

**“Emptying the World So We Can Be Alone:” Connection and Isolation in the Poetry of
Frank O’Hara**

by

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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1955, while living at 326 East Forty-Ninth Street, aspiring writer Joe LeSueur was sharing a flat with Frank O'Hara, who, at the time, held a position at the Museum of Modern Art as a special assistant in the International Program.¹ LeSueur recounts how O'Hara was capable of nearly boundless energy, stating that once O'Hara declared: "If I had my way I'd go on and on and on and never go to sleep."² Indeed, from O'Hara's job at the Museum, to his numerous parties and get-togethers with all sorts of artist friends, to his promiscuous sex life, his drinking and smoking habit, to his own artistic output, it seemed as though nobody could truly "keep up with him," including LeSueur himself.³ O'Hara was constantly in motion while in New York, and so in 1955 when he accepted a writer's fellowship at the Poet's Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts for the first six months of 1956, LeSueur was taken completely aback: "What could he have been thinking? [...] he must have realized that he thrived on life in New York, that the city had become the lifeblood of his poetry."⁴

As to what he was thinking, it is difficult to say, but it turns out that LeSueur's intuition was correct, for during the six months at Cambridge, O'Hara wrote only a dozen poems, compared to the twenty-two he had written in the six months before going to Cambridge.⁵ The poems written during his time at Cambridge vary wildly in their quality, but none have established themselves within the canon of O'Hara's most famous and well-regarded poetry. Within less than two months after returning to the hustle and bustle of New York, however,

¹ Frank O'Hara Donald Allen, ed. *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*. Berkeley, University of California Press. 1971. Print. xiv.

² Joe LeSueur. *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O'Hara*. "Introduction: Four Apartments." New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2003. Print. xv.

³ LeSueur, xvi.

⁴ LeSueur, 98.

⁵ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, 537.

O'Hara had written two of his most famous poems, "In Memory of my Feelings," and "A Step Away From Them," the latter of which showcases the New York-inspired imagery which would help make O'Hara's poetry famous one day: "On/ to Times Square, where the sign/ blows smoke over my head."⁶ O'Hara's poetry became infused with the New York landscape, with all its messiness, beauty, and intricacy.

This senior project explores that messiness and intricacy present in O'Hara's poetry. First, it examines O'Hara's life before New York and how O'Hara gradually created the poetic drive that blossomed in New York City. Of particular interest is his time at Harvard where he befriended other undergraduate students, such as poets John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch, who also moved to New York. Then, this paper examines O'Hara's fifteen years living in New York City, during which time he wrote a vast amount of poetry and was heavily involved in the New York City art world. Then it analyzes O'Hara's poetry. O'Hara tempers the serious nature of many of his poems with a sense of the casual in order to effectively connect with the reader. This balance between seriousness and the casual is part of what makes O'Hara still read to this day, for it is what helps his poetry compelling and relatable.

Frank O'Hara, as an American poet, today exists somewhere between obscurity and canonization. He does not occupy the same level as American poets such as Whitman or Frost, nor has he been fully relegated to the annals of lesser poets. He is recognized as a formative member of the "New York School of Poets" which, in its first generation, included poets John Ashbery, James Schuyler, and Barbara Guest. The "New York School" spawned a second generation of acclaimed poets, including Ted Berrigan, Alice Notley, and Ron Padgett, whose idolization of O'Hara's work helped further O'Hara's popularity among readers after his death.

⁶ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, 257.

Many of his poems were published posthumously in magazines such as *Poetry*, and most recently his 1964 collection *Lunch Poems* was reissued on its 50th anniversary.

O'Hara's life in and relationship with New York City was a focal point of his poetry. O'Hara lived in New York City during an artistic explosion; the Abstract Expressionist movement, largely based in and around the city, was beginning to gain fame; a number of writers at the time lived in or near the city, including W. H. Auden, Allen Ginsberg, and John Ashbery; and the Museum of Modern Art had recently opened up its International Program and was opening up exhibitions across Europe. Between all of these, at times, disparate groups, sat O'Hara, whose role, as described by Ashbery, was to "cobble everything together and tell us what we and they were doing."⁷

This paper seeks to explore O'Hara's role as this glue holding together artists, poets, and friends. He forged both artistic connections with artists, collaborating with artists across artistic genres, and personal connections, befriending many. His experiences as curator at the MOMA, a position in which he celebrated some of the most recognizable names in mid-century American art such as Jackson Pollock and Willem De Kooning, and the friends and people he knew while living in New York, bolstered not just the New York art scene, but also his poetry. O'Hara's poetry is his greatest legacy. Many of the poems are a sort of time capsule, populated with names of places, friends, and artists that O'Hara knew and saw in 1950's New York City. Most remarkable about his poetry, however, is that despite its indebtedness to the very specific time of mid-century New York City, it still holds a sense of universality.

It is through an introduction to Frank O'Hara's poetry in my second year of college that I first became interested in him and his work. Sitting in the dining hall eating a slightly cold

⁷ David Lehman. *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*. New York. Anchor Books, 1998. Print. 56.

breakfast, I read his poems from 2009's *Selected Poems* edited by Mark Ford. I had borrowed the book from a friend and felt the sort of connection that, undoubtedly, was felt by thousands of readers before me. The relaxed tone, the blend of irony and sincerity, the rapid-fire references to a plethora of locations and artists, it all made me feel as though I were included in an inner conversation the poet was having with himself, and I was amazed. Reading and researching more about O'Hara's life and work seemed like the most appropriate way to uncover more about what it is that fascinates me about his poetry to this day.

This paper does not seek to completely recreate the New York of the 1950's that O'Hara knew. Rather, it seeks to recreate New York City according to how O'Hara viewed it and wrote about it in his poems. Thus, this project focuses particularly on areas such as Greenwich Village, where O'Hara frequented due to the prevalence of artists, and Midtown Manhattan, where he worked. Also of importance is the circle of New York artists and friends who O'Hara knew, who impacted his poetry and his career at MOMA.

This project relies on accounts of O'Hara's life recorded by friends and colleagues. Two sources in particular were key: Brad Gooch's biography *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* for its comprehensive nature as well as the personal interviews conducted by Gooch on family and friends of O'Hara's, and Joe LeSueur's *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O'Hara* for its contextualization of O'Hara's poetry in regard to O'Hara's personal life. Such sources were supplemented by letters written by O'Hara which are archived at the University of Connecticut at Storrs and the UC of San Diego library. The New York Times, which regularly wrote about New York's art and writing scene, was also a vital source for the insight into New York beyond O'Hara's experience.

O'Hara's poetry is the most important key to his thinking. I am approaching these secondary sources as an opportunity to build upon the New York that is seen in his poetry. This project is an attempt to contextualize O'Hara when he writes about Grand Central station or the ballet or the Cedar Tavern or any of the myriad places in New York that he visited and explore how those places impacted his poetry. His job as an art curator at MOMA is also critical, for it is his experience with art there that heavily informed how he approached his own poetry. O'Hara played a big role in helping other artists, such as the Abstract Expressionists, grow in fame and recognition, and it is his position at the museum that allowed him to do this.

CHAPTER 1: Pre-New York Frank O'Hara

On the night of February 9, 1962 Frank O'Hara was on the Staten Island Ferry heading to a poetry reading. It was a cold and dark February, with snow battering the boat, producing an unpleasant ride. To combat his discomfort, O'Hara wrote a poem based on an article from that day's copy of the New York Post.⁸ Just a few hours after writing the poem, O'Hara read it before an audience at Wagner College, filled with college students, aspiring poets, artists, and famous poets, such as Robert Lowell, who also read. It was received with great enthusiasm.⁹ The poem in question, simply titled "Poem," became more well-known by its first line, "Lana Turner has collapsed!" After concluding his reading, Lowell stood up to the podium to go next and sarcastically apologized to the crowd for not having "written a poem on the spot," implying that writing poems was not as casual for him as it was for O'Hara.¹⁰

This story, among many others, has become ingrained in the mythos that surrounds O'Hara's life and work. O'Hara became a well-known figure in the New York art scene of the late 1950's and early to mid-60's due, in equal parts, to his poetry and writings, his position at MoMA, and his extroverted and passionate personality. The interest that surrounded him grew to such an extent that artist Helen Frankenthaler recalled that by the early 1960's, invitations to cocktail parties and dinners would often bear the written promise that "Frank will be there!"¹¹ His poetry, as well as this cult of personality that surrounded him, contributed to the lasting power that his work has had on American poetry in the decades since his death at the age of forty.

⁸ LeSueur, 265.

⁹ Lehman, 349.

¹⁰ Brad Gooch. *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1993. Print. 387.

¹¹ Peter Schjedahl. "Frank O'Hara: He Made Things and People Sacred." *The Village Voice*, 11 Aug 1966. Web.

O'Hara was born on March 27, 1926 in Baltimore, Maryland, to farming business owner Russell O'Hara and his wife, Katherine "Kay." Russell and Kay were both born into conservative Irish Roman Catholic families and were able to garner respect in the mainly Protestant town of Grafton, Massachusetts where they relocated shortly after Frank's birth.¹² The family lived in a large, two story wooden house with an attic, a porch, and a garden.¹³ The young Francis showed an intense interest in reading at a very young age, as one of his uncles remarked: "Francis was far happier reading a book than you or I would be playing ball." His Aunt Margaret gave him books with handwritten notes inside: "For Francis who charms me with his thoughtfulness, amazes me with his intelligence, and amuses me with his flashes of independence."¹⁴ Among the books O'Hara read as a child were classics such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Captain's Courageous*, and *A Christmas Carol*.¹⁵ Francis already displayed the love of literature that would come to dominate his life and work years later. Poetry was not particularly interesting to the young O'Hara, who chose the comfort of novels or, most significantly, music.¹⁶

Music became one of O'Hara's artistic interests. His parents frequently brought him to concerts and plays, such as his first concert: a performance of Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony and Prokofiev's "Lieutenant Kije Suite" by the Boston Symphony Orchestra.¹⁷ Russell O'Hara could also be found at the piano for twenty minutes or so before dinner, with Francis perched just nearby, playing compositions by Gershwin, Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, and especially Rachmaninoff, who was Russell O'Hara's favorite composer.¹⁸ This love of music and the piano

¹² Gooch, 20.

¹³ Gooch, 18.

¹⁴ Tom Broderick. Interview by Brad Gooch, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1993. Print. 27.

¹⁵ Gooch, 26, 27.

¹⁶ Frank O'Hara. Letter to his Parents. 9 March 1945. Gooch, 35.

¹⁷ Gooch, 31.

¹⁸ Tom Broderick. Interview by Brad Gooch, 28.

(along with Rachmaninoff, who would remain one of O'Hara's favorite composers as well) stayed with O'Hara for years and years, with the young Francis starting piano lessons at seven years of age.¹⁹

Francis O'Hara was sent to St. Paul's elementary school from 1932 to 1940.²⁰ He had a negative reaction to the strict, parochial education, a reaction which would last well into adulthood as seen in the "Autobiographical Fragments" written in 1960: "I was sent against my will to Catholic schools."²¹ Often frustrated at the notoriously strict sisters, O'Hara consoled himself with the piano: "A lot of my aversions to Catholicism dumped themselves into my musical enthusiasms."²²

This musical outlet continued to high school, when he attended St. John's High School run by the Xaverian Brothers on Temple Street in Worcester.²³ There, he received a heavy workload featuring a classical college preparatory curriculum of French, Latin, Greek, Math, Science, Physics, History, and Religion.²⁴ O'Hara ranked seventh in his class of fifty-two students.²⁵ Francis' piano skills continued to grow as well, and by 1943 was able to play such a variety of pieces as Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, Gershwin's First Prelude, Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier*, Leonard Bernstein's "Seven Anniversaries," and *Hindemith's* "Konzermusik."²⁶ O'Hara attended the New England Conservatory once a week for a semester in 1944, possibly preparing for a career in musical composition.²⁷

¹⁹ Frank O'Hara, Donald Allen, ed. *Standing Still and Walking in New York*. "Autobiographical Fragments." Grey Fox Press, Bolinas, 1975.

²⁰ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems* xiv.

²¹ Frank O'Hara, *Standing Still and Walking in New York*. 30.

²² Frank O'Hara, *Standing Still and Walking in New York*. 30.

²³ Gooch, 38.

²⁴ Gooch, 39.

²⁵ Gooch, 39.

²⁶ Gooch, 55.

²⁷ Gooch, 57.

After graduating from St. John's High School in 1944, O'Hara enlisted in the Navy.²⁸ Years later, he detailed his experiences in the navy in his short story "Lament and Chastisement: A Travelogue of War and Personality," which he wrote in a creative writing class in Harvard (he got a B+). O'Hara wasn't terribly fond of military life- recalling that nobody "had said anything to me for months and I had said nothing in return."²⁹ Other recruits described O'Hara as "soft-spoken" and that he "kept to himself a lot," which is a rather different person than the one who would fill up parties with New York's blossoming art scene years later.³⁰

After completing basic training, O'Hara was sent to Key West, Florida, for more specialized training as a sonar operator, owing to his musical background and trained ear, which O'Hara, in a letter to his parents, suggested might "improve my pitch and teach me about the physics of sound and therefore music."³¹

Even after he departed for the Pacific on the USS *Lurline*, O'Hara still turned to art to provide clarity in his life, writing in "Lament and Chastisement," "At this time I reread *Ulysses*, needing to throw up my sensibilities and Joyce's art into the face of my surroundings [...] I was reassured that what was important to me would always be important to me."³² His reverence for Joyce extended into his poetry, such as in his 1957 poem, "Poem Read at Joan Mitchell's" when he declares: "Yesterday I felt very tired from being at the FIVE SPOT/ and today I felt very tired from going to bed early and reading ULYSSES."³³ O'Hara referenced many of the artists that he read and admired in his future poetry.

²⁸ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, xiv.

²⁹ Frank O'Hara, Donald Allen, ed. *Early Writing*. New York, Grey Fox Press, 1977. Print. 112.

³⁰ Jim O'Connor. Interview by Brad Gooch, 64.

³¹ Frank O'Hara. Letter to his Parents. 9 March 1945. Gooch, 66.

³² Frank O'Hara, *Early Writing*, 122.

³³ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, 265.

Aside from “Lament and Chastisement” O’Hara rarely showcased his wartime experiences in his poetry, at least, not explicitly. The specter of war hung over the poet, particularly in his first major poetic exploration during his graduate studies in 1951: “A Byzantine Place: 50 Poems and a Noh Play.”³⁴ While he occasionally broaches the subject of his wartime experiences in this collection, it is the “charged silences, unplanned sounds, suspenseful quiets, and acts of listening” in these early poems which truly echo his experiences in the war and is what greatly shapes his poetry in the future.³⁵

With the GI Bill of Rights providing for free education, O’Hara planned to continue his musical studies, hoping to teach or compose one day, and only applied to schools that featured a music program.³⁶ His family, and in particular his parents, encouraged him to apply to schools with a liberal arts program instead of a such a specialized program, with his mother particularly liking Harvard for its social aura and excellent academic reputation.³⁷

In 1946, O’Hara moved to Cambridge and began taking classes at Harvard as a music major.³⁸ At Harvard, O’Hara experienced condescension from the classically wealthy, Protestant students there. With one describing the Irish-Catholic O’Hara as coming from a “hick town.”³⁹ This twinge of disdain did not hamper O’Hara, who was able to go “his own way,” developing a personal style as well as striving for academic and artistic growth and rigor.⁴⁰ O’Hara took courses in both music theory and English, but also sat in on a variety of other courses, including a few in the art history program, brought about by his increasing interest in visual arts.⁴¹

³⁴ Claire, Seiler. "Francis O’Hara, War Poet." *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 54 no. 4, 2013, p. 810-833.

³⁵ Seiler, "Francis O’Hara, War Poet."

³⁶ Frank O’Hara. Letter to his Parents. 13 April 1946. Gooch, 93.

³⁷ Gooch, 93.

³⁸ Frank O’Hara, *The Collected Poems*, Xiii.

³⁹ Gooch, 99.

⁴⁰ Gooch, 99.

⁴¹ Hal Fondren. Interview with Brad Gooch, 29 October 1987. Gooch, 145.

This artistic exploration was catalyzed by his interactions with fellow Harvard students, many of whom developed literary careers of their own and stayed in contact with O'Hara. For instance, O'Hara roomed with future illustrator and graphic novelist Edward Gorey in his second year and the two extensively poured through a variety of novels and poetry, including works by Gertrude Stein, C. Day Lewis, Virginia Woolf, and Hart Crane.⁴² O'Hara also attended multiple poetry readings and lectures, through the Morris Gray Lecture Series, from poets such as Wallace Stevens in February 1947 and T.S Eliot in May 1947.⁴³

In 1950, two of O'Hara's stories were published in the *Harvard Advocate*, the university's literary magazine, signaling his growing interest in writing.⁴⁴ O'Hara thought of himself primarily as a fiction writer, with some of his "models" including the novels "*Between the Acts*, *Nightwoods*, *The Tragic Comedians* [...] *The Waves* [...] *Ulysses*, and *Prothalamium*."⁴⁵ O'Hara thought "My own writing is so far in the future that it may well be a mirage. Except that the future itself is a mirage and I refuse to disbelieve in either."⁴⁶ This sort of bold, extravagant, writerly exploration is mirrored in poet John Ashbery's description of O'Hara, who he had met during Ashbery's final year at Harvard: "[H]e was this sort of brilliant young writer who talked sassy. Someone who looked like he was going to be famous someday."⁴⁷ The two young poets bonded over their shared love of modern music and shared numerous poems with each other. In his introduction to the *Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, published in 1971, Ashbery describes

⁴² Gooch, 117, 121.

⁴³ *Morris Gray Lectures*, poetry.harvard.edu/morris-gray-lectures.

⁴⁴ Gooch, 121.

⁴⁵ Frank O'Hara, *Early Writing*, 102.

⁴⁶ Frank O'Hara, *Early Writing*, 103.

⁴⁷ John Ashbery. Interview by Brad Gooch, 137.

O'Hara's college-era poetry as, "as a period of testing, of trying to put together a tradition to build on where none had existed."⁴⁸

Having outgrown his childhood disinterest in poetry, O'Hara began composing his own poetry while at Harvard, keeping a brown leather notebook from 1946 to 1950.⁴⁹ These early poems provide a glimpse into O'Hara's poetic progress as well as his first forays into poetic experimentation. Poems such as "A Suite of Vowels," demonstrate O'Hara's early interest in Surrealist and Dada poetic techniques, and poems such as "Have You Ever," highlight O'Hara's experimentation with the prose poem form.⁵⁰ This interest in many poetic forms is a feature of O'Hara's poetry seen for years to come.

His most significant early poem is "Memorial Day, 1950" which Ashbery later called "one of his most beautiful early poems."⁵¹ This poem centered on artists and people that O'Hara had encountered and explored at Harvard. The tone and aestheticism that marked his later work was evident: "A locomotive is more melodious/ than a cello. I dress in oil cloth and read music/ by Guillaume Apollinaire's clay candelabra."⁵² O'Hara graduated from Harvard in the spring of 1950 as an English major.

In the fall of 1950, O'Hara relocated to Michigan to attend the University of Michigan's Graduate School Creative Writing Program, partially at the behest of a Harvard professor who encouraged O'Hara to apply for the Hopwood Award in Poetry.⁵³ He wrote his first play "Try! Try!" which was staged at the Poet's Theater back in Cambridge that fall.⁵⁴ Starring John

⁴⁸ John Ashbery, Donald Allen, ed. *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*. Berkeley, University of California Press. 1971. Print. Viii.

⁴⁹ Frank O'Hara, *Early Writing*, ix.

⁵⁰ Frank O'Hara, *Early Writing*, 55, 50.

⁵¹ Ashbery, *The Collected Poems*, vii.

⁵² Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, 18.

⁵³ Donald Hall. Letter to Brad Gooch, 28 January 1988. Gooch, 160.

⁵⁴ Gooch, 179.

Ashbery and O'Hara's good friend Violet "Bunny" Lang, "Try! Try!" was a big success, drawing a crowd of two hundred, including many in Harvard's literary community.⁵⁵

O'Hara decided to move to NY after graduate school following a trip to the city from Michigan for a New Year's Eve part at John Ashbery's Greenwich Village apartment.⁵⁶ Among the people he met were painters Larry Rivers and Jane Freilicher, and future roommate Joe LeSueur, and had "managed to shuffle the cards in the social life of this still small circle."⁵⁷

Returning to Ann Arbor for a second semester of grad school, O'Hara prepared the manuscript, "A Byzantine Place: 50 Poems and a Noh Play," which was awarded first place in the 1951 Avery Hopwood Major Award in Poetry, with one judge remarking that, "This man is unquestioningly a poet."⁵⁸ With a master's degree in one hand and his award-winning poems in the other, O'Hara immediately returned to Manhattan, choosing to share an apartment with Hal Fondren, a former Harvard roommate, at 386 East Forty-Ninth Street.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Gooch, 180.

⁵⁶ LeSueur, Xiii.

⁵⁷ Gooch, 178.

⁵⁸ Gooch, 183.

⁵⁹ LeSueur, xiv.

CHAPTER 2: O'Hara in New York City

Frank O'Hara settled in New York City after graduating the University of Michigan with a Master's in English in 1951.⁶⁰ The city was a vital influence on O'Hara's poetry, even in O'Hara's early poetry such as 1951's "Song (I'm going to New York):" "I'm going to New York!/(what a lark! what a song!)"⁶¹ The myriad artists and poets he knew and collaborated with, his curatorial job at the Museum of Modern Art, and the very fabric of New York City itself deeply influenced O'Hara and his poetry during the next fifteen years of his life.

The New York City of 1951 was bursting with art. In particular, O'Hara was attracted to the "Abstract Expressionists," who were steadily rising to fame, helping New York supplant Paris as the art capital of the Western World.⁶² These Abstract Expressionist painters, who would also become known as the 'New York School,' received growing recognition in the postwar years of 1946 and onwards.⁶³ Many other artists who had moved to New York City, including Larry Rivers, Joan Mitchell, Jane Freilicher, Grace Hartigan, Helen Frankenthaler, Franz Kline, and Mark Rothko, had found residences in Greenwich Village and East Village during the 1940's and 50's, drawn to these spots by the cheap rent and opportunities for artistic cooperation and inspiration.⁶⁴

O'Hara spent many nights with artists like these in the Cedar Street Tavern, a bar at 24 University Place, which has been called the "painter's bar, legendary even then for marathon boozing and brawling."⁶⁵ It was also, however, an essential part of what made the New York

⁶⁰ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, Xiii.

⁶¹ Frank O'Hara, Mark Ford, ed. *Frank O'Hara: Selected Poems*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2008. Print. 19.

⁶² John Strausbaugh. *The Village*. New York. HarperCollins, 2013. Print. 244.

⁶³ Strausbaugh, 244.

⁶⁴ Strausbaugh, 244.

⁶⁵ Lehman, 65.

City art world at this time tick, for it was at the Cedar, amongst other bars and parties, that artists formed friendships, created collaborations, and engaged in artistic discussion which impacted their careers.⁶⁶ As O'Hara wrote in an essay on artist and friend Larry Rivers: "in the Cedar we (O'Hara and other poets) often wrote poems while listening to the painters argue and gossip."⁶⁷ In his poem "L'Amour Avait Passé Par La," O'Hara references the Cedar Tavern "to get to the Cedar to meet Grace / I must tighten my moccasins / and forget the minute bibliographies of disappointment / anguish and power / for unrelaxed honesty."⁶⁸ This "unrelaxed honesty" in the bar was fostered by the painters as well as poets.

Some of the other New York based poets whom O'Hara knew included John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gregory Corso. O'Hara collaborated with some of these poets frequently. In 1952, he and Kenneth Koch collaborated on a sestina, a difficult poetic form, with Koch remarking that: "artistic collaboration [...] seemed to be a natural part of Frank's talent."⁶⁹ O'Hara was also often his friends' most fervent supporter. In 1955, O'Hara submitted his manuscript *Meditations in an Emergency* to the Yale Young Poets Prize which was judged by poet W.H. Auden.⁷⁰ However, Auden gave the award to Ashbery's manuscript *Some Trees* instead.⁷¹ Despite this loss, O'Hara wrote a glowing review for his friend in the February 1957 edition of *Poetry*, declaring that *Some Trees* is, "the most beautiful first book to appear in America since *Harmonium* [by Wallace Stevens]."⁷²

⁶⁶ Strausbaugh, 245.

⁶⁷ Frank O'Hara, *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, 169

⁶⁸ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, 333.

⁶⁹ Kenneth Koch. "A Note on Frank O'Hara in the Early 1950's." *Homage to Frank O'Hara*, edited by Joe LeSueur, Bill Berkson. Berkley, Creative Arts Book Co. 1980. Web.

⁷⁰ Lehman, 145.

⁷¹ Lehman, 145.

⁷² Frank O'Hara. "Rare Modern." *Poetry*. February 1957. 313. Web.

The poets and painters who were in O'Hara's circle also influenced his poetry. For instance, when O'Hara was living at 90 University Place in 1955, he was gifted an original De Kooning by artist and friend Fairfield Porter.⁷³ This painting, titled "Summer Couch" was referenced in O'Hara's 1956 poem, "Radio", in the lines, "well, I have my beautiful de Kooning/ to aspire to."⁷⁴ In his 1956 poem "Why I Am Not A Painter," O'Hara describes an experience with painter Mike Goldberg in which O'Hara talks about the similarities and differences between painting and poetry by comparing his earlier poem, *Oranges*, to Mike Goldberg's painting, *Sardines*.⁷⁵ O'Hara thought constantly about his group of friends, writing sonnets for them, composing poems as birthday presents, and penning elegies for those who died.

A major influence on O'Hara's becoming more involved in the NYC Art Scene was John Bernard Myers, director of the Tibor de Nagy gallery at 219 East Fifty Third Street.⁷⁶ Myers personally knew a number of New York School artists when he opened the gallery in 1950, including Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, Larry Rivers, and Willem De Kooning.⁷⁷ Myers recalls meeting O'Hara through Rivers, as O'Hara and Rivers were on-and-off again friends and lovers, and stated that there was "much to admire" about the young poet.⁷⁸ So much to admire, in fact, that the Tibor de Nagy Gallery published O'Hara's first collection of poems, *A City Winter*, in 1952.⁷⁹

At the Museum of Modern Art, where O'Hara began working in 1951, O'Hara forged important connections and started his career in the New York art world. He had applied for a job

⁷³ LeSueur, 80.

⁷⁴ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, 234.

⁷⁵ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, 261.

⁷⁶ John Bernard Myers. *Tracking the Marvelous: a Life in the New York Art World*. 1st ed., Random House, 1983. Web. 115.

⁷⁷ Lehman, 21.

⁷⁸ Myers., 122.

⁷⁹ Lehman, 21.

at the front desk in 1951, in large part to be closer to a retrospective on Matisse.⁸⁰ Thanks to a resume that included recommendations from editor Jason Epstein and poet Delmore Schwartz, the latter of whom had helped publish one of O'Hara's poems in *Partisan Review* in 1950, O'Hara landed the position.⁸¹ His duties at this time consisted mainly of selling postcards and running the greeting desk, a position which provided enough free time to write poetry, such as one lost poem entitled "It's the blue!" which James Schuyler read while visiting O'Hara one day at work.⁸²

O'Hara lived at 386 East Forty-Ninth Street in the first half of the 1950's, first with Harvard roommate Hal Fondren, then poet and friend James Schuyler, whom he had met through Myers, and then, starting in 1955, with Joe LeSueur.⁸³ LeSueur describes the time spent in this apartment, located right near the newly-constructed United Nations building, as "easygoing," since O'Hara was "unknown as a poet and not yet officially involved in the art world," allowing O'Hara to divide much of his time between desk duty at the Museum, parties, movies, the Ballet, hanging out in bars, and spending time with friends.⁸⁴ The UN building appeared in a few poems written in this apartment, such as in 1955's "Nocturne" when he writes: "A tiny airliner drops its/ specks over the UN building./ My eyes like millions of/ glass squares, merely reflect."⁸⁵

O'Hara found himself immersed in the New York City art world when he took up an editorial associate position for *ArtNEWS* magazine in 1953, resigning from his position at the Museum to do so.⁸⁶ Artist and critic Fairfield Porter, who had met O'Hara in Harvard and later

⁸⁰ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*,. Xiii.

⁸¹ Peter Schjedahl, 207.

⁸² Gooch, 208.

⁸³ Carl Little, and James Schuyler. "An Interview with James Schuyler." *Agni*, no. 37, 1993.159. *JSTOR*. ; LeSueur, xiv.

⁸⁴LeSueur. Xv

⁸⁵ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, 224.

⁸⁶ Frank O'Hara, Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, Xiii.

helped him secure the *ArtNEWS* job, was also the subject of O'Hara's first feature piece for the magazine published in January 1955, "Porter Paints A Picture."⁸⁷

This feature piece was just one of many that O'Hara wrote about Abstract Expressionist artists for *AetNEWS*, most of whom he knew personally, with some others including Jackson Pollock, Larry Rivers, and Franz Kline.⁸⁸ These feature pieces were also a venue for O'Hara to flaunt his knowledge of past artists and art movements, such as in "Fairfield Paints a Picture" when he writes how "the impressionists had the sensibility for this interior quality to a remarkable degree, but they tended to give up sensibility in favor of construction."⁸⁹ O'Hara's witticisms on artists, both contemporary and older, show up constantly in his poetry, such as in the poem "Having A Coke With You" in the line: "what good does all the research of the Impressionists do them/ when they never got the right person to stand near the tree when the sun sank."⁹⁰

Despite never having earned a degree in art history, his writings on and familiarity with New York City's newest artists lead to O'Hara being re-hired by the Museum of Modern Art in 1955, after a two-year hiatus, as a special assistant in the recently formed International Program.⁹¹

He was hired by Porter McCray, then-director of the International Program at the museum, which coordinated arrangements for American painting and sculpture to be shown at international art biennials.⁹² O'Hara's role was largely administrative, which did not require an art history background, according to coworker and MoMA curator Waldo Rasmussen: "O'Hara

⁸⁷ Gooch, 207.

⁸⁸ Frank O'Hara, Donald Allen, ed. *Art Chronicles: 1954-1966*. New York, George Brazillier, 1975. Web.

⁸⁹ Frank O'Hara, *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, 56.

⁹⁰ Frank O'Hara, Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, 360.

⁹¹ Gooch, 257

⁹² Thomas Lawton. "Porter A. McCray 28 May 1908-1 December 2000." *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 60, no. 2, 2000, pp. 330–331. *JSTOR*..

was supposed to be “coordinat[ing] the correspondence with lenders and assist[ing] with some of the complex organizational details.”⁹³ He was, hired on a temporary basis in order to work on the exhibition, “From David to Toulouse-Lautrec” which was to be shown at the Musée de l’Orangerie in Paris.⁹⁴ However, after the exhibition was a critical success, O’Hara was promoted to a more permanent position as an Administrative Assistant in the International Program in April 1955.⁹⁵ Much of his career at the museum was spent in the International Program, except for the break O’Hara took in early 1956 to take up a writer’s fellowship in Cambridge, Massachusetts.⁹⁶

During this fellowship, O’Hara had hoped to have some quiet time to be able to write, having resigned from his editorial position at *ArtNEWS* in October of 1955, writing to Fairfield Porter that he had “no time to write poems.”⁹⁷ However, after the six months at Cambridge, the biggest thing that O’Hara had learned upon returning to New York City was that only in New York was he able to write his best poems. He complained about Cambridge in a letter to Grace Hartigan: “it’s not hot enough, it’s not crowded enough, there’s not enough asphalt, and you can see over buildings too easily.”⁹⁸ Joe LeSueur muses that O’Hara needed the work provided by the Museum and the bustle of the city: “he must have needed the reality and discipline of the workaday world.”⁹⁹ Thankful to return, O’Hara returned to work at the museum, was given

⁹³ Waldo Rasmussen. “Frank O’Hara In the Museum.” *Homage to Frank O’Hara*, edited by Joe LeSueur, Bill Berkson. Berkley, Creative Arts Book Co. 1980. Web.

⁹⁴ Aline Saarinen “U. S.-LENT WORKS OK VIEW IN PARIS: 100 MASTERPIECES OF GALLIC ART ‘GO HOME’ IN ‘SALUTE TO FRANCE’ EXHIBITION.” *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Apr 20, 1955. 1,

⁹⁵ Gooch, 257.

⁹⁶ Frank O’Hara, Frank O’Hara, *The Collected Poems*, Xiii.

⁹⁷ Frank O’Hara. Letter to The Porters. 10/3/1955. Allen Collection of Frank O’Hara Letters.

⁹⁸ Frank O’Hara. Letter to Grace Hartigan. 2/11/1956. Allen Collection of Frank O’Hara Letters.

⁹⁹ LeSueur, xvii.

more “serious assignments” to work on, and moved with LeSueur further downtown to 90 University Place in February of 1957.¹⁰⁰

The city was conducive to O’Hara’s writing, and its locations and energy were a major influence on his second work, 1957’s *Meditations in an Emergency*.¹⁰¹ Written in the space of two years, many were directly inspired by artists and friends of O’Hara’s, such as “On Seeing Larry Rivers’ ‘Washington Crossing The Delaware’ At The Museum of Modern Art.” Many reflected his love of the city itself, seen in this line from the titular poem, “One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes.”¹⁰² The collection was received with a degree of critical confusion. Critic Kenneth Rexroth from the *New York Times* dismissed it as “flat, dead-pan colloquialism,” yet also remarked that the poems, “always manage a fresh start.”¹⁰³ Despite the lackluster critical response, *Meditations in an Emergency* became the collection that he became best known for during his lifetime.¹⁰⁴

O’Hara played a role in bringing to fruition the International Program’s 1958 exhibition “The New American Painting” which toured Europe in 1959.¹⁰⁵ It showcased eighty-one paintings by seventeen abstract expressionist American painters, including Jackson Pollock, Willem De Kooning, Grace Hartigan, and Mark Rothko.¹⁰⁶ This exhibition was significant both for its status as the first abstract-expressionist exclusive exhibition to tour Europe.¹⁰⁷ This experience proved useful as O’Hara was promoted in MOMA, eventually culminating in his

¹⁰⁰ LeSueur xviii.

¹⁰¹ Frank O’Hara, Frank O’Hara, *The Collected Poems*, xv.

¹⁰² Frank O’Hara, Frank O’Hara, *The Collected Poems*, 197.

¹⁰³ Kenneth Rexroth. “Two Voices Against the Chorus.” *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Oct 06, 1957. 297,

¹⁰⁴ Gooch, 299.

¹⁰⁵ Rasmussen, 88.

¹⁰⁶ Howard Devree. “Art: Travelers Return: Modern Museum Showing 81 Abstracts by Americans that Toured Europe.” *New York Times (1923-Current file)*, May 28 1959, p. 35. *ProQuest*. Web. 15 Nov. 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Rasmussen, 88.

appointment as Associate Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions in 1966.¹⁰⁸

While MOMA was the focus of his work life, O’Hara centered his social life around his New York circle of friends, and these relationships often spilled into his poetry. In Larry Rivers’ autobiography, he describes his first meeting with O’Hara at a party thrown by John Ashbery in 1950: “We shook hands and talked our heads off for two hours. Repairing to a quick spot behind a window drape, we kissed.”¹⁰⁹ However, their relationship stayed as a friendship, even if O’Hara’s feelings towards Rivers were complex and unreciprocated.¹¹⁰ O’Hara poured these feelings into his 1954 poem, “To The Harbormaster,” in which Rivers is the harbormaster that O’Hara, the ship which must overcome the “metallic coils of the tide,” is attempting to reach.¹¹¹

O’Hara began writing “openly gay love poems” when he met dancer, Vincent Warren in summer 1959 at a party hosted by artist John Button.¹¹² The relationship inspired O’Hara to write more than forty poems over the course of the twenty-one month relationship, including the jubilant “You Are Gorgeous And I’m Coming,” the sentimental “Poem (When I am feeling depressed and anxious sullen),” and the anxious “St. Paul And All That.”¹¹³ Thirty-five year old O’Hara, at the time living downtown at 441 East Ninth Street with LeSueur, was deeply enamored with the twenty-year old, writing in one letter “I suppose it is silly, but rather typical of me, to be writing you a note when you’ve only been gone an hour and fifteen minutes, but I can’t think of anything else to do, so here I am.”¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁸ Gooch, 443.

¹⁰⁹ Larry Rivers, and Arnold Weinstein. *What Did I Do? : the Unauthorized Autobiography* . 1st ed., HarperCollins, 1992. 228.

¹¹⁰ Rivers, 236.

¹¹¹ Gooch, 217.

¹¹² Gooch, 330.

¹¹³ Marjorie Perloff. *Frank O’Hara: Poet Among Painters*. New York. George Braziller, 1977. Print. 157.

¹¹⁴ Frank O’Hara. Letter to Vincent Warren, 6/23/1960. Allen Collection of Frank O’Hara Letters.

O'Hara's flurry of letters to Warren did not cease, even when O'Hara traveled to Madrid in 1960, prepping for a new MoMA exhibit, "New Spanish Painting and Sculpture," in which he took a directorial role.¹¹⁵ In one letter, dated April 2nd, 1960, O'Hara describes to Warren how beautiful Toledo is, and how "I think about you a lot and miss you."¹¹⁶ Both of these themes appeared in his poem to Warren entitled, "Now That I Am In Madrid And Can Think," written just two days before the letter on March 31st, 1960. He wrote "in Toledo the olive groves' soft blue look at the hills with silver like glasses like an old lady's hair."¹¹⁷ While expressing his pain at missing Warren, the poem also highlights how important New York is to him. By comparing Vincent to New York and visualizing Vincent in New York, O'Hara described his feelings for him, affirming that even if O'Hara is an ocean away, he cannot get his mind off of New York: "your brown lashes flutter revealing two perfect dawns colored by New York." O'Hara and Warren did not last forever, as in September 1961, Warren relocated to Montreal with his dance troupe, bringing O'Hara's biggest romantic relationship to a close.¹¹⁸

The last five years of O'Hara's life witnessed a diminished poetry production. In the *Collected Poems*, the years 1962 to 1966 account for 84 of the total 491 pages, with only one poem being included from 1966.¹¹⁹ This decline in poetic output compared to his first several years in New York was, in part, due to his increasing responsibilities in the museum. In 1965 he directed a retrospective on artist Robert Motherwell, to mixed reviews, and directed an exhibit on Reuben Nakhian in 1966.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Rasmussen, 89.; "SPANISH ART SHOW OPENS WEDNESDAY: MODERN MUSEUM TO DISPLAY WORKS OF 16 AVANT-GARDE PAINTERS AND SCULPTORS." *New York Times (1923-Current File)*, Jul 17, 1960.

¹¹⁶ Frank O'Hara. Letter to Vincent Warren, 4/2/1960. Allen Collection of Frank O'Hara Letters.

¹¹⁷ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, 356.

¹¹⁸ Gooch, 376.

¹¹⁹ Perloff, 165.

¹²⁰ Rasmussen, 89; Andrew Hudson. "Hanging Dims Motherwell show." *The Washington Post, Times Herald (1959-1973)*, Oct 10, 1965.

The biggest poetic achievement to occur during these years was the publication of his collection *Lunch Poems* by the San Francisco-based City Lights Books.¹²¹ This 74-page collection, years in the making, reflected O’Hara’s indecision regarding which poems to include.¹²² In one letter to Warren in 1960, four years before the book was published, he describes “stay[ing] home all day,” and “look[ing] over *Lunch Poems* a little,” before abandoning it and reading instead.¹²³

His love of New York City and its integration in his poetry peaked in *Lunch Poems*. The title reflected the fact that O’Hara wrote most of these poems during his lunch hour from the MOMA.¹²⁴ This volume, which was widely ignored by critics, featured poems such as “The Day Lady Died,” and “Music,” which push the integration of New York City in O’Hara’s poetry seen in *Meditations in an Emergency* to a new level.¹²⁵ “The Day Lady Died,” written in 1959, was an elegy to recently deceased singer Billie Holliday. The poem features O’Hara going about his daily activities in New York City, which include stopping by a liquor store on Park Lane and going back to 6th avenue and by the “tobacconist in the Ziegfeld theatre.”¹²⁶ “Music” shows O’Hara “pausing for a liver sausage sandwich in the Mayflower Shoppe,” nearby the “angel” which, “seems to be leading the horse into Bergdorf’s.” In this scene, O’Hara is nearby the Bergdorf Goodman’s clothing store on 58th Street in Midtown Manhattan, just a few blocks from the MOMA.

Frank O’Hara died on July 25, 1966 from internal injuries, after being struck by a jeep on Fire Island in the very early hours of the morning.¹²⁷ His death was a shock to his friends and

¹²¹ LeSueur 275.

¹²² LeSueur, 276.

¹²³ Frank O’Hara. Letter to Vincent Warren, 7/11/1960. Allen Collection of Frank O’Hara Letters.

¹²⁴ Gooch, 266.

¹²⁵ Gooch, 440.

¹²⁶ Frank O’Hara, *The Collected Poems*, 325.

¹²⁷ Gooch, 466; Gooch, 459.

family, both in the unexpected circumstances surrounding it and how young the poet was, having just turned 40. At the time of his death, he was working on a Jackson Pollock exhibition for MOMA, which in a letter to Vincent Warren just nine days before his death, O'Hara expresses how he hopes it will be "terrific."¹²⁸ He was buried in Green River Cemetery in Long Island, on July 28, at a service attended by dozens of friends such as John Ashbery, Joe LeSueur, William de Kooning, Larry Rivers, Helen Frankenthaler, Bill Berkson, and many others.¹²⁹ During his life he was better known as an art curator at the Museum of Modern Art; his brief obituary in the New York Times lists his profession as art curator first, and poet second.¹³⁰

Once news of his death broke, Kenneth Koch, Larry Rivers, and Frank Lima raided O'Hara's loft at 791 Broadway in order to ensure that any poetry there was in good hands.¹³¹ They discovered piles of manuscripts that O'Hara had written, dated, and organized.¹³² Many of these poems were never published in his lifetime, and some he never even showed to anyone.¹³³ In 1967, Donald Allen, editor at Grey Fox Press who was named O'Hara's literary executor the same year, began compiling O'Hara's poems in order to publish *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* and turned to John Ashbery for advice.¹³⁴ Ashbery knew a considerable amount about when and where O'Hara wrote particular poems, and by September 1969 was writing an Introduction to *The Collected Poems*.¹³⁵ After much advice from those who also knew O'Hara, including James Schuyler and Don Allen, Ashbery completed the Introduction and it was

¹²⁸ Frank O'Hara. Letter to Vincent Warren, 7/16/1966. Allen Collection of O'Hara Letters.

¹²⁹ Gooch, 6-7.

¹³⁰ FRANK O'HARA, 40, MUSEUM CURATOR: Exhibitions Aide at Modern Art Dies--Also a Poet *New York Times* (1923-Current file); Jul 26, 1966; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times

¹³¹ Gooch, 467.

¹³² Gooch, 467.

¹³³ Gooch, 470.

¹³⁴ Donald Allen. Letter to John Ashbery, 8/27/1967. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego Library

¹³⁵ John Ashbery. Letter to Don Allen, 6/30/1969; Don Allen. Letter to John Ashbery, 9/16/1969. Special Collections & Archives, UC San Diego Library

published along with the rest of *The Collected Poems* in 1971.¹³⁶ *The Collected Poems* won The National Book Award For Poetry in 1972, thus solidifying O'Hara's growing fame.¹³⁷

O'Hara's work also garnered its most serious critical attention after his death. In 1975, Marjorie Perloff's *Poet Among Painters* was the first major critical analysis of O'Hara's poetry. As Perloff writes in the preface: "a decade after his death, Frank O'Hara remains a controversial figure" due to the perceived frivolity of his work.¹³⁸ But that Perloff will "right this balance" and asserts that "his influence will continue to grow in the years to come."¹³⁹ This assertion became true, for here we are today, reading and writing about O'Hara's poetry.

¹³⁶ Lehman, 76.

¹³⁷ "The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara." *National Book Foundation*, 29 June 2020.

¹³⁸ Perloff, Xi.

¹³⁹ Perloff, x.

CHAPTER 3: The Casual and The Serious in O'Hara's Poetry

For Frank O'Hara, poetry was a living, breathing part of his life. He would often sit at the typewriter and fifteen minutes later, have a poem.¹⁴⁰ Much of his poetry demonstrates this improvisatory nature, with certain poems melding an intimacy and an objective universality together. O'Hara would be glib and, at times, was criticized for the "silly" tone and overall casual feel that many of his most famous poems feature.¹⁴¹ However, it is precisely through this "silly" tone that O'Hara is attempting to achieve objective universality, and it is the tension that arises when he fails to do so that drives many of his poems forward.

This desire for the casual is articulated in his mock manifesto, "Personism: A Manifesto," where O'Hara longs for a poetry that is between "two persons instead of two pages," similar to a telephone call.¹⁴² While one can argue that this was O'Hara's intention in writing poetry, it is more likely that O'Hara was being ironic and playful, as at other moments in "Personism," O'Hara utilizes outlandish images to get his point across, such as: "Too many poets act like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat."¹⁴³ Despite the deluge of irony in this piece, there are glimmers of sincerity. For instance, upon the topic of abstraction in poetry, O'Hara has this to say: "Abstraction (in poetry, not in painting) involves personal removal by the poet." This desire for removal in O'Hara's poetry comes into direct conflict with a perceived desire for intimacy or closeness. Thus, creating tension.

O'Hara uses the casual, achieved often through his tone, to attempt to remove the poet from the poem. However, this attempt is merely a façade, for O'Hara's anxieties cause the poem to always attempt to make a connection with the reader in a serious manner. This longing for a

¹⁴⁰ John Ashbery, *The Collected Poems*, Vii.

¹⁴¹ LeSueur, 265.

¹⁴² Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, 499.

¹⁴³ Frank O'Hara. 499.

connection with the reader, juxtaposed with the longing for removal of the poet, is what invigorates O'Hara to ask deeper questions about the nature of poetry, and "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul" is a prime example of this turmoil.

The poem begins, like many of O'Hara's do, with a pronouncement on the time, place, and what the poet is up to: "It is 12:10 in New York and I am wondering/ if I will finish this in time to meet Norman for lunch."¹⁴⁴ The reference to the poem itself, the "this" seen in the second line, is the set up for the conflict between the casual and the serious throughout the rest of the poem. For, despite opening up with a distinct and universal declaration on space and time in the first few words, many people experience 12:10 in New York twice a day, the poem shifts to a subtle attempt to reach out to a grander human experience; it is the act of wondering, not of writing, that is the crux of these first two lines.

The poet's attempts to bond with the reader through the poem, foiled by his attempts to remain removed from the poem, increase in scope through the rest of the poem. Later in the stanza, the act of wondering comes up again, but now the poet is "several floors up in the dead of night/ wondering whether you are any good or not/ and the only decision you can make is that you did it." With the inclusion of "you" here, the poet is attempting to connect with the reader, or at least, the idea of a reader, with more gusto. However, in the context of the poem, the poet is bound to be pulled back into the realm of removal, for directly before this, the poet makes it clear that he is still wondering about his own poems: "I wish I were staying in town and working on my poems." The usage of the phrase "did it" also bolsters the poet's attempts to downplay the seriousness of writing poetry, for between the poet writing the poem while thinking about lunch in the beginning and coming to the realization that he, or "you," just "did it," casts the act of

¹⁴⁴ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, 328.

writing a poem in an unimportant light: bolstering the poet's aloofness and sense of casual while trying to hold down the anxiety that the poet is also making.

The deference given to many of O'Hara's favorite artists in the ending of "Adieu" is a culmination of the fears that the poet is experiencing in the beginning of the poem. After deciding that "the only thing to do is simply continue," the poet then brings up the question of whether or not this is a good thing; if "continuing" in life is the "only thing to do," does that inherently mean that we will be happy doing it? To attempt to answer this dilemma, the poet first broadens this issue away from him and to a "we" at large: "surely we shall not continue to be unhappy/ we shall be happy." The distillation of the double-negative in the first line ("not continue to be unhappy") into its straightforward form, is representative of the poet's need to connect with the "we" without the complexity of poetic language. The poet eschews the linguistic ambiguity which can arise from a double negative in favor of a concrete statement to connect with the reader; to "dumb it down" in a sense.

At the very conclusion of the poem, the poet turns to "René Char, Pierre Reverdy, Samuel Beckett," to ask: "it is possible isn't it." The inclusion of these artists is a final method of attempting to connect with the reader, in the hope that if the reader has read these three artists, they may be able to relate to what the poet is feeling. However, this can also result in the reverse, for if the reader is not familiar with these writers; if they do not know why Reverdy would say "yes," then they can feel removed from the poet. O'Hara's usage of artists at the end is a double-edged sword, for it can make or break whether the poet is successful in removing himself from the poem or is successful in creating an intimacy with the reader. Thus, the poet's turmoil between serious and casual in "Adieu" comes to a head in the final lines.

Another poem which uses other artists to depict the O'Hara's turmoil between the serious and the casual is his 1959 poem, "The Unfinished."¹⁴⁵ Throughout the poem, O'Hara attempts to lessen the casual and remove the poet from the poem by turning to the history of art. This turning to art is at first an attempt to demonstrate the implausibility of art to connect with people, his art included. However, by the end of the poem, the poet realizes that this is impossible, and the turmoil between the serious and the casual weighs in favor of the serious.

"The Unfinished" hinges upon references to art and other artists, for it is by displaying them that the poem executes its argument about the incompleteness of art and artists. For instance, O'Hara refers to two different "Gregorys," Gregory Lafayette and Gregory Corso, in an attempt to juxtapose their artistry and, in the end, their fates. Lafayette, who according to O'Hara was "so pointlessly handsome/ and innocently blond that he cheerfully died" was an actor who died in an automobile accident at the very young age of 19, thus becoming the "innocent blond" which O'Hara describes him as.¹⁴⁶ Lafayette is both likened to and juxtaposed with the Beat poet Gregory Corso, who was a friend of O'Hara's. Corso is described as "too lustrously dark and precise" and that, even after his death one day, Corso "would be excavated and declared/ a black diamond," meaning that Corso and his artistic legacy will live on for years to come, even into the "26th Century," according to O'Hara.

These two artists, one who died too young and the other young with a promising artistic future ahead, are linked to O'Hara by their shared name, Gregory, but used to showcase O'Hara's concerns surrounding the passage of history and the artist. Lafayette is described as "blond" which is a descriptor that appears frequently in O'Hara's poetry and is linked to some

¹⁴⁵ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, 317.

¹⁴⁶ "Highway Crash Kills Stage Couple in Wyoming: Recently Wed." *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963), Jul 05, 1957.

sort of extreme beauty, as Joe LeSueur, O'Hara's longtime roommate and occasional lover, puts it: "in Frank's scheme of things, there is something so special about being blond-haired- mythic, glamorous, sexy anomalous."¹⁴⁷ This mythic quality bestowed upon blonds makes them seem pure and innocent, thus emphasizing the death, even a "cheerful" one, as a serious blow to art. To compare to O'Hara's treatment of Corso, who is described as "dark" as a stylistic contrast to "blond," Corso is able to live on and create further art. Formally, this continual presence of art is shown in how Corso becomes a major figure in the end of the poem, being described simply as "alive," while Lafayette disappears from the poem, just as he disappeared from art and life.

The tension introduced into the poem by these two figures and the issues surrounding the relationship between life and art is quickly magnified to greater scales, which heightens the poet's anxieties and causes him to create a connection with the reader through the shared experience of art. A little after the discussion on the two Gregorys, O'Hara further establishes his stance on history's role in art- albeit briefly. After describing a scene in which he is "impersonating some wretch weeping over a 1956 date book," which offers the poet some degree of separation from the progress of time (the poet is not himself, he is simply "impersonating" someone else), O'Hara declares that "everything becomes history." He connects these two images with "and," thus implying that because he cried over a 1956 date book which is revealed to be his "own/ (date book, that is)" everything that is occurring at the moment can become history, including himself. This revelation could be seen as bringing solace to O'Hara, seen in how he was "weeping" before wiping his eyes and seeing that it was his own datebook, with it the realization that he, too, is included in the progress of history.

¹⁴⁷ Joe LeSueur, 60.

This realization that he too is included in history worries the poet, and this anxiety follows him throughout the poem, with his journey to Paris becoming the “Paris branch of contemporary depression.” The shift in the poem occurs when he finally makes a connection to himself and comes to terms with his own identity amongst the ocean of art and history surrounding him. In a so-called “short digression” O’Hara describes a scene in which he “sticks lots of cloves” in an orange and “kills” it. He situates this orange in history, just as he does with everything in this poem, remarking that it was loved in “Ancient China.”

Oranges are a prominent image in much of O’Hara’s poetry, with perhaps the largest example being his pastoral poem “Oranges” written years prior. Thus, oranges have a historical connection to O’Hara as well, being a centerpiece for one of his earliest major poetic experiments. Oranges, which represent the poet’s own artistic history, help lead O’Hara to his breakthrough out of unhappiness. For he realizes that Gregory Corso, the artist who was shown to be a source of artistic motivation for O’Hara, being compared to a “black diamond” which will outlive history into the 26th century, “has had the same/ experience with oranges, and is alive.” This realization that Corso has also “experienced” oranges allows O’Hara to recognize that his past and his struggle with history is not unique to just him and that Corso, despite the weight that history presents, is still “alive,” which makes O’Hara no longer “depressed.” Due to the poet finding solace in accepting his relationship with art and history, “The Unfinished” becomes a solution to the very anxieties expressed in the poem. O’Hara realizes that art can cause a personal connection between creator and viewer, and O’Hara allows this poem to aid in that cycle of casual and serious.

The turmoil between removal and connection is also seen in many of O'Hara's shorter poems. One such poem is "Poem" (Light clarity avocado salad in the morning).¹⁴⁸ This poem fuses the specific and the universal, while still maintaining O'Hara's very particular tonality, in order to breathe this poetic statement into existence. By creating the impression of spontaneity (whether or not this poem was spontaneous is difficult to determine), O'Hara gives the poem a sort of ironic universality- a charming and enrapturing quality that is juxtaposed with the small yet meaningful insight the poem provides into the nature of love.

O'Hara's ironic sensibilities can be seen in the first line: "Light clarity avocado salad in the morning." The extra spacing between the listed nouns, "light," "clarity," avocado salad" lend them an extra sense of gravitas, which is offset by the inclusion of something as mundane as "avocado salad" in this list with such bold statements as "light" and "clarity." This juxtaposition is, of course, vitally important for the rest of the poem, as the combination of the universal (everyone understands light and feels clarity) and specific (not everyone eats avocado in the morning) is developed further. It should also be noted that, while it is very possible that O'Hara was simply listing the sensations he was feeling while composing the poem in the morning, this does not detract from their subsequent universality and intimacy.

The poem then shifts, slightly, going from a description (albeit simple) to more of an inner monologue where O'Hara ruminates on the nature of love, among other things. O'Hara writes in the second line: "after all the terrible things I do." This statement is specific to himself, as he reminisces on past mistakes in a general manner. He then broadens this statement, declaring: "how amazing it is/ to find forgiveness and love, not even forgiveness/ since what is done is done[.]" Multiple things are happening here. For one, O'Hara is embracing his own inner

¹⁴⁸ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, 350.

worries about doing so many “terrible things.” What it is that he did wrong is left unknown, it is not important. What is important is that O’Hara has received forgiveness for doing it, and the implication is that he received this forgiveness because that is what is supposed to happen (“what is done is done”, after all).

This relationship between tension and universality is seen in the rest of the poem, in which O’Hara declares that “love is love” and that “nothing can ever go wrong.” Such grandiose statements as “love is love” (which repeats the rhythm set by “done is done”) lend further universality to the poem- which makes the poem seem as though it is making some grand statement or argument on the state of love. Further enforcing this argument are such stylistic choices as the transference of the subject from a “you” to the “I” of the beginning of the poem; the tension of which enables the very specific simile he constructs in the space between (“you feel distant the mere presence/ changes everything like a chemical dropping on a paper”) to seamlessly pivot from a universality to a specificity that the poet himself is experiencing. This simile further enforces its own universality by declaring it does, declaring that “everything” changes.

The 1960 poem “As Planned” is O’Hara at his most serious. Through a lowering of inhibitions, the poet abandons the casual and adopts an intimate tone in an attempt to connect with the reader. The poem ultimately ends on a question of uncertainty, similar to the uncertainty that permeates “Adieu,” as the poet finds himself questioning the very purpose of a poet.

From the title, it appears as though the poem has been planned out. In fact, it was written in response to a poem by Bill Berkson from the same date, which furthers the argument that this poem is an attempt by O’Hara to adhere to the notion of removal of the poet by planning out

what and how the poet is going to say.¹⁴⁹ However, early on in the poem, O'Hara abandons this attempt at removal in favor of intimacy. This creates a tension between the title and the contents of the poem which heightens the uncertainties over poetry O'Hara grapples with: what does it mean for a poem to not turn out as planned?

Similar to "Poem," the poet starts the poem with a mundane object before transitioning to the poet's inner monologue.¹⁵⁰ It is "after the first glass of vodka," an object which acts similarly to the "avocado salad" but, rather than increasing mundanity, is a representation of lowering inhibitions, that the poet is able to abandon any attempt to remove from the poem. After having the vodka, the poet then exclusively adopts the second person which breaks down the wall between poet and reader further, a sign that the poet has abandoned any attempt at removal and, instead, embraces the connection with the reader. The adoption of this "you" also furthers the uncertainty over poetry's role building throughout the poem. The poet's role is reduced, and the barrier between reader and poet is blurred.

This attempted connection intensifies throughout the poem. Offering up this statement: "you can accept just about anything/ of life even your own mysteriousness," O'Hara is posing a broad question about mysteriousness; a question which he continuously narrows down, becoming more and more serious. Preceding this is a description of a "box/ of matches" in which O'Hara gravitates towards objective facts about it, such as its color ("purple and brown"), name ("La Petite"), and place of origin ("Sweden"). This objectivity gives way to the one fact about the matchbox that strikes O'Hara: the fact that it is made of "words that you know." The poet's revelation of the matchbox as existing purely in the poem and existing purely as a formulation of

¹⁴⁹ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, 549.

¹⁵⁰ Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems*, 382.

words sends the poet into a greater declaration on the nature of not just poets, but on humanity's concept of words in general.

This is done through the final half of the poem's use of ecstatically written declarations of words. As O'Hara writes: "that/ is all you know words not their feelings/ or what they mean and you write because you know them not because you understand them." Here, O'Hara is occupying himself with the issue of words. This poem features no punctuation, except for a question mark at the end, which places its emphasis on words themselves. In "As Planned," O'Hara is stripping away as much of languages' flourishes and additions until it is just words, which is what O'Hara "understands." He is not making any grand claims with his "understanding" of words, after all, the poet describes you/himself as "stupid and lazy," but rather, he is stripping language of artifice in an attempt to directly connect with the reader. The self-deprecation seen in "stupid and lazy" also point to O'Hara's increasing anxiety as he is downplaying his own abilities as a poet in this poem that is struggling with the issue of a poet's purpose.

This is O'Hara at among his least removed; baring his anxieties to the reader in an attempt to forge a sense of intimacy. The only punctuation is a question mark, at the very end of the poem, when the poet asks: "but you do/ what you know because what else is there?" This is a question that goes beyond poets, for the universality in this question speaks to the turmoil that the poet feels, as well as any other person reading this poem.

Removing himself from the poem allows O'Hara to tap towards a deeper understanding of poetry's relationship with a reader. "As Planned" ends on a similar note to "Adieu," where O'Hara is worrying over poetry's ability to connect with other people. After much deliberation, with him attempting to connect with readers through a variety of methods, all he can definitively

conclude is that poetry does what exactly what poetry is meant to do. O'Hara, as a poet, must try and simply realize poetry's mysteries, in his own way, until he can do it no longer. As O'Hara sums it up in "Adieu:" the only thing to do is simply continue."

CONCLUSION

Frank O'Hara was, undoubtedly, an urban poet in the vein of his poetic inspirations: Whitman and Baudelaire. However, unlike Whitman, who saw the Brooklyn Ferry in himself and himself in the Brooklyn Ferry, O'Hara only ever saw New York City as the place on earth where his poetic imagination could drift back and forth "like a tree breathing through its spectacles." The slew of descriptions, praises, and celebrations of New York in all its unabashed fervor, excitement, and even occasional boredom guide O'Hara's poetry and way of viewing the world. Be it a poem about Grand Central Station (and sex), a rumination while stuck in a taxicab, or a paean about a steeple that leans just slightly to the left, there would be no Frank O'Hara, poet, without New York.

Joyfully stuck between the artistic Charybdis of post-WWII New York City and the Scylla of literary traditions tracing back to Williams, Crane, Apollinaire, and Baudelaire, O'Hara managed to carve out his own literary tradition. In the final few years of his life, younger poets such as Bill Berkson, Ron Padgett, Alice Notley, and, especially, Ted Berrigan, idolized O'Hara, and wrote poems in the style of his "I do this I do that" poems by the shovelful. Even today, with poets like Ocean Vuong writing poems with the subtitle "After Frank O'Hara," Frank O'Hara has a wonderful habit of popping up in literature and art.

I have lived in New York City my entire life. I have walked the streets of Manhattan; paused by the Equestrian leading the horse into Bergdorf's; strutted past 515 Madison Avenue with its "door to heaven;" basked in MOMA's subtle grandeur. I cannot help but feel that, even over half a century since he left, I am still living in Frank O'Hara's New York.

Overlooking the Hudson River, down in the Battery Park, lines from his prose poem "Meditations in an Emergency" are forged into a fence facing Newport. These words, with letters

nearly a foot long, are situated next to lines from one of O'Hara's poetic idols, Walt Whitman and stretch several feet. They read: "One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes." Someday, many years from now, when I depart New York for the last time, I wonder if the greenery will be nearly as green as it is here.

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