
FRANK O'HARA

(1926–1966)

Frank O'Hara was so attracted to the variety and hectic pace of New York City life that he once claimed, "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." Yet this exuberantly urban poet grew up in rural Grafton, in central Massachusetts, where his father oversaw three farms and a dealership for farm machinery. Art became the young O'Hara's refuge. In "Autobiographical Fragments," O'Hara recalls that "I was sent against my will to Catholic schools, but fortunately I also began at the age of seven to study music. A lot of my aversions to Catholicism dumped themselves into my musical enthusiasms." Although he still hoped to pursue a career as a concert pianist, O'Hara joined the Navy immediately after his 1944 graduation from St. John's High School in Worcester. During the next two years, he worked as a shore patrolman in San Francisco, where he kept up his studies in piano and attended symphony concerts, and served on the destroyer USS *Nicholas*, which was stationed in the South Pacific. In the long months at sea, the young O'Hara turned to literature and music for solace, and he began to write poetry.

After his military service ended in 1946, O'Hara enrolled at Harvard University where he initially majored in music but soon changed to English. He read French and German poetry as well and published poems and stories in the *Harvard Advocate*. Although John Ashbery, whose work is often linked to O'Hara's, also attended Harvard at the same time, the two poets did not meet until their senior year, when at a party Ashbery overheard O'Hara rank the twentieth-century French composer Francis Poulenc's eighteen-minute cantata, *Les Sécheresses*, over Richard Wagner's four-hour opera, *Tristan und Isolde*. In a 1978 essay paying tribute to O'Hara, Ashbery remarked that "Frank didn't really believe that *Les Sécheresses* was greater than *Tristan* . . . but at the same time he felt . . . that art is already serious enough; there is no point in making it seem even more serious by taking it too seriously."

After graduation from Harvard in 1950, O'Hara spent a year at the University of Michigan, where he earned a master's in comparative literature, winning in spring 1951 a university-sponsored Hopwood Award

for a manuscript of poems and a play. In 1951 he settled permanently in New York City. Until his premature death fifteen years later, he thrived on the city's energy and liberality, for in New York he was free to live an openly homosexual life and to become part of the avant garde art scene. Both the rhythms of city life and the details of his social life became subjects of his poems. O'Hara was gregarious and maintained an extensive network of friendships, especially with painters. He made his living as an editorial assistant for *ArtNews*, to which he contributed reviews, and later at the Museum of Modern Art, where he began in 1951 by selling tickets and postcards at the information desk, rising to the rank of curator by 1960. His friendships with painters gave him an understanding of new trends in art. This knowledge, combined with his energy and enthusiasm, led to his achievements as a curator, for he helped organize traveling exhibitions that introduced Abstract Expressionism to Europe.

As a poet, O'Hara achieved fluency, generosity, and expansiveness through a lack of premeditation that is the result of knowledge and constant practice, rather than mere accident. O'Hara wanted to embrace all dimensions of experience in his poetry, whether momentous or banal. He included allusions to high culture alongside references to popular culture, particularly movies and advertising. Although his poems often chronicled his feelings and experiences, O'Hara is not considered a "confessional poet," for rather than focus on "the self" as his main subject, he gave equal value to the self and to the world and imbued his work with wry humor. His humility led not only to his habit of writing quickly, but to a casual attitude toward publication. Ashbery recalls, "Dashing the poems off at odd moments—in his office at the Museum of Modern Art, in the street at lunchtime or even in a room full of people—he would then put them away in drawers and cartons and half forget them."

For O'Hara, the process of writing mattered more than the pursuit of literary fame. His poems often appeared in limited editions that were sometimes printed by art galleries and included artwork by his friends. Only two short collections of poems, *Second Avenue* (1960) and *Lunch Poems* (1964), received wide distribution during his lifetime. After his sudden death in 1966 from injuries sustained when he was hit by a dune buggy on Fire Island, his friends began gathering his poems. *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* appeared in 1971, and was followed by additional volumes of poetry, plays, and art criticism, most notably *Art Chronicles: 1954–1966* (1975). Today, O'Hara remains one of the most influential mid-twentieth-century poets. His work is much imitated, especially by young poets, but his idiosyncratic combination of attentive spontaneity, disjunctive wit, and openness to all levels of experience is seldom matched.

Inspired by a lunchtime conversation with LeRoy Jones (Amiri Baraka) on August 27, 1959, in which the two jokingly decided to dream up a movement, O'Hara wrote "Personism" very quickly one week later as a contribution to Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry*. Like much of O'Hara's poetry, "Personism" walks the line between mockery and seriousness, for he satirizes the ubiquitousness of poetry movements, and the need felt by mid-century poets to create and promote them, yet also reveals a great deal about his own attitude toward writing.

PERSONISM: A MANIFESTO

Everything is in the poems, but at the risk of sounding like the poor wealthy man's Allen Ginsberg I will write to you because I just heard that one of my fellow poets thinks that a poem of mine can't be got at one reading is because I was confused too. Now, come on. I don't believe in god, so I don't have to make elaborately sounded structures. I hate Yachel Lindsay, always have, 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."

That's for the writing poems part. As for their reception, suppose you're in love and someone's mistreating (*mal aimé*) you, you don't say, "Hey, you can't hurt me this way, I *care!*" you just let all the different bodies fall where they may, and they always do may after a few months. But that's not why you fell in love in the first place, just to hang onto life, so you have to take your chances and try to avoid being logical. Pain always produces logic, which is very bad for you.

I'm not saying that I don't have practically the most lofty ideas of anyone writing today, but what difference does that make? they're just ideas. The only good thing about it is that when I get lofty enough I've stopped thinking and that's when refreshment arrives.

But how 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*). Nobody should experience anything they don't need to, if they don't need poetry bully for them, I like the movies too. And after all, only Whitman and Crane and Williams, of the American poets, are better than the movies. As for measure and other technical apparatus, that's just common sense: if you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you. There's nothing metaphysical about it. Unless, of course, you flatter yourself into thinking that what you're experiencing is "yearning."

Abstraction in poetry, which Allen recently commented on in *It is*, is intriguing. I think it appears mostly in the minute particulars where decision is necessary. Abstraction (in poetry, not in painting) involves personal removal by the poet. For instance, the decision involved in the choice between "the nostalgia of the infinite" and "the nostalgia for the infinite" defines an attitude towards degree of abstraction. The nostalgia of the infinite representing the greater degree of abstraction, and negative capability (as in Keats and Mallarmé). Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody yet 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. That's part of personism. It was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959, a day in which I was in love with someone (not Roi, by the way, a blond). I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born. It's a very exciting movement which will undoubtedly have lots of adherents. It puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages. In all modesty, I confess that it may be the death of literature as we know it. While I have certain regrets, I am still glad I got there before Alain Robbe-Grillet did. Poetry being quicker and surer than prose, it is only just that poetry finish literature off. For a time people thought that Araud was going to accomplish this, but actually, for all its magnificence, his polemical writings are not more outside literature than Bear Mountain is outside New York State. His relation is no more astounding than Dubuffet's to painting.

What can we expect of Personism? (This is getting good, isn't it?) Everything, but we won't get it. It is too new, too vital a movement to promise anything. But it, like Africa, is on the way. The recent propagandists for technique on the one hand, and for content on the other, had better watch out.