it is virtually impossible to fully locate O'Hara in his poems, 'A Step Away from Them' conveys the openness that a reader can achieve from his poetry; an understanding of the cohesion of a moment, which is what O'Hara seems tirelessly to be trying to capture:

Everything
suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of
a Thursday.

He even records the time. What is unexpected, and even funny is the use of the word 'Honk'. It seems unwieldy and out of place. O'Hara himself does not seem to have anticipated that this moment he has been waiting for in the seeming minutiae of his lunch break would manifest itself in the form of a 'honk'. Perhaps the word 'honk' is used because of the stimulus of the moment; a loud honking from the street would provide an oddly fitting accompaniment to the point at which O'Hara captures the duality of the mundane and the magnificent:

Neon in daylight is a
great pleasure, as Edwin Denby would
write, as are light bulbs in daylight.

From this moment the unsightly is perceived as striking if not beautiful. Helen Vendler's criticism of O'Hara, that 'a radical incapacity for abstraction' 'tended to do O'Hara in',⁵⁹ seems like a gross misjudgment, as for O'Hara, it is in the concrete and the everyday that abstraction is found. 'A Step Away From Them' communicates a burst of lucidity and truthful simplicity that he encourages amongst 'the hum-colored/cabs', yet simultaneously does not try to force this upon himself nor upon a reader.

⁵⁹ Helen Vendler, *Part of Nature, Part of Us*, (Cambridge Massachusetts, 1980), pp. 179-94, (p. 179).

O'Hara motions towards a truthfulness of poetic form that is often mistaken as an openness, or directness from and about the man himself. However there does seem to be a fascination with a poet like Mayakovsky's ability to bear his soul. In his poem 'The Backbone Flute' Mayakovsky describes himself as:

faceting my cries into verse,
a diamond-cutter on the verge of madness.⁶⁰

This metaphor for an experience of poetry suggests a self-appointed ability to fashion raw pain and experience into, and out of words. O'Hara, on the other hand, continually retreats from the brink of pure emotional intensity, tempering it with his witty evasiveness. His interest in Mayakovsky's savage emotional honesty; 'Over the abyss I've stretched my soul in a tightrope / and, juggling with words, totter above it',⁶¹ rests at odds with his more cagey style. In his poem 'Mayakovsky',⁶² O'Hara seems to be trying Mayakovsky's feelings on for size. Perhaps using them as a screen to explore his own ability to express a cruder emotional experience, however the two styles never become totally assimilated:

My heart's aflutter!
I am standing in the bath tub
crying. Mother, mother
who am I?

⁶⁰ Vladimir Mayakovsky, 'The Backbone Flute', in *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry*, ed. Patricia Blake, tr. M Hayward and G. Reavey, (Indianapolis, 1975), pp. 111-31, (p. 115), (hereafter cited as *Bedbug*).

⁶¹ Vladimir Mayakovsky, 'The Backbone Flute', in *Bedbug*, pp. 111-31, (p. 125).

⁶² 'Mayakovsky', in *Poems*, pp. 201-2.

It is unclear whether the 'I' is O'Hara's own feelings translated into the way Mayakovsky would write, whether it is a performance of an impression of Mayakovsky's emotional experience, or whether it is just a forum for experimentation.

I love you. I love you,
but I'm turning to my verses
and my heart is closing
like a fist.

In direct relation to this quotation, Morton Feldman writes that 'what he is telling us is something unbelievably painful. Secreted in O'Hara's thought is the possibility that we create only as dead men.'⁶³ This points to the difficulty of fusing experience (and feeling *in* experience) with the distance, or deadness that is writing. By aping a voice akin to Mayakovsky's at the start of the poem, and then killing him off; 'I leap into the leaves, green like the sea'; O'Hara suggests a concept of rebirth through assimilation with, and then a rending apart from, another voice. If the deadness in writing is Mayakovsky's, not O'Hara's, then O'Hara can use Mayakovsky's voice as a conduit for a stronger sense of self-definition:

Now I am quietly waiting for
the catastrophe of my personality
to seem beautiful again,
and interesting and modern.

Within this re-emergence of the self however, there still remains the 'catastrophe of my personality', the anxiety of whether capturing a moment can make it live on or whether the act of capture, cements and kills it. He appears to have a morbid interest

⁶³ 'Lost Times and Future Hopes' by Morton Feldman, in *Homage*, pp. 12-14, (p. 14).

in the relation of death to poetry and the poet, which the aptly titled ‘Death’⁶⁴ suggests:

the very fact that I’m a poet
suffers my eyes
to be filled with vermilion tears,

A fascination with the concept of ‘the tortured artist’ lies at odds with, and informs the way in which he sends it up as a cliché. This self-awareness feeds into his perception of art in relation to his own life, toying with a Romantic tradition of poet and poetry, which he alludes to in his reference to the ‘dashing Byronic’:

‘Nevertheless I am aware that I am now six years older than Keats was when he died and four years younger than Byron when in the same situation.’⁶⁵ The use of the word ‘situation’ highlights an analytical perception of the poet as part of the process of art, arguably making him inseparable from his work. It therefore seems possible that his life can exist as a work of art and his art can take on a life and reality of its own.

However this seemingly simple formula appears to be something that O’Hara is continually trying to achieve, but never quite attains, as suggested in the poignantly titled ‘A Hill’:⁶⁶

the purity
of my confusion is
there, it’s poetry

in love with you
along with me,
both of us love you
in the same “My!”

⁶⁴ ‘Death’, in *Poems*, p. 186.

⁶⁵ ‘Autobiographical Fragments’, in *SS+W*, pp. 29-32, (p. 29).

⁶⁶ ‘A Hill’, in *Poems*, pp. 203-4.

These complex lines display poetry as part of O'Hara in that it is, at least here, a forum for his 'confusion', for 'the catastrophe'⁶⁷ of his personality. However whilst 'it's poetry' can refer to 'my confusion', suggested by the stanza break, the punctuation suggests that poetry is 'in love with you', existing as a separate entity from O'Hara; it is 'along' with him, not part of him. However equally O'Hara's poetry cannot exist without him, and therefore both he and his poetry are combined in the utterance of "My!"

Whilst he explored this metaphysical idea during his life, it was only arguably, in the act of dying young that a culmination of this attempt at the cross pollination between art and life could paradoxically be achieved:

In a certain sense the artist makes that pain immortal when he dies young... There is a kind of exaltation, as though they know there can never be an end to the period of mourning.⁶⁸

Arguably this is what catapulted O'Hara to the position of 'exaltation' from which he is now read. His tragic death coupled with his poetry, crystallizes O'Hara as a highly biographical poet. Koch's review of the collected poems for *The New Republic* enhances this:

All those 'moments'. All the momentary enthusiasms and despairs which I had been moved by when I first read them when they were here altogether made something I had never imagined. It is not all one great poem, but something in some ways better: a collection of created moments that illuminate a whole life.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ 'Mayakovsky', in *Poems*, pp. 201-2.

⁶⁸ 'Lost Times and Future Hopes' by Morton Feldman, in *Homage*, pp. 12-14, (p. 12).

⁶⁹ *PoetPainter*, p. 7.

It seems important, however, to be able to hold O’Hara’s poetry and O’Hara the poet as separate entities as well as one and the same. Nevertheless both his dashing poetic style and personal *joie de vivre* seem to gather strength, liveliness and inspiration from being surrounded by living, breathing people: ‘I am the least difficult of men. All I want is boundless love’.⁷⁰ The paradox of this poetic statement embodies the way in which O’Hara pulls back from ‘*boundless love*’ in his poetry, opting instead for momentary flashes within the ephemeral nature of his works. Perhaps it is only in his death that O’Hara attains the amount of love that he claims to want in ‘Meditations in an Emergency’. Perhaps in his poetry, the moments of unconsummated passion, the ‘I’ that never quite reaches the ‘you’ is the beauty and excitement of what he communicates, in the space between capturing and experiencing:

but as I pass O Manhattan, your frequent and
swift flash of eyes offering me love,
Offering response to my own – these repay me,
Lovers, continual lovers, only repay me.⁷¹

⁷⁰ ‘Meditations in an Emergency’, in *Poems*, pp. 197-98.

⁷¹ Walt Whitman, ‘City of Orgies’ in *Walt Whitman, The Complete Poems*, ed. Francis Murphy, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1975), p. 158.