

Marjorie Perloff

"THE ECSTASY OF ALWAYS BURSTING FORTH!"

: rereading FRANK O'HARA

**(Frank O'Hara, *Selected Poems*, ed. Mark Ford. New York:
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Song

Is it dirty
does it look dirty
that's what you think of in the city

does it just seem dirty
that's what you think of in the city
you don't refuse to breathe do you

someone comes along with a very bad character
he seems attractive. is he really. yes. very
he's attractive as his character is bad. is it. yes

that's what you think of in the city
run your finger along your no-moss mind
that's not a thought that's soot

and you take a lot of dirt off someone
is the character less bad. no. it improves constantly
you don't refuse to breathe do you

(158)

Fifty years have passed since Frank O'Hara wrote this seemingly casual and droll little poem about sexual desire—fifty years in which O'Hara's reputation has continued to rise steadily. Who would have believed in 1959, or in 1966, the year of O'Hara's tragic death at the age of forty, or in 1974, when Donald Allen produced the first *Selected Poems*, with Larry Rivers' notorious nude portrait of Frank on the dust jacket, that by 2009, O'Hara would have come to be regarded, not only in the U.S. but around the world, as one of the great poets of our time? Robert Lowell, who famously dismissed as mere fluff the lyric "Lana Turner has collapsed" (1962), written, so O'Hara claimed, in the course of a Staten Island ferry ride that took him and Lowell to a joint poetry reading, is no longer much favored by les jeunes, even as so many other notable poets of mid-century, from W. S. Merwin to Adrienne Rich, have found themselves inevitably eclipsed by a younger, cooler generation.

But O'Hara? Not only is he now widely taught here and abroad (the editor of the *Selected Poems* is the British poet-critic Mark Ford, a professor at University College, London); he has found an unexpected popular audience as well. On YouTube, at this writing, you can find three short video performances of "Is it dirty," made by Joseph Fusco (*fuscofilm* 2006), each with a different reader (Fusco himself, Dylan Chalfy, Janet Shaw), the first read to music by Brahms, the second Artie Shaw, the third Eric Satie—all containing distinctive Manhattan imagery from Harlem fire escapes to flashing neon signs. Each gives an intriguing window on the poem, placing before us the signature style that makes O'Hara so unique and inimitable.

Is it dirty? The question is almost rhetorical for Manhattan dwellers, whose habitat—street corners, dumpsters, construction sites, subway platforms, park benches, back alleys—is dirty by definition. But *that* dirt is taken for granted: what really interests the questioner is mental dirt: dirty jokes, films, novels, and pictures, "dirty" as in mild expletives like "You dirty rat!" And why is the city especially conducive to dirty thoughts? Well, presumably, those who breathe in the dirty air, think dirty too. The logic here is of course specious, but in the context of "Song," it makes perfect sense. The poem, moreover, immediately sets itself apart from the urban nightmare poems of its time: unlike Lowell's nerve-wracking New York of "chewed-up streets" or Ginsberg's "supernatural darkness of cold-water flats," O'Hara's "city hung with flashlights" (19) is the American counterpart of what James Joyce called "dear dirty

Dublin.”

The key to “Song” is what Aristotle called in his *Rhetoric* the pathetic argument—the characterization of speakers by their modes of second-person address. In O’Hara’s lyric, meditation or description generally gives way to overheard conversation: the address to a “you,” whether overt or not, shifting in the course of a given poem even as it everywhere controls the discourse. Is it dirty? does it look dirty? does it just seem dirty? The insistent and intense questions may be posed to a friend, a lover, or even to the poet himself; then, too, in the case of the refrain “that’s what you think of in the city,” “you” may be equivalent to “one.” What the form of direct address manages to do, in any case—and none of O’Hara’s countless imitators has quite matched this strategy—is give the poem an astonishing immediacy: the reader, confronted by the lines “is it dirty / does it look dirty,” is instantly drawn into the conversation. For what is “it” anyway—the “it” that may just “seem dirty” of line 4? And how does “it” morph so readily into the “attractive” *he* of “very bad character” in the third tercet?

Ordinary and colloquial as the language in that tercet is, the staccato conversational rhythm—“is he really. yes. very / he’s attractive as his character is bad. is it. yes”—heightens the intimacy of the discourse. And also its mystery: who’s speaking here? Do we read “is he really” as genuine question, confirmation, or sardonic response to the previous assertion? It all depends on pitch, as the video versions attest. Are there two people debating the issue or even three? Or is the poet daydreaming in a taxi? The ambivalence of pronouns is reinforced by the surreal slide from physical to mental in “run your finger along your no-moss mind,” with its sexual (masturbatory?) connotations—connotations confirmed by the comic line that follows: “that’s not a thought that’s soot.” You don’t refuse to breathe do you?

O’Hara called the aesthetic that governs this process “Personism.” The widely known 1959 manifesto by that name is so playful, so filled with declarations like “You just go on your nerve,” “I don’t have to make elaborately sounded structures,” or “While I was writing [the poem] I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead,” that readers often miss the import of a passage that come at midpoint:

Abstraction in poetry . . . is intriguing. I think it appears mostly in the

minute particulars where decision is necessary. Abstraction . . . involves personal removal by the poet. . . . [Personism] 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 toward the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person. (248)

The demand is for personal address on the one hand, depersonalization of the addressee on the other. The poet talks, even here in his manifesto, to a *you*, he familiarly confides in you, he is sensitive to *your* responses. But the particulars of the addressee's identity remains opaque, even when "you" is "me" or "us." Thus, despite the well-known campy explanation that Personism "puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified," O'Hara mythologizes his "characters" by regarding them less as individuals than as players in particular language games.

Such distancing is enhanced by formal control. "Song" is built on a sequence of repetition with variation ("Is it dirty / does it look dirty . . . does it just seem dirty"), refrain ("that's what you think of in the city"), and off-rhyme, with the first five lines ending respectively on "dirty," "dirty," "city," "dirty," "city." Once the dirty city motif is established, the poem introduces a new motif: "someone comes along . . .," followed by the clipped dialogue of the next three stanzas with its "yes, no" banter and absence of all punctuation except for periods. The poem's musical development comes full circle with the repetition, now in a different context, of "you don't refuse to breathe do you."

Despite its seeming ease, then, O'Hara's is not an easy poetry. In making his new selection, Mark Ford plays down the more clotted, surrealist experiments of the early fifties (e.g. the long "Second Avenue") as well as most of the charming but slight later poems that O'Hara never intended to publish (e.g., "The Sentimental Units" or "Bathroom," both from 1963). Rather, the volume's focus is on the great odes, the "I do this, I do that" "lunch poems," and the short lyrics and songs in the vein of "Is it dirty." As such, this new *Selected* contains almost no wholly negligible poems,

although it does include the campy—and to my mind, slight—early verse play *Try! Try!* Indeed, the O’Hara who produced such brilliant conversation poems, faltered when he had to write actual dramatic dialogue. One problem, of course, was that, given the conventions of the fifties, O’Hara had to code as heterosexual the gay love affair between his three principals. More important, the necessity of simulating what people might actually say in a given situation prevented the imaginative transformation that lyric permits.

Take the following untitled poem, also of 1959, that centers on a telephone call to Frank’s poet friend Kenneth Koch:

The fluorescent tubing burns like a bobby-soxer’s ankles
the white paint the green leaves in an old champagne bottle
and the formica shelves going up in the office
and the formica desk-tops over the white floor
what kind of an office is this anyway (164)

Again: present tense, *medias res*. The reference here is probably to Frank’s new office at the Museum of Modern Art, but the detail is less realistic than cinematic: one thinks of fifties films like James Dean’s *Rebel without a Cause*, with its bobby soxers and burning lights. White formica shelves going up, white desktops coming down onto white floors: the scene reflects the poet’s inner emptiness, what with nature reduced to a few leaves stuck into an empty champagne bottle. But even this description is quickly interrupted by the exasperated query: “what kind of an office is this anyway.” Is the unpunctuated question addressed to the self? Memory of someone else’s disparaging remark? The improvisational note, in any case, paves the way for the phone call that follows:

I am so nervous about my life the little of it I can get ahold of
so I call up Kenneth in Southampton and presto
he is leaning on the shelf in the kitchen three hours away
while Janice is drying her hair which has prevented her from hearing
my voice through the telephone company ear-blacker
why black a clean ear
Kenneth you are really the backbone of a tremendous poetry nervous
system

which keeps sending messages along the wireless luxuriance
of distraught experiences and hysterical desires to keep things humming
and have nothing go off the trackless tracks

Address here is complicated: the poet doesn't so much address Kenneth as relay, in the present tense, (to another friend?), how miserable he felt, how he called up Kenneth, and why Janice (Kenneth's wife) wasn't the one to answer the phone. The poet as protagonist may well feel out of control, but the poem itself is able to *relate* everything: "nervous" in line 1 above points ahead to the "tremendous poetry nervous system" of which Kenneth is said to be the backbone, the kitchen shelf Kenneth leans on connects to the shelves in Frank's office: indeed, there seems to be one continuous shelf from Manhattan to Southampton "three hours away." And the hair dryer Janice is using has the shape and look of the "telephone company ear-blacker": the aside "why black a clean ear," which literally refers to the phone, thus slyly includes Janice, straight from the shower, as well.

In this context the address to Kenneth has the directness of actual speech, but the fact is that Frank's words, as recorded here, are by no means a simulation of the actual phone conversation. On the phone, one speaks of specifics ("why did Vincent get mad yesterday? Or "what shall I tell Joe when I get home?"). "The wireless luxuriance / of distraught experiences and hysterical desires to keep things humming," on the other hand, is a retrospective and abstracted description of the poet's state of mind, again, perhaps, presented as if in witty summation to a third party. We can see this doubling over process at work in the final section:

And once more you have balanced me precariously
on the wilderness wish
of wanting to be everything to everybody everywhere
as the vigor of Africa through the corridor
the sands of Sahara still tickle my jockey shorts
the air-conditioner grunts like that Eskimo dad
and the phone clicks as your glasses bump the receiver
to say we are in America and it is all right not to be elsewhere (164)

Note that the poem never supplies the words of comfort and reassurance Kenneth might actually proffer. Rather, Frank's narrative of Kenneth's cheering up is after the

fact: the poet can look back on the “wilderness wish / of wanting to be everything to everybody everywhere” with some equanimity. And just telling it again and again, to one of his countless confidantes, Frank can break the dark mood. Africa and Alaska, emblematic of those far reaches beyond the poet’s grasp, are no longer threatening; indeed, he can joke about the “sands of Sahara still [tickling] my jockey shorts” or the air-conditioner that “grunts like that Eskimo dad.” Only in the penultimate line does the “your” once again relate directly to Kenneth as Frank recognizes the sound of his friend’s glasses scraping the phone. That sound as the phone clicks off is the reassurance he needs: “to say we are in America and it is alright not to be elsewhere.” Which is a way of saying that Frank is not out of line, that, whatever is at issue, he’s doing the right thing.

“Personism,” as exemplified here, is thus artfully constructed, inviting the reader to share what seems so private and is yet a common process of working oneself out of an anxiety state. We don’t know from the poem what’s wrong with Frank, why his life is falling apart, whom he’s in love with or just what “distraught experiences and hysterical desires” have been bothering him. We only know that friendship breaks the spell—“once more you have balanced me precariously—and that, as “precariously” tells us, it won’t last. In O’Hara’s poetic universe, nothing does last, as the poet knows only too well. The cream in the instant coffee is always “slightly sour” (100), the ice in the whiskey melting (159), the lunch hour nearly over. All the more reason to savor every moment: “There’s nothing so spiritual about being happy but you can’t miss a day of it, because it doesn’t last” (99). And soon we will read “how sad the lower East side is on Sunday morning in May” (213).

The longing to stop time in its “trackless tracks” is forever met by its opposite: the desire to “keep up” the surface with what the early abstract expressionist Hans Hoffman called “push and pull.” In a poem surprisingly not included in Ford’s *Selected*, “To Hell with It”: the poet declares:

(How I hate subject matter! Melancholy.
intruding on the vigorous heart.
the soul telling itself
you haven’t suffered enough ((Hyalomiel))
and all things that don’t change,

photographs,

monuments,

memories of Bunny and Gregory and me in costume

(*Collected Poems*, 275)

Hyalomiel is a French trade name of a vaginal gel: lubricant is what's needed to give life to those static items like photographs and monuments. And liquification is equivalent to *surprise* in O'Hara's work: opening lines, especially, must jump out at the reader. "The only way to be quiet," he declares in the short manifesto lyric "Poetry," "is to be quick, so I scare/ you clumsily, or surprise / you with a stab." And so we have openings like the following:

I think a lot about

the Peachums:

("The Three-Penny Opera," 1950)

Why do you play such dreary music

on Saturday afternoon . . .

("Radio," 1955)

I'm having a real day of it.

There was

something I had to do. But what?

("Anxiety," 1957)

"I think a lot about the Peachums" is wonderfully absurd because no one familiar with "The Three Penny Opera" (whether the Brecht-Weill play or, as here, the film) has ever given a thought to the Peachums, those vicious parents of Polly who are the purest of stereotypes, functioning in the play to satirize the financial ills of Weimar Germany, while glancing back slyly at the not so different mores presented in John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, which is Brecht's source. The opening declaration is thus comically absurd, as is the admonishment to the radio box in O'Hara's second example. And it is the candor of "I'm having a real day of it" that immediately engages the reader, especially with the follow-up, "There was / something I had to do. But what?"

The immediacy of such poems is palpable, the comic-anxious moods heightened by O'Hara's tensile line breaks: "I think a lot about / the Peachums" or "There was / something" in "Anxiety." What, on rereading, I find even more remarkable in these poems is their contemporaneity; often, they sound as if they were

written yesterday. Common sense suggests that, when poems use the particulars of slangy, everyday speech—and in O’Hara’s case, the New York gay *argot* of his time—along with former brand names like Hyalomiel or the “Heaven on Earth Bldg / near the Williamsburg Bridge,” they would date quickly. After all, our idiom in 2008—seven years after 9/11 and half a century after O’Hara’s radio days, his screening of “Three Penny Opera,” or his late-night suppers at the Sagamore Café—has certainly changed. The Cold War discourse and cold-water flats of O’Hara’s pre-Stonewall Manhattan have been replaced by a much more corporate and dispersed metropolis, whose poetic activity has shifted from the Cedar Bar to the internet, from the telephone (not yet a mobile in O’Hara’s days!) to email and the blogosphere.

The presentness of O’Hara’s poetry depends, I think, on its peculiar absorption of the public into the private sphere. Unlike the Lowell of “For the Union Dead” or “Inauguration Day, 1953,” O’Hara does not comment directly on public events, nor does he express political convictions. Rather, he makes the reader *feel* what it meant to live at a moment when the Berlin blockade or the Cuban Missile Crisis or, first and last, the threat of nuclear war was always on the edge of one’s consciousness. For the private citizen, the morning news was—and this remains the case today—paradoxical: on the one hand, the newsflash becomes part of our everyday life; on the other, we absorb the news passively, it being quite beyond our power to actually affect it.

“Poem” (Khrushchev is coming on the right day!)” is a case in point. In September 1959, Stalin’s successor Nikita Khrushchev was the first Soviet Premier to visit the U.S. Between high-level talks, Eisenhower entertained Khrushchev at Camp David, movie stars entertained him in Hollywood, and of course he saw the sights in New York. For the thirteen days of his trip, Khrushchev was constantly in the headlines, his unsmiling (though sometimes broadly grimacing) face staring defensively at his audience. What, under these circumstances, can we make of that absurd opening line? Why is it the “right day” for Khrushchev to come to New York?

From Frank’s particular perspective, this bright September day is the “right” one because he happens to be feeling especially buoyant. It’s a gorgeous sunny and windy day in New York— “the cool graced light/ is pushed off the enormous glass

piers by hard wind / and everything is tossing, hurrying on up”—and his love affair with Vincent is evidently going well, as suggested by the droll double entendre of the line “last night we went to a movie and came out.” Wind, as I noted before, is always a sign of life, of vitality in O’Hara’s work; it energizes the poet and makes even the morning cab drive to work a pleasure:

where does the evil of the year go
when September takes New York
and turns it into ozone stalagmites
deposits of light

But where does Khrushchev come in? On the morning cab ride, the Puerto Rican driver complains that “this country has everything but *politesse*.” Inconsequentially, that evening Frank remembers the comment as he and Vincent are dining after the movie. “Blueberry blintzes”: whether these are on the dinner menu or only conjured up vis-à-vis the Russian motif, the speaker notes that “Khrushchev was probably being carped at / In Washington, *no politesse*.” The joke, of course, is that it is Khrushchev himself who is probably doing the carping and that, in any case, nothing could be more alien to this dour personality than *politesse* or charm. Nor is he likely to care what sort of day it was in Manhattan. Indeed, the subliminal presence of the Soviet premier does color the poet’s mood: recalling his reading, last night, of François Villon, “his life, so dark,” the bright sunshine is perceived as “blinding” and the poet notes that “my tie is blowing up the street / I wish it would blow off / though it is cold and somewhat warms the neck.”

It is a momentary tremor. The exhilaration quickly returns, the expansive mood large enough to incorporate the dour presence of the Russian Premier:

as the train bears Khrushchev on to Pennsylvania Station
and the light seems to be eternal
and joy seems to be inexorable
I am foolish enough always to find it in wind (176)

The Khrushchev train, bearing down on Penn Station, can’t spoil the poet’s mood. All the same, O’Hara concludes on a tremulous note: the light only *seems* to be eternal, the joy inexorable. And the wind, we know, bloweth where it listeth. The poem, in any case, traces the emotional arc of this poet’s response to public events, subliminally

present as he makes his way through the city. It is the *banality* of the political that makes it so insidious. And again the pathetic argument draws the reader into the frame, for “Khrushchev is coming on the right day!” is a quip evidently made to an accompanying friend, and the whole “I do this, I do that” process seems to be relayed to various intimates, with the poet wryly performing himself in their presence.

The lesson—if there is anything as solemn as a lesson to be learned from O’Hara’s lyric—is the old one that poetry must *show* rather than *tell*, that poetry is always a mode of defamiliarization. At a time where the poetry journals are filled with trivial love songs and self-righteous anti-war poems—poems that present their speaker as *knowing* self, telling us others what the right stance is—O’Hara’s poetic instinct for the unbearable lightness of being is especially remarkable:

it’s also pretty hard to remember life’s marvelous
but there it is guttering choking then soaring
in the mirrored room of this consciousness
it’s practically a blaze of pure sensibility
and however exaggerated at least something’s going on
and the quick oxygen in the air will not go neglected
will not sulk or fall into blackness and peat (“In Favor of One’s Time”)

Or, as O’Hara put it in a neighboring poem, “it is possible isn’t it.”