

FRANK O'HARA: A POET AMONG PAINTERS

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Abstract: This paper explores the life and work of Frank O'Hara, a central figure of postwar American poetry and the New York School. Combining personal experience with an engagement in the visual arts, O'Hara's poetry captures the energy and immediacy of New York City, reflecting his close interactions with painters, musicians, and writers. The study examines how his work integrates elements of Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, and American vernacular, highlighting the dialogue between poetry and contemporary visual art. Through an analysis of key poems such as *Meditations in an Emergency*, *Lunch Poems*, and *Why I Am Not a Painter*, this paper demonstrates O'Hara's contribution to the avant-garde and his innovative approach to poetic form, process, and presence.

Keywords: Frank O'Hara; New York School; Abstract Expressionism; American poetry; avant-garde

1. Introduction

Writer, art critic, and assistant curator at the Museum Of Modern Art, Frank O'Hara was one of the most influential figures in postwar American poetry and one of the best-loved New York poets of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Born in Baltimore, Maryland, on March 26th, 1926, he grew up in Grafton, Massachusetts, and graduated from Harvard in 1950 with a degree in English. At Harvard he befriended John Ashbery, who back then was a member of the university's literary magazine, the *Advocate*. "There was a sort of legend about Frank, Ashbery recalls, that he was this brilliant young writer who talked sassy. Someone who looked like he was going to be famous someday"¹.

O'Hara moved to New York City in the autumn of 1951, after another year of study in Ann Arbor, and soon became one of the leading figures of the so-called New York School of poetry, together with John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch and James Schuyler. "The term 'New York School' applied to poetry isn't helpful, in characterizing a number of widely dissimilar poets whose work moreover has little to do with New York", writes John Ashbery, who actually lived in France from the mid-50s to the mid-60s, "but O'Hara is certainly a New York poet"². According to Ashbery, O'Hara's poetry illustrates "the lovely, corrupt, wholesome place"³ New York is, stating that "the nightmares, delights and paradoxes of life in this city went into Frank's style"⁴. And indeed, *Meditations in an Emergency* ("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"⁵), *To The Mountains in New York* ("I love this hairy city./ It's wrinkled like a detective story/ and noisy and getting fat and smudged/ lids hood the sharp hard black eyes"⁶), *A Step Away From Them* ("It's my lunch hour, so I go/ for a walk among the hum-colored/ cabs"⁷), and *Steps* ("How funny you are today New York/ like Ginger Rogers in *Swingtime*"⁸)

¹ Brad Gooch, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), p. 137.

² John Ashbery, Introduction to *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, edited by Donald Allen, (1971; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) p. x.

³ *Ibid*: "a scent of garbage, patchouli and carbon monoxide drifts across it".

⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems...*, p. 197.

⁶ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems...*, p. 198.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 370.

are only a few of his poems that capture the city's energy and exhibit the poet's urban sensibility at times in a Surrealist manner, but mostly in an essentially realistic way.

2. Frank O'Hara: a Poet Among Painters

Written after "a period of academic sterility"⁹, O'Hara's poetry came into notice as part of what Kenneth Rexroth calls, in *The New American Poetry*, an essay written in 1961, the "latest Renaissance" in American verse, echoing the radical energies that stood at the heart of the avant-garde movements from the first half of the 20th century. But "just as this poetry is at once popular and 'avant-garde', so it is also intensely American, a powerful declaration of independence of the English tradition"¹⁰.

Rexroth's essay presenting the map of mid-century American poetry was written a year after the publication of Donald Allen's groundbreaking anthology *The New American Poetry* 1945-1960, bringing together the poets who redefined American writing: the New York School, the Beats, the Black Mountain group, and the San Francisco Renaissance, along with younger poets influenced by the preceding groups. The title of the anthology is inspired, though, by *The New American Painting*, a term generally referring to the work of Abstract Expressionists during the 1950s, and particularly to the large MOMA exhibition which toured eight European cities between 1958 and 1959, showing the role painters had as path breakers. In the early 50s, Frank O'Hara was in search of new poetic forms, and, as John Ashbery puts it, the first years of his writing were a period of "testing", of imitations, parodies and poetic exercises. Due to his eclectic taste, both in art and popular culture, and his thirst for experimentation, he combined French post-symbolist poetics with the voice of the American poets he admired: Whitman and Williams, from whom he borrowed the celebration of the ordinary experience. This combination of styles is what Brad Gooch calls the poet's "personal puzzle"¹¹.

After moving to New York, he immersed himself in the American art scene whose main protagonists were the abstract painters Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning and the figurative artists Larry Rivers and Jane Freilicher. And so, his work began to incorporate the energy and philosophy of Abstract Expressionism.

From the mid-50s to the year of his death, in 1966, the vernacular and the emphasis on more direct communication took over, although the Surrealist imagery, assimilated through reading French avant-garde poetry, continued to stand behind his poems.

One of the most remarkable dimensions of Frank O'Hara's work is the ingestion of the immediate world and his ability to capture the present moment. Most of his poems are personal and autobiographical, chronicling urban life, depicting the artistic milieu in which he lived and worked, showing the influence of his friendships on his life and art. As David Lehman observes:

In his poetry one feels the romance of cheap digs in Greenwich Village, chinos and sneakers, a constant flow of adrenaline, taxis, drinks, an opening at the Museum of Modern Art, a party at a painter's loft, poems written on the run between the San Remo bar and the New York City Ballet¹².

Some of O'Hara's poems truly are authentic records of New York's artistic and social life, the constant name-dropping being another aspect of his distinctive style. Not only does he

⁹ Kenneth Koch, 'The New American Poetry', reprinted in *Assays*, (New Directions, 1961), URL: <http://www.bopsecrets.org/rexroth/essays/american-poetry.htm> [accessed: July, 18th, 20014].

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Brad Gooch, *City Poet...*, p. 183.

¹² David Lehman, *The Last Avant-garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (1998; New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 26.

casually inserts the names of places and streets of Manhattan into his poems, but also his writing casts most of his poet and painter friends, along with the iconic artists of the period, from jazz musicians like Miles Davis and Billie Holiday to actors like James Dean and Lana Turner. *The Day Lady Died*, an elegy to 'Lady Day' (Billie Holiday) dated July 17th, 1959, the day of her death, is exemplary of this sense of immediacy embodied in O'Hara's poetics, as well as of the poet's influential style.

During his lifetime, O'Hara published five volumes of poems, but according to Donald Allen, the editor of *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, these represent only a selection of the hundreds of poems the writer held in manuscript. *Meditations in an Emergency* appeared in 1957 and was the collection by which he became known. *Lunch Poems*, a selection of poems dating from 1953 to 1964, was published only in 1964, two years before his tragic death.

Actively engaged in the New York art world, making a sparkling presence at parties and shows, Frank O'Hara developed his work in a way relevant to the time. Like Koch, Ashbery and Schuyler, in addition to writing poetry, he also collaborated with visual artists working with different media: with Larry Rivers on lithographs (*Stones*), with Grace Hartigan on paintings (*Oranges*), with Alfred Leslie on films, and in the early 60s with the young assemblagist Joe Brainard on collages and comic-strips, and with Norman Bluhm on "poem painting". The period was, in Koch's words, "fizzy with collaboration"¹³.

3. From Picasso to Pollock: O'Hara and Abstract Expressionism

As I mentioned above, painters had a major influence on O'Hara's work. This section will try to illustrate the complex relation between the poet's style and Abstract Expressionism, as well as the way the group of artists reframed the spirit of the avant-garde in postwar America.

After the World War II the capital of arts shifted from Paris to New York and Abstract Expressionism becomes the first indigenously American art movement to achieve international recognition. As most of his critics have pointed out, O'Hara is best known for his affiliation with the so-called New York School of Poets, which developed in a historical relation to the New York School of Painters. Like Dada and Surrealism, the New York School was a collective artistic adventure bringing together painters and poets.

In the floating bohemia of Manhattan, writes David Lehman in his book on the making of the New York School of Poets, where life seemed like a party and art an aphrodisiac, the young poets began their evenings at the Cedar Tavern or a few blocks away at the San Remo bar, where they would pull out their latest poems from their coat pockets and show them to each other¹⁴.

While the San Remo was more like a Paris café, the Cedar Tavern was the meeting place of the Abstract Expressionists, being more art-oriented than literary. According to his biographer, O'Hara found himself more often at the artist's tavern. The poet later wrote about the 'catalytic' atmosphere of the Cedar and about their status as 'outsiders' in *Larry Rivers: a Memoir*:

In the San Remo we argued and gossiped: in the Cedar we often wrote poems while listening to the painters argue and gossip. So far as I know nobody painted in the San Remo while they listened to the writers argue. An interesting sidelight to these social activities was that for most of us non-academic, and indeed non-literary poets in the sense of the American scene at the time, the painters were the only generous audience for our poetry.

¹³ Kenneth Koch, cited in *The Last Avant-garde...*, by David Lehman, p. 5.

¹⁴ David Lehman, *The Last Avant-garde...*, p. 65.

(...) The literary establishment cared about as much for our work as the Frick cared for Pollock and de Kooning¹⁵.

O'Hara's popularity among the second-generation Abstract Expressionist artists is, in Perloff's words, "legendary". He was even named "the Apollinaire of our times" by Waldo Rasmussen¹⁶, the director of the MOMA's International Program. "Substitute Frank O'Hara for Apollinaire and Abstract Expressionism for Cubism, and you get an eerie fit"¹⁷, says David Lehman, pointing out how the pre-war European avant-garde served as a prototype for the postwar American artistic "Renaissance".

Moreover, according to Marjorie Perloff, O'Hara's activity as an art critic shows enough striking parallels with that of his French model:

Apollinaire provides us neither with a theory of Cubist painting nor with practical analyses of individual works. In O'Hara's art criticism, we find the very same qualities: an absence of theoretical discourse and, except in rare cases, close technical analysis, counterbalanced by an astonishing ability to recognize greatness, to distinguish between the first-rate and the second-best¹⁸.

Ironically, both O'Hara and Apollinaire, poets, art critics, and popular members of the artistic communities they activated in, died at the age of forty.

Another avant-garde figure that O'Hara admired was Picasso: "Picasso made me tough and quick"¹⁹, the poet writes in one of his most acclaimed early poems, *Memorial Day 1950*. However, by the time the poet absorbed the Abstract Expressionist conceit, Picasso, says Christopher Pearce, "came to be regarded as an anachronism, his fifties series of re-working of famous paintings of the past appearing often mannered and artificial"²⁰.

The relation between O'Hara's poetry and the aesthetic of Abstract Expressionism is one of the key aspects of his work, and also one of the topics that Marjorie Perloff largely discusses in *O'Hara: A Poet Among Painters*. The critic appears to classify the poems that came out of this relation into poems about art and poems inspired by art – "meditations on paintings with the intent of "translating" the tone of the painting into verbal medium"²¹.

Why I Am Not A Painter, for instance, tells the story of O'Hara's composing a series of poems entitled Oranges as compared to the art of Michael Goldberg, who wrote the word Sardines across the bottom of a canvas²² without any logical reference to his painting. According to Perloff, this was another way of Frank O'Hara saying that poetry and painting belong to the same spectrum and art as a process does not tolerate divisions, as there is a clear reflection of artistic acts. From this point of view, the tone of the poem is highly ironic:

I am not a painter, I am a poet.
Why? I think I would rather be
a painter, but I am not. Well,

for instance, Mike Goldberg
is starting a painting. I drop in.

¹⁵ Frank O'Hara, cited in *City Poet...*, by Brad Gooch, p. 202.

¹⁶ Brad Gooch, *City Poet...*, p. 356.

¹⁷ David Lehman, *The Last Avant-garde...*, p. 2.

¹⁸ Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: A Poet Among Painters*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979) pp. 86-7.

¹⁹ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems...*, p. 17.

²⁰ Christopher Pearce, *Fifties Source Book*, (London: Virgin, 1990), p. 171.

²¹ Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: A Poet Among Painters*, p. 82.

²² This biographical insight into O'Hara's poem is recorded in his biography, *City Poet...*, p. 305.

'Sit down and have a drink' he
 says. I drink; we drink. I look
 up. 'You have SARDINES in it.'
 'Yes, it needed something there.'
 'Oh.' I go and the days go by
 and I drop in again. The painting
 is going on, and I go, and the days
 go by. I drop in. The painting is
 finished. 'Where's SARDINES?'
 All that's left is just
 letters, 'It was too much', Mike says.

But me? One day I am thinking of
 a color: orange. I write a line
 about orange. Pretty soon it is a
 whole page of words, not lines.
 Then another page. There should be
 so much more, not of orange, of
 words, of how terrible orange is
 and life. Days go by. It is even in
 prose, I am a real poet. My poem
 is finished and I haven't mentioned
 orange yet. It's twelve poems, I call
 it ORANGES. And one day in a gallery
 I see Mike's painting, called SARDINES²³.

But O'Hara's poems also inspired artists, Oranges representing a series of paintings by Grace Hartigan that correspond to the poet's twelve pastorals written four years earlier, in 1949. She gives this personal account of her collaboration with Frank O'Hara:

To the New York avant-garde in the late 1940s and early 1950s, fame or historical significance seemed impossible. As a result, the collaborations between painters and poets were casual and spontaneous. For example, one day in 1952, Frank O'Hara and I were talking about Apollinaire and his relationship with the Cubists. I said, 'I'd like to do something with your poems, but I don't want to do only one.' Frank said, 'How about twelve? I have a dozen poems called "Oranges."?' I painted 12 oils on paper, at times writing the whole poem, other times just a line or two. All the images related to each poem²⁴.

As mentioned above, some of O'Hara's poems echo the Abstract Expressionist aesthetic. Kenneth Koch believes that the first "action poem" belonging to Frank O'Hara is *Easter*, with its form 'as free as the canvases of the 'action painters'"²⁵. Formally, a more illustrative poem of the way he 'translated' the visual art of his time into verbal medium is *Joseph Cornell*, written in 1955. Cornell was a pioneer of assemblage, a form of three-dimensional collage who drew inspiration from European Surrealism. The poem visually approximates Cornell's *Taglioni's Jewel Casket* (1940), a wooden box construction containing

²³ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*..., p. 261.

²⁴ Grace Hartigan gave this personal account of her collaboration with Frank O'Hara on the *Oranges* series in 2006 with the occasion of the 'Imagine! Painters and Poets of the New York School' exhibition.

²⁵ Kenneth Koch, cited in *City poet*..., p. 225.

four rows of glass cubes²⁶. At the same time, the poet tries to convey the spirit of the assemblagist's art:

You are always a little too
young to understand. He is
bored with his sense of the
past, the artist. Out of the
prescient rock in his heart
he has spread a land without
flowers of near distances²⁷.

From Abstract Expressionism O'Hara made use of such concepts as "push and pull" and "action painting", says Perloff, but "he was really more at home with painting that retains at least some figuration than with pure abstraction"²⁸. What is essential to highlight is that from 'action painting' O'Hara borrowed the idea of art as process, of art as a field of action and total freedom. His poetry is thus perceived "as a chronicle of the creative act that produces it"²⁹. But this represents only one aspect of what we could call the aesthetic of presence embodied in his poetry as the poet aligned his work not only with the abstract, energetic ways of expression that were shaping in the New York art scene of the late 40s and early 1950s, but even with the artistic developments that marked the downfall of his "camp", like New Realism, Pop Art, and Happenings.

4. Conclusions

Frank O'Hara's poetry represents a unique convergence of urban experience, avant-garde aesthetics, and close engagement with the visual arts. Through his interactions with painters, musicians, and fellow writers, O'Hara developed a poetic voice that captures the immediacy of New York life while experimenting with form, process, and language. His work demonstrates a seamless integration of Surrealist imagery, Abstract Expressionist principles, and American vernacular, reflecting both the energy of his environment and the artistic innovations of his time.

By examining key poems such as *Meditations in an Emergency*, *Lunch Poems*, and *Why I Am Not a Painter*, it becomes clear that O'Hara not only chronicled the cultural and social milieu of mid-century New York but also redefined what American poetry could achieve in dialogue with contemporary art. Ultimately, his oeuvre stands as a testament to the possibilities of interdisciplinary creativity and remains influential for poets and artists seeking to merge life, art, and the immediacy of the present moment.

²⁶ Cornell's 'boxes' are owned by The Museum of Modern Art: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81493>.

²⁷ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*..., p. 237.

²⁸ Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: A Poet Among Painters*, p. 85.

²⁹ John Ashbery, Introduction to *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, p. ix.

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