Circulating: Frank O'Hara

The day Frank O'Hara died, following an accident on Fire Island – he was struck by a beach buggy early in the morning of 24 July, 1966 – ‘the New York art world was,’ as Peter Schjeldahl has said, ‘collectively thunderstruck. In 1 years as a poet, playwright, critic, curator, and universal energy source in the lives of the few hundred most creative people in America, Frank O'Hara had rendered that whole world unprepared to tolerate his passing.’1 ‘A center,’ as the painter John Button put it, registering the magnitude of the shock, ‘had gone out of our lives’ (H, 43). At O'Hara’s funeral Larry Rivers told the congregation, ‘Frank O'Hara was my best friend. There are at least sixty people in New York who thought Frank O'Hara was their best friend’ (H, 138).

To gauge the significance of this, in In Memory of my Feelings: Frank O'Hara and American Art, Russell Ferguson passes on the received wisdom that the New York avant-garde of the 1950s and early 1960s consisted of no more than 300 people. The premature death of any significant artist is always mythologized, as the composer Morton Feldman eloquently observes in relation to Jackson Pollock: ‘To die early was to make the biggest coup of all, for in such a case the work perpetuated not only itself, but also the pain of everybody’s loss’. Even after making full allowance for this, for the desire of all those who knew the artist in question to ensure his or her continued status, there is no question that in New York between 1951 and 1966, Frank O'Hara fuelled an extraordinary creativity.

There are numerous testimonies to this. Feldman, like many creative friends, described O'Hara’s impact in terms of his energy: ‘It is only now that one sees the truth about this intellectual’s intellectual ... only now one realizes it was his capacity for work, his stamina ... that was the energy running through his life’ (H, 13). For Alex Katz, O'Hara seemed, at times, like a priest who got into a different business. Even on his 6th martini-second pack of cigarettes and while calling a friend, ‘a bag of shit,’ and roaring off into the night. Frank’s business was being an active intellectual. He was out to improve our world whether we liked it or not ... The frightening
amount of energy he invested in our art and our lives made me feel like a miser. [H, 99]

One expression of that energy was, as Rivers indicated, O’Hara’s capacity for intimacy, where intimacy meant not just friendship but a detailed understanding of the artist friend’s work. Philip Guston recalls a conversation with O’Hara:

Frank was in his most non-stop way of talking, saying that the pictures put him in mind of Tiepolo ... Suddenly I was working in an ancient building now a warehouse facing the Giudecca. The loft over the Firehouse was transformed. It was filled with light reflected from the canal. I was a painter in Venice. [H, 101]

The point here is the transformation, just as when Feldman, speaking of the conditions necessary to creativity, observes that ‘what really matters is to have someone like Frank standing behind you. That’s what keeps you going’ [H, 13]. What both painter and composer are alluding to is what Renee Neu, Kenneth Koch and Donald Allen refer to as O’Hara’s enthusiasm. ‘Perhaps,’ O’Hara wrote of a posthumous Yves Klein show, in his third Art Chronicle, ‘not for a non-enthusiast.’ ‘But,’ as he went on to remark, ‘I don’t care about them.’

There is no apology to make for the attention given here to O’Hara’s life, or for the recourse to the anecdotes in which it is recorded; much more than most artists’, O’Hara’s actions, especially in relation to others, were a continuation of his aesthetic. This must, in part, have been why Bill Berkson and Joe LeSueur considered Homage to Frank O’Hara a necessary book, because the sum of his aesthetic was to be found not just in his writing, but also in his actions to which only friends and contemporaries could testify. It is an aesthetic they identify as Pasternakian, the book opening with an epigraph from Doctor Zhivago in which Zhivago (as O’Hara had quoted in his review ‘Zhivago and his Poems’) speculates that ‘You in others – this is your soul’. Which said, however, and keeping his vital effect on others firmly in mind as an intentional consequence of his aesthetic, O’Hara’s enthusiasm found its fullest expression in the writing itself. Koch wrote that ‘His presence and his poetry made things go on around him, which could not have happened in the same way if he hadn’t been there.’ The early poem ‘Easter,’ he recalls, in his ‘Note on Frank O’Hara in the Early Fifties’, ‘burst on us all like a bomb’ [H, 27]. Which is not to suggest, again, that the enthusiasm of O’Hara’s writing is only to be identified in the responses it produced, and produces, in readers. What I want to argue, rather, is that the dynamic, sustaining and circulatory effect O’Hara had on the New York art world of the 1950s and 1960s flowed from the fact that, as he remodelled poetry to make it viable in the middle of
the twentieth century, it was explicitly in terms of the modes and conventions of enthusiasm that he did so. This is apparent in the poems themselves, where the themes of immediacy, intimacy, directness and acquaintance that have constituted this book’s reading of American literary enthusiasm find clear, deliberate and beautiful expression. It is apparent also, however, in the criticism, and in particular in a number of prose works he wrote between 1958 and 1962 – his book on Jackson Pollock, his review of Pasternak, reviews of Guston and Helen Frankenthaler, ‘Personism: A Manifesto’ – in which he quite self-consciously articulated and rearticulated a contemporary version of enthusiasm. These prose pieces are culminations, expressions of long-standing artistic interests, written at a moment when O’Hara was more than ever sure of how he had reconfigured the poetic act. O’Hara was able to have the effect on others that he did because more than any writer since Thoreau he explored the meanings of enthusiasm.

Painting

A significant difference between Frank O’Hara and Ezra Pound, who in their roles as artistic galvanizers had much in common, is that whereas when Pound arrived in London he had to create the movement which would generate the new demands to which, as he understood it, poetry should now look to respond, when O’Hara arrived in New York the movement had already begun – not in poetry, but in painting. As he told Edward Lucie-Smith:

> When we all arrived in New York or emerged as poets in the mid 50s or late 50s, painters were the only ones who were interested in any kind of experimental poetry and the general literary scene was not. Oh, we were published in certain magazines and so on, but nobody was really very enthusiastic except the painters. [SS, 3]

The painters, O’Hara specifies, ‘the Abstract Expressionists in particular’, acted as an ‘example’, giving him the feeling that ‘one should work harder and should really try to do something other than just polish whatever talent one had been recognised for, that one should go further’ [SS, 3]. The evidence of their example is *The Collected Poems*, testifying as the book does not only to O’Hara’s willingness to work, his sheer productivity, but also to the relentless pursuit of the new and the better; early technical exercises giving way to the surrealist slabs of such poems as ‘Second Avenue’, giving way in turn to the ‘I do this, I do that’ poems, and then to the *Odes*, and then to the *Love Poems*. O’Hara worked harder, and went further, and what resulted was not just a style, but a series of radically different practices. In gratitude for their example, O’Hara took every opportunity, in his art criticism, to document the painters’ value. Thus, for example, ‘Despite the high level of ambition and
execution witnessed in almost every country since the war,’ O’Hara wrote with reference to Norman Bluhm, ‘few artists can give to us that immensity and density which allows our spirits to elaborate and to founder, to leap and to fall back, with hope’ (SS, 94). Likewise of Franz Kline, whose work embodies those qualities of individuality, daring and grandeur which have made the movement a powerful influence. The painters of this movement... have given us as Americans an art which for the first time in our history, we can love and emulate, aspire to and understand. (SS, 89)

The poem of this relationship is ‘Radio’, in which, ‘mortal tired’, O’Hara calls on the radio for ‘a little reminder of immortal energy’. All week long, he writes,

while I trudge fatiguingly
from desk to desk in the museum
you spill your miracles of Grieg
and Honegger on shut-ins.³

The poem turns on the verb, there in the third line, as if at its best the radio cannot help but issue marvels, as if, in its uncensored state, like a painter perhaps, it will spill miracles into the world. Except that at weekends, for whatever meanness of programming, it doesn’t, and so it is to painting O’Hara has to turn:

Well, I have my beautiful de Kooning
to aspire to. I think it has an orange
bed in it, more than the ear can hold.

The painting’s value lies in the aspiration it produces, just as Kline produces aspiration, and where the source of the aspiration lies in the works’ ‘daring and grandeur’, the permission it gives for ‘our spirits to elaborate and to founder, to leap up and to fall back, with hope,’ occasionally, perhaps, to spill miracles. Which steers us, unmistakably, into the territory of enthusiasm. Just as he enthused Guston, so O’Hara is enthused by the example of the painters; and it is, we should notice, enthusiasm in its most empowering form, that state of mind which prompted Emerson to ask, ‘What is a man good for without enthusiasm? and what is enthusiasm but this daring of ruin for its object?’, and which obliged Kant to observe: ‘This state of mind appears to be sublime: so much so that there is a common saying that nothing great can be achieved without it’.⁴ It was out of precisely this state of mind that, as O’Hara presented it repeatedly in his art criticism, the Abstract Expressionists issued their example.
O’Hara was a singular and deliberate art critic, asking questions that criticism, in its continuing preoccupation with hermeneutics, can too often neglect. Chief among these was how to present that which one values, his response to which, and his preferred critical practice, was to acquaint and reacquaint the reader with the work’s own terms. This was his habit also when, rarely, he discussed his own work. As, for instance, in his ‘Notes on Second Avenue’, where in response to an editor’s request for clarification of the poem, O’Hara attaches ‘notes’ to some ‘excerpts’: ‘the remarks are explanatory of what I now feel my attitude was toward the material, not explanatory of the meaning which I don’t think can be paraphrased’ (SS, 37). In fact, very little sense is given of O’Hara’s ‘attitude’ towards the material. Rather, extracts from the material are given minimal representation, episodes being identified formally as ‘a little Western story’, ‘a talk with a sculptor [Larry Rivers]’, ‘a description of a Grace Hartigan painting’ (SS, 37-9). Coming as a critic to his own creation, O’Hara’s question is not how can the work be explained, but how can it be positioned, or repositioned, such that its audience is most likely to gain acquaintance with it?

One might think of this as a curator’s question, and it is as a responsible curator that O’Hara sometimes wrote, asking questions of galleries, museums and more generally of public arts policy, which were designed to ensure the best possible dissemination of works of value. As when he addresses the Lincoln Center on the question of sculpture. ‘Modern American sculpture,’ he urges the City Fathers responsible for the Lincoln Center,

is presently at a very great height of development: what other country today can offer us such a splendid and brilliant array of masters .... Most of these men, as in the case of Smith and Nakian, either have executed, or have projected, work of a scale and grandeur which cannot at present be accommodated in either our public or private situations. ... Lincoln Center is one of the few foreseeable possibilities to rectify this situation and, in so doing, allow our sculptors to make real their dreams, dreams which follow so closely Keats’ great aspiration: ‘I am ambitious of doing the world some good’ (SS, 135)

As with Pound, it is a great virtue of O’Hara’s criticism that he should sometimes address himself to policy makers on the question of presentation, and for O’Hara, as for Pound, this practical question of how best to acquaint the public with new work is also a matter of aesthetics. Hence his much quoted remark:

In a capitalist country fun is everything. Fun is the only justification for the acquisitive impulse ... Abstract expressionism is not [fun], and its justifications must be found elsewhere. Not to say it as justification, but
simply as fact, abstract expressionism is the art of serious men. They are serious because they are not isolated. So out of this populated cavern of self come brilliant, uncomfortable works, works that don't reflect you or your life, though you can know them. Art is not your life, it is someone else's. Something very difficult for the acquisitive spirit to understand. [SS, 129]

There is an enthusiast’s question in all of this, the question of what do with what one values, how to part with something, as Marianne Moore puts it, without losing it. It is a question here for museums, where the issue is how a public institution enables the requisite intimacy between work and audience. It was a question, also, for writing and publishing, for the choices O'Hara made about when and where to show his work, how to mediate it in such a way that an intimacy might be preserved between work and reader. Chiefly, though, it was a question for criticism, O'Hara aiming always to present the object in its own terms.

In particular, what O'Hara sought to familiarize his readers with was the creative or compositional process, a critical practice with him which amounted to a method. Thus if, as often as not, the question Pound was asking in his prose was ‘What calls for poetry?’, O'Hara’s question, dispensing with the trace of passivity implicit in Pound's stance towards subject matter, was invariably ‘What makes art happen, what fuels the creative process?’ This is a question central to his poetry also, the point of an O'Hara poem being, as often as not, that it has found, in some unlikely situation, material on which poetry can feed. In the best of his criticism what the question leads to is a discussion conducted at the level of the creative process itself, showing the numerous applications and technical decisions that go into the making of a work of art. Which might seem to cast O'Hara as a Sontag-like critic before the fact, Sontag, in ‘Against Interpretation’, dismissing hermeneutic criticism in favour of accounts of the work’s surface.5 What O'Hara effects, however, is not an account of materials as opposed to meanings, but an account of creation as opposed to meanings, his model of criticism acquainting the reader with the work by showing how it happens.

His painstaking account of Fairfield Porter painting his daughter’s portrait is a prime instance of this. The discussion is concerned with the numerous decisions that contribute to the making of the painting, as when, to sample the method, he notes how:

For the first oil sketch he used sized canvas but did not spread it with medium first, as is often done, because it makes colors blend more than he wanted them to. ... Instead, he merely mixed his tube colors with medium and applied them direct, drawing with the brush, a No. 16 sable (he also uses oxihair and bristle brushes, finding oxhair a nice mean between bristle stiffness and sable softness). [SS, 54]
The issue here is the detail, the fundamental point about Porter's Portrait of Katherine being not what it signifies but that it exists, which means that the critic has to allow the reader to appreciate how it came into being. Likewise, and in case this seems just to be a point about the conventions of art criticism, in his sleeve notes to recordings of works by Morton Feldman, O'Hara inducts the reader into the process and markings that make the sounds (Sontag's surface) happen. Thus 'Intersection 3 for Piano' is

A graph piece, it is totally abstract in its every dimension. Feldman here successfully avoids the symbolic aspect of sound which has so plagued the abstract works of his contemporaries by employing unpredictability reinforced by spontaneity – the score indicates 'indeterminacy of pitch' as a direction for the performer. [SS, 116]

Following which, for the direction of the reader, O'Hara presents the graph which is the music's pictorial life.

What these discussions underscore is O'Hara's commitment to technique, where technique means not the application of given rules, but the evolution of a method of composition which one might call a style, but which is really the process by which the artist's creativity is made possible. Which is to say that whereas O'Hara is implacably opposed to art understood as the performance of conventions, his enthusiasm is absolutely not opposed to technical proficiency. Rather, and quite the opposite, technical decision making is necessary for the operation of the artistic impulse. This is nowhere clearer than in his account of Feldman, where discussion of the graphic inner life of the music guides O'Hara to the creative wellspring itself, O'Hara taking great care to demonstrate how creativity is possible. Thus,

I interpret this 'metaphysical place', this land where Feldman's pieces live, as the area where spiritual growth can occur, where the form of a work may develop its inherent originality and the personal meaning of the composer may become explicit. In a more literal way it is the space which must be cleared if the sensibility is to be free to express its individual preference for sound and to explore the meaning of this preference. That the process of finding this metaphysical place of unpredictability and possibility can be a drastic one is witnessed by the necessity Feldman felt a few years ago to avoid the academic ramifications of serial technique. Like the artists involved in the New American painting, he was pursuing a personal search for expression which could not be limited by any system. [SS, 115–16]

O'Hara could hardly be more deliberate in picturing creative work as a technical procedure, the object of which is a casting off of system in favour of an intimate acquaintance with the unpredictable promptings which constitute the force of the work. And in Feldman, crucially, the aim is to pass on this
intimacy; hence his presentation of the music in terms of graphs not notes. Feldman’s ‘courageous assumption’, as O’Hara sees it, is that ‘the performer is a sensitive and inspired musician’, and so his ‘music sets in motion a spiritual life which is rare in any period and especially so in ours’ (SS, 119, 120).

The tenor of this is clear, but it is clearer still in O’Hara’s book on Jackson Pollock, where again O’Hara is keen to emphasize technique. Thus Pollock’s glorious lines demonstrate his skill as a draughtsman, ‘his amazing ability to quicken a line by thinning it, to slow it by flooding it’, where again the object of the technique is the capacity to articulate that which in his creative state Pollock is capable of conveying. Thus,

In the state of spiritual clarity there are no secrets. The effort to achieve such a state is monumental and agonizing, and once achieved it is a harrowing state to maintain. In this state all becomes clear, and Pollock declared the meanings he had found with astonishing fluency, generosity and expansiveness. This is not a mystical state, but the accumulation of decisions along the way and the eradication of conflicting beliefs toward the total engagement of the spirit in the expression of meaning. ... [T]he artist has reached a limitless space of air and light in which the spirit can act freely and with unpremeditated knowledge.6

Or as he puts it later:

the action of inspiration traces its marks of Apelles with no reference to exterior image or environment... It is the physical reality of the artist and his activity of expressing it, united to the spiritual reality of the artist in a oneness which has no need for the mediation of a metaphor or symbol. It is Action Painting. [AC, 35]

There are two things to observe about these remarks. The first is that, in the fullness of his admiration for Pollock, O’Hara puts behind him, artistically speaking, the Catholicism of his youth. Pollock articulates his inspiration without the mediation of metaphor or symbol, action painting being, in this respect, the art equivalent of religious enthusiasm. What is at issue here is proximity to the creative impulse. The object of action painting was to arrive at a technique – byway, largely, of rejections of technique – which permits as direct an expression as possible of that impulse. Pollock’s paintings work because he was prepared to risk ruin in pursuit of this object, and because, therefore, there is nothing bogus in the claim of intimacy with the impulse to act. Or as O’Hara quotes Pollock as saying:

When I am in my painting, I am not aware of what I’m doing. It is only after a sort of ‘get acquainted’ period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. [AC, 39]
Finally, in this vein, consider O’Hara on Helen Frankenthaler, whose delicate and troubling work he reviewed in 1959: ‘This sensibility is inclusive and generous, free-ranging and enthusiastic. One of her strengths is this very ability to risk everything on inspiration, but one feels that the work is judged afterward by a very keen and erudite intelligence’ [AC, 121]. Faced with the crucial decision for the contemporary artist, as O’Hara sees it, of ‘whether to “make the picture” or “let it happen”’, Frankenthaler’s preference is to let it happen, where again technique is what allows the happening, and as a consequence of which she is able to be ‘a daring painter ... willing to risk the big gesture, to employ huge formats so that her essentially intimate revelations may be more fully explored and delineated’ [AC, 125]. It is this, perhaps, that carries over most directly from O’Hara’s account of painters to the execution of his own work, his poetry aiming invariably at an intimate communication issued against the background of huge, abstract social and historical forces. More generally, as O’Hara presents it, Frankenthaler, Pollock and Feldman – and for that matter Kline, Motherwell and David Smith – are, artistically speaking, enthusiasts. Or to put it another way, O’Hara is immaculate in his reconstruction of the enthusiastic position, detailing precisely the intimacy, immediacy, directness, aversion to system and acquaintance with the creative impulse that constitutes enthusiasm in all its historical occurrences. So much so that, whereas with Pound one had to read his enthusiasm against his terminology, with O’Hara it is possible, through the deliberateness of his formulations, to name him an enthusiast.

Writing

In what has gone already, I have talked about the enthusiasm with which O’Hara embraced and motivated the New York art world of the 1950s and 1960s, and have shown enthusiasm to be a principle of his criticism – as the way he chose to articulate the creativity of a number of artists he intensely admired. The point now is to establish enthusiasm as a principle of O’Hara’s own creative work, how it featured in and guided the composition of his poetry, and again it is helpful to draw a distinction between him and Pound. Thus, where Pound’s innovations in writing were principally formal, the object being to arrive at a form that would accommodate the material which called for poetic attention, it was not his object, on the whole, to remodel the act of writing itself (save perhaps by default in *The Pisan Cantos*, composed as they partially were at the DTC). O’Hara remodelled the act. Inspired, perhaps, by the example of Pollock, who didn’t so much change the content of painting as rethink the whole way painting was done, O’Hara sought new ways of doing writing, the intention of which was a reconfiguration of the relation
between writer, poem and world. It is this reconfiguration of writing itself that I want to dwell on now, fundamental as O’Hara’s changing sense of the act of composition is to questions of audience, content and theme in his work. And the claim I want to make is that as he sought ceaselessly to reconfigure the act of writing, his question was how, after the example of Pollock, one might arrive at a properly poetic, which is to say linguistically honest, articulation of enthusiasm.

It is arguable that early in O’Hara’s career, Pollock served not just as an example, but as a model. Thus, among the aspects of Pollock O’Hara admires, as with other Abstract Expressionists, is the scale of the work, and in his book on Pollock he recalls that many painters of the New York School ‘worked on the mural projects’ of the Federal Arts Project, suggesting that ‘this experience had an effect on [their] pictorial ambitions’ (AC, 34). ‘Scale,’ as O’Hara notes, ‘has a particular significance in Pollock’s work,’ having principally to do with ‘the emotional effect of the painter upon the spectator’. This is the sublime, of course, and as such steers us towards the aspect of Pollock’s enthusiasm which is most dubious: his propensity to be dominated by the work, and so in turn to dominate the viewer, to effect an overpowering intimacy, a tyranny as Locke would have called it. There are O’Hara poems which appear to have this ambition, works such as ‘Easter’, ‘Hatred’ and ‘Second Avenue’, where the intention is precisely to change the scale of the poem, as if the poem, in its proportions, could emulate ‘that immensity and density which allows our spirits to elaborate and founder’, ‘Second Avenue’ is an immense work: it calls for a large and airy space; it requires ramps and walkways so that readers might become familiar with it as an edifice, so that they might become acquainted with its constitutive parts. This is what the notes were for, a way of coming at the work from a different angle. Even so, ‘Second Avenue’ doesn’t have the impact of a Bluhm or a Pollock, poetry having as its principal mode of existence time. O’Hara later came to a profound understanding of this fact, as Geoff Ward has argued so insightfully in relation to his lyrics.7 In the case of ‘Second Avenue’, however, the time it takes to read the poem militates against a Pollock-like immediacy of effect.

One might argue that in its mode of expression also ‘Second Avenue’ resembles Pollock, that in the extended syntax and the onrush of diction there is an analogy with Pollock’s line. But the analogy founders as soon as it is made because the brush-stroke, or wrist action, carries over into the spectator’s consciousness with a directness that the key-stroke on the typewriter can’t very well emulate, the connotativeness of language making it pale, as a medium, by comparison with paint. A closer, more viable model for the outpouring of ‘Second Avenue’ is Surrealism, early O’Hara unquestionably demonstrating, even as it looks to go beyond, verbal qualities characteristic of
Surrealism: syntax-busting sentences, irrational semantics, a willed variousness of diction and a high regard for the workings of the imagination as opposed to experience. And Surrealism can look very much like a mode of enthusiasm, like the verbal enthusiasm that results from the enthusiast’s departure from, or abandonment of, the mechanisms of reason. Thus Breton can sound very much like an enthusiast when, in his first *Manifesto of Surrealism*, he recalls:

Completely occupied as I still was with Freud at that time, and familiar as I was with his methods of examination which I had had some slight occasion to use on some patients during the war, I resolved to obtain from myself what we were trying to obtain from them, namely, a monologue spoken as rapidly as possible without any intervention on the part of the critical faculties, a monologue consequently unencumbered by the slightest inhibition and which was, as closely as possible, akin to spoken thought.8

Such a monologue, were you to hear it, might well sound like an enthusiastic utterance, like sceptical witnesses of early Quakers reported them as sounding, like Pip sounds – jabbering – after he has been abandoned by Stubb. And there are similarities: Surrealism conceived itself as a response to the Kantian view of the mind, endeavouring to bypass the critical faculties in its aim of establishing an intimacy with a creative impulse. But there are crucial differences also, implicit in Breton’s statement early in the *Manifesto* that “The mere word “freedom” is the only one that still excites me. I deem it capable of indefinitely sustaining the old human fanaticism”.9 The divergence lies in the different problems in Kant to which Breton as opposed, say, to Thoreau, looks to respond. The problem Thoreau identifies is alienation, as proposed by the *Critique of Pure Reason*, from the thing itself – from which point of view, the point of view of Thoreauvian enthusiasm, Surrealism compounds the problem. Thus, the claim enthusiasm makes is to know better something that is external to the self, God originally, but, following Romanticism’s repositioning of the Divine, nature as it stands for the world. The claim Surrealism makes is that the mind knows itself better, with the effect that external things – Thoreau’s beans, for instance – are rendered less, not more, available to thought and language. Invigorating as it can be then, and significant as it no doubt was as a provocation to O’Hara, Breton’s ‘freedom’ is secured at a cost; the cost being, as he elsewhere confesses, the arbitrariness of the word. Which is not to argue that O’Hara thinks of the word as not, in some sense, arbitrary – the word, for him, doesn’t promise a correspondence – but that his enthusiasm, like Thoreau’s, was for (and of) that which lies outside the imagination.

Enthusiasm, by this way of thinking, looks not to abandon reason, but to supplement it precisely where it must acknowledge itself – from a
Kantian point of view – to be deficient, looking to step just so far into the world as to become acquainted with things. In this respect one aspect of Surrealist practice was crucial to O’Hara’s innovation in writing, Surrealism having injected into literary expression an unprecedented speed. Thus Breton aimed for a ‘monologue spoken as rapidly as possible ... which was, as closely as possible, akin to spoken thought’. Breton, in other words, wants to speak, or write, as quickly as thought. O’Hara, glad, no doubt of the Surrealist example of speed, and not least because speed, in conversation and writing, came very naturally to him, wants to go even quicker. The impression, in early O’Hara in particular, is that poetry is moving faster than thought. Thus as ‘Second Avenue begins it is possible to hear an argument taking shape:

Quips and players, seeming to vend astringency off-hours celebrate diced excesses and sardonics, mixing pleasures, as if proximity were staring at the margin of a plea ...

This thoroughness whose traditions have become so reflective, your distinction is merely a quill at the bottom of the sea tracing forever the fabulous alarms of the mute so that in the limpid tosses of your violet dinginess a puss appears and lingers like a groan from the collar of a reproachful tree whose needles are tired of howling. (CP, 139)

I think I know what is being contested here. I think I know that the traditions the poem mentions, in their tendency to reflection, have ceased to be intimate with something, have lost ‘proximity’ or nearness. I know also, however, that if I carry on thinking like this the poem will run away from me, that the poem has thinking in it, but that it outpaces thought; and this is reasonable, because if reflection has a tendency to alienate writing, or the mind, from things, then one response would be to move so quickly from thing to thing that reflection cannot take hold. It would be good to think that this is what O’Hara means when, in the first of his poems ‘On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday’, he shouts:

Quick! a last poem before I go off my rocker. (CP, 159)

Going off his rocker would imply not knowing the world; by way of an alternative, the poem is his way of knowing, ‘My pocket / of rhinestone, yoyo, carpenter’s pencil, / amethyst, hypo, campaign button’ (CP, 159). Whether or not this is right, certainly it is true that as he reconfigured the act of writing he considered it necessary for poetry to be quick, ‘Dashing the poems off,’ as
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Ashbery puts it, ‘at odd moments – in his office at the Museum of Modern Art, in the street at lunchtime or even in a room full of people’ (CP, vii).

‘On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday’ points towards a more direct sense in which O’Hara’s object, as he experimented, was to evolve a way of expressing his enthusiasms; his enthusiasm in that poem (for Rachmaninoff) being the substance of the poem. If the question is ‘What fuels poetry?’, then in that case the answer is Rachmaninoff, O’Hara’s enthusiasm for whom fuelled, through his lifetime, seven birthday poems. He created in this way from very early in his career. ‘Memorial Day 1950’, for instance, his first poem in The Collected Poems to name names, does what many New York School poems do in telling the history of its own coming into being. ‘Picasso,’ the poem begins, ‘made me tough and quick, and the world’, the ambiguity making it uncertain whether the world also made O’Hara, or whether Picasso made the world. Either way, the poem goes on to mention numerous other figures who have been significant in O’Hara’s development: Gertrude Stein, Max Ernst, Paul Klee, Auden, Rimbaud, Pasternak, Apollinaire. You could call these figures influences, but that implies mysterious, only partly conscious mental processes, and O’Hara’s way of dealing with them is much more direct than that. To put it simply, he enthuses:

O Boris Pasternak, it may be silly
to call to you, so tall in the Urals, but your voice
clears our world, clearer to us than the hospital:
you sound above the factory’s ambitious gargle.
(CP, 18)

Enthusiasm, as ‘Memorial Day 1950’ tells it, and as it records the history of its own coming into being, is the stuff of poetry. And it explicitly remained so for O’Hara. Any number of poems are acts of homage – to Wyatt, to Schoenberg, to Mondrian, to name but three. Many are expressly ‘To’ friends: Jane, John Ashbery, Larry Rivers, John Wieners. Sometimes the object of his affection – Edwin Denby, Elaine de Kooning – is built into the fabric of the poem in the manner of an acrostic. Many times the poem gives voice to the enthusiasm of an occasion, ‘John Button Birthday’, for instance, or ‘Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s’. Then there are the Odes, to people, objects and ideas. And then there were the Lunch Poems, lunch, as the dust-jacket had it, being the poet’s ‘favourite meal ...’. In all of these cases a formal decision is at stake, and in some cases – as in the occasional poems, poems to friends that were incorporated into letters, and especially the Lunch Poems – what is also at issue is the act of writing. In all cases the poem has the form and mode of production that it does because O’Hara is trying to catch or articulate an enthusiasm.
Chiefly, however, and much more broadly than all of this, what O'Hara was enthusiastic for was life itself – which would sound an impossibly vague and naive claim were it not that so many people who knew him and observed him working stated it to be the case. Thus as Joe LeSueur puts it towards the end of *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O'Hara*, commenting on O'Hara’s indifference – which I will come on to – to publication: ‘As to his being indifferent about publication, it made perfect sense: it allowed him to embrace life, not careerist concerns, and it was through his everyday experiences that a poem might come to him’. What I want to suggest in response to this remark is that ‘life’ – that which was going on around him – operated as a formal principle in and for his writing. Or rather that the form his writing often and most characteristically took, owed to the enthusiasm with which O'Hara’s poetry disposed itself towards life; where ‘life’ has a quite specific value – a value as specific as ‘nature’ had for the Romantics – and where the claim can best be understood with reference to O'Hara’s reading of Pasternak.

Among the prose pieces O'Hara wrote in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and in particular among the pieces he wrote in the period 1958-59, when critically he seemed especially certain of what poetically he had discovered, ‘Zhivago and his Poems’ is the only piece about a writer. As such, and as a piece about a figure he admired just as intensely as he admired Pollock, the review is unique in articulating what enthusiasm might mean for a writer, as opposed to a painter or the artist in general. In his writing on Pasternak, in other words, O'Hara conducts the enthusiasm which was his critical response to, and assessment of, painting into a statement of its value for, and operability in the medium of, the written word. The review articulates two aspects of the Russian writer’s – and also O'Hara’s – manner that can be thought of as enthusiastic. The first is identifiable in Zhivago’s reflection, quoted by O'Hara, that:

However far you go back in your memory, it is always in some external, active manifestation of yourself that you come across your identity – in the work of your hands, in your family, in other people. And now listen carefully. You in others – this is your soul. This is what you are. This is what your consciousness has breathed and lived on and enjoyed throughout your life – your soul, your immortality, your life in others. (SS, 102)

This remark catches O'Hara’s enthusiasm in action: being and becoming himself when in circulation, inspiring others such that – though this is not the calculation – they enthuse about him; setting, as he said of Morton Feldman’s music, ‘the spirit in motion’, disseminating his values through his friends and contemporaries; passing things on, keeping life in motion. This, then, is O'Hara’s enthusiasm as it acts in his social existence, as the mechanism by which he becomes intimate with others.
More intriguing, however, is O’Hara’s presentation of Pasternak’s relation with the external world. The discussion follows a consideration of Pasternak’s assessment of Mayakovsky, the central thrust of which is that Mayakovsky misconstrued his relation to life: that as an avant-garde artist in the Romantic mode he took life to be a background to his actions, as the mediocrity against which his purpose was formed. This, of course, is a common artistic myth. Pound, for instance, too often fell victim to an image of life which counterposed it to the artist and which, as a consequence, alienated the one from the other. Pasternak, by contrast like O’Hara, has as his ambition an integrated art. Hence O’Hara’s question:

What, then, after rejecting the concept of the Romantic ‘pose’ in relation to his own life and art, does Pasternak’s position become? He had already moved towards this decision in the poems written previous to 1917 and in a later volume he chooses the title from a poem, ‘My Sister Life’. This expresses very clearly his position: the poet and life herself walk hand in hand. Life is not a landscape before which the poet postures, but the very condition of his inspiration in a deeply personal way: ‘My sister, life, is in flood today...’ This is not the nineteenth-century Romantic identification, but a recognition. (SS, 102)

This ‘recognition’ imposes a burden on the poet, because as O’Hara sees it:

In the post-epilogue book of poems we find that Zhivago has not written the poems he wanted to; nor the poems we expected ... in the course of creating the poems he has become not the mirror of the life we know, but the instrument of its perceptions, hitherto veiled. (SS, 106)

We can see O’Hara in this, I think, in the image of poet and life walking hand in hand, but also in the suggestion that ‘life is ... the very condition of his inspiration’, O’Hara’s object, as he reconfigured the act of writing, being precisely to get as close to the ‘condition of his inspiration’ as possible. Hence the fact that he would type out a poem in the middle of a party, or on an aeroplane, or mid-conversation, or at work in the Museum of Modern Art. What O’Hara’s enthusiasm disposed itself towards above all, in other words, was the life going on around him, and his way of expressing that enthusiasm was to position himself (and his typewriter) amidst its flow. Numerous friends and colleagues have pictured him working in this way, and Joe LeSueur remarks upon it frequently, as for instance when he observes, evocatively, how our presence ... must have inspired and galvanized him. This had less to do with his ability to concentrate than it did with the way he concentrated, for whatever happened around him often became part of the creative act in progress. The radio could be blaring, the phone could
be jangling, people could be dropping by, someone could be in the same room with him (talking to him); and when we lived in East Ninth Street, in a second-floor apartment so close to the street that it seemed an extension of it, a cacophonous symphony of ugly urban sounds played fortissimo outside our window, punctuated regularly by the sound of the Ninth Street crosstown bus making its stop next to the downstairs doorway – incredibly, these distractions not only failed to impede but seemed to spur the steady stream of words rushing from his teeming brain to his two nimble index fingers that decisively, at full tilt, struck the keys of his trusty, overburdened Royal portable. (D, 82)

It is important to be clear, through O’Hara’s account of Pasternak, what this image of the poet at work should be taken to imply. The intimacy O’Hara identifies in Pasternak – walking hand in hand with life, and not as in ‘identification’ but as in ‘recognition’ – and which O’Hara so memorably achieved in a poem such as ‘A Step Away From Them’, but also in the totality of The Collected Poems, is like the nearness or nextness Cavell identifies Thoreau as achieving in Walden. New York-with its ‘cacophonous symphony of ugly urban sounds’, and for which O’Hara, at his typewriter, aimed to make himself the measure – was, for him, what Walden Pond was to Thoreau. And the claim is similar to, but crucially is not the same as, Pollock’s famous claim that ‘I am Nature’; and perhaps in the differences in the two media there is a justification for this, the pure physicality of action painting constituting an immediacy of sorts. The word, on the other hand, does not permit this, and Thoreau’s more tempered claim, instead, was that he felt ‘nearer to the vitals of the globe’. O’Hara reorientated the act of writing poetry by situating himself and his typewriter amid the flow, and so could justly claim an intimacy with life which we can well call nearness, the ‘I do this, I do that’ poems in particular making themselves, as he said of Pasternak, intimate with their condition of inspiration.

Knowing

O’Hara was an epistemological poet. The question of how art can be thought to know the world, and how its media can be turned towards life, was given repeated, careful and quite technical consideration in his criticism. Thus in ‘Porter Paints a Picture’, ‘Composition’ is described as ‘a function of the sensibility: it is the personal statement of the insight which observation and insight afford’ (SS, 55). It is not, he goes on,

an illusion as is the expression of an appearance, as is the representation of observation ... Fairfield Porter’s paintings stand or fall by their composition: it is the literal meaning of his perceptions and he will do any number of versions of a motif to perfect its utterance. (SS, 55)
Remarking on O’Hara’s compositional practice, LeSueur observed that it was not his capacity to concentrate, but ‘the way he concentrated’ that permitted his intimate relation with the world. O’Hara, very deliberately, is observing a similar thing in Porter. Privileging the statement of what he calls ‘composition’, O’Hara identifies in Porter’s best work an ideal interplay between ‘insight and observation’, between the operations of mind and its capacity for receiving things. What should be noticed in particular, here, is the attention given to what Kant would have termed faculties. Like Thoreau, in other words, O’Hara is engaged quite consciously in the problem of how people know things.

Elaine de Kooning is presented in similarly considered, semi-philosophical terms. Speaking generally of the new painters, under the heading ‘Nature and the New American Painting’, O’Hara finds them to be ‘Turning away from styles whose perceptions and knowledge are not their own occasion’, and that instead, ‘these painters seek their own perceptions and in doing so have turned, voluntarily or involuntarily, to nature’ (SS, 43). It is worth noticing here the balance of style and perception which is, historically, a starting point for the enthusiast, the painters seeking their own perceptions at the point at which ‘style’ had come to obscure ‘knowledge’. Only here, as has been the case since Romanticism, the turn is not to God, but to nature. De Kooning, in this context, is more radically exposed than Porter: ‘What she experiences seems to go straight to the canvas, partially due to her adroitness as a draughtsman in capturing physical movement; the force of her perceptions obliterates stylistic effects and sets free a plastic vitality’ (SS, 44). Experience, in de Kooning, obliterates style, and so her work, crucially, ‘does not refer back to the artist ... but forward to life’. Art, then, in its composition, takes on the task that Kantian philosophy left over, referring the mind – Olson termed this capacity ‘projective’ – forward towards life. Pollock, of course, for O’Hara, positions himself uniquely in this respect, differing from Porter in the matter of insight. Thus in Pollock’s act of concentration, which is not composition but ‘a state of spiritual clarity’, ‘the artist has reached a limitless space of air and light in which the spirit can act freely and with unpremeditated knowledge’ (AC, 26). There is a state of mind in art, in other words, whether identified in the quite different practices of Porter, de Kooning or Pollock, that enables an acquaintance with things in the world, O’Hara thus approaching questions of composition and creativity very largely as matters of epistemology.

His contemporaries identified this in him. Ashbery’s portrait of O’Hara in action, in his introduction to The Collected Poems, several times tries to catch his mental process. Noting how O’Hara ‘ignored the rules for Modern American poetry ... drawn up from Pound and Eliot down to the academic establishment of the 1940s’, Ashbery finds in the early poems something ‘unlike poetry’ and more like ‘the inspired ramblings of a mind open to the
point of distraction’. The interesting implication is that O’Hara’s early work finds the poet in his most purely enthusiastic phase. A necessary phase, as Ashbery tells it, that permitted the less rambling later poems, work which seems ‘entirely natural and available to the multitude of big and little phenomena which combine to make that almost unknowable substance that is our experience’ (CP, vii, xi, xi). But Koch got closer, perhaps, to the nature of O’Hara’s sensibility in his 1972 review of *The Collected Poem*, observing in his work, as he had observed in the actual writing of it, ‘the immediacy of the relationship of what is happening outside to what happens in the poem’ (H, 206). This consists, as Koch has it, of the same sort of combination of operations Ashbery describes, though in Koch they seem less chronological and the expression is more technical. Thus on the one hand, as one reads, ‘One’s feeling of being overwhelmed gives way to a happy awareness of expanded powers of perceiving and holding in mind’ (H, 207). This, it should be noticed, is the Kantian sublime by any other name. It is also, quite precisely, the enthusiast’s mode of knowledge, a mode of knowledge perhaps qualified by, or perhaps subsumed in, Koch’s other image of O’Hara composing:

It was always an emergency because one’s life had to be experienced and reflected on at the same time, and that is just about impossible. He does it in his poems. [H, 206–7]

In the act of writing, as Koch would have it, O’Hara arrived at ‘expanded powers’ of holding in mind, where the greater capacity can be thought to consist of the ability, in composition, to experience and reflect at the same time. Which implies not, as Breton sought, a complete disabling of the critical faculties, but rather a state – call it writing – in which the manifold of experience can be held as such while at the same time subject to the operations of reflection. Quite how this was achieved is, obviously, difficult to say, involving as it ultimately would a report on O’Hara’s experience. But then, of course, he provided just such a report – the poems – and so if it is not, naturally, possible to verbalize O’Hara’s concentration, it is possible, as he did with Porter and with Pollock, to identify elements of O’Hara’s way of knowing.

The first of these is a disposition toward categories. ‘Grace / to be born,’ O’Hara wrote in ‘In Memory of My Feelings’, ‘and live as variously as possible’. The line is his epitaph, and in every aspect of his life, as consistently as if it were an ethic, O’Hara declined to deal with the world through the medium of categories. Feldman recalls that he was ‘able to love and accept more difficult kinds of work than one would have thought possible’, remarking how it was ‘possible for him, without ever being merely eclectic, to
write so beautifully about both Pollock and Pasternak’ and ‘to dedicate a poem to Larry Rivers one day and to Philip Guston the next’. It was a disregard for categories O’Hara himself identified with enthusiasm. Witness how, in his commentary on Robert Motherwell, he observed the artist’s great good fortune to have first shown at Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of this Century Gallery, where curatorial taste outwitted categories. Motherwell thus found himself:

in a milieu where simultaneous passions for the work of Mondrian, Max Ernst, de Chirico, Leger, and Joseph Cornell were enriching rather than confusing, joined together in time, place, and enthusiasm rather than compartmentalized and classified as they would have been in most art schools of the time. [AC, 71]

Compartmentalization and classification were for second-rate artists and bureaucrats, and O’Hara, as an enthusiast, had a horror of both. ‘My Heart’ sets the position out:

I’m not going to cry all the time
nor shall I laugh all the time,
I don’t prefer one ‘strain’ to another.
I’d have the immediacy of a bad movie,
not just a sleeper, but also the big,
overproduced first-run kind. I want to be
at least as alive as the vulgar. And if
some aficionado of my mess says, ‘That’s
not like Frank!’ , all to the good! I
don’t wear brown and grey suits all the time,
do I? No. I wear workshirts to the opera,
often. I want my feet to be bare,
I want my face to be shaven, and my heart -
you can’t plan on the heart, but
the better part of it, my poetry, is open.

[CP, 231]

This is plain enough to speak for itself, but it is also pointed enough for certain details to be drawn from it: the desire for the ‘immediacy’ of a bad movie, for instance; O’Hara’s opposition to the aficionado; the rhyming, and equal validation of, ‘vulgar’ and ‘opera’; the fact that his feet are bare, ready to step naked into the world; the fact that his poetry, enthusiastically, ‘is open’.

‘My Heart’ mixes categories up. Elsewhere the category is outwitted and outpaced, as in his epistemological masterpiece ‘In Memory of My Feelings’, where famously the self is quick, taking on and casting off guises faster than it is possible to make sense of:
I am a dictator looking at his wife
I am a doctor eating a child
and the child’s mother smiling
I am a Chinaman climbing a mountain
I am a child smelling his father’s underwear
I am an Indian sleeping on a scalp
and my pony is stamping in the birches,
and I’ve just caught sight of the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria.
What land is this, so free?

This makes a point about poetry – O’Hara is writing in the spirit of Whitman, and also after Pound, injecting velocity into the idea of personae – but the passage makes a point about experience as well, about the relation between people and things. The point is that experience is not susceptible to a mind conducting itself in terms of categories. The whole poem is a consideration of this point, and an account also of what state of mind might be the alternative, one version of which makes O’Hara sound like Pollock in the grip of his enthusiasm:

as runners arrive from the mountains
bearing snow, proof that the mind’s obsolescence is still capable
of intimacy

This formulation would seem to be clear: intimacy with things, snow in this case, is the object state, and what this entails, or requires, is obsolescence of mind. As in Pollock, then, ‘the spirit can act freely and with unpremeditated knowledge’. This is not, however, by any means the whole of what ‘In Memory of My Feelings’ has to communicate about knowledge, because the mind of the poem, and the mind described by the poem, are far from obsolete. The mind of ‘In Memory of My Feelings’ has, rather, become capable of a remarkably agile double operation.

This double operation is the substance of the poem’s opening:

My quietness has a man in it, he is transparent
and he carries me quietly, like a gondola, through the streets

The image here, I think, is of a person beside himself, observing himself and also observing the state in which he observes himself. The image seems true as an account of numerous O’Hara poems, of the relation his poems often establish between poet and life, that relation consisting of a carefully presented double state: one aspect of self, a man, venturing after intimacy with the world, another aspect of self, his quietness, watching on. As when later in the poem, following the Whitmanesque celebration of a life lived variously, O’Hara watches on quietly in the midst of his experience:
I watch
the sea at the back of my eyes, near the spot where I think
in solitude as pine trees groan and support the enormous winds

(CP, 256)

Colloquially, being beside oneself would seem to imply distraction or madness. Here, though, it implies knowledge. It is this state Koch has in mind when he speaks of O'Hara's capacity to reflect on life and to experience it at the same time. It is this state, also, Cavell wants to ascribe to Thoreau when he presents him as ‘next’ to Walden Pond. The precondition of such a state of existence for Thoreau was ‘supernatural serenity’, *Walden* being an account, to borrow O'Hara's description of Pollock at work, of the numerous decisions necessary to achieve the state in which an intimacy with life might be composed. O'Hara, likewise, for all his activity, identifies a measure of quietness as the state of mind in which it is possible to know oneself as being intimate with the world. All of which is to present ‘In Memory of My Feelings’ as O'Hara's portrait of his own act of composition, as his self-revealing equivalent of 'Porter Paints a Picture', as 'Frank O'Hara Writes a Poem'.

The poem was, as Joe LeSueur observes, one of the first O'Hara wrote after his unhappy and poetically unproductive fellowship at the Writer's Theater in Cambridge. Perhaps it was for this reason that ‘In Memory of My Feelings’ becomes a recollection, as far as that is possible, of how he writes a poem, of the state of mind and self in which composition is possible. But also of how it had become possible in the first place, the poem, in its mix of autobiographical, historical and mythic modes, offering an account of the various processes and decisions through which the poet – as himself, but also as a figure through history – has arrived at a state of mind capable of intimacy with experience. An intimacy through which it is possible to record stillness, as when,

At 7, before Jane
was up, the copper lake stirred against the sides
of a Norwegian freighter; on the deck a few dirty men,
tired of night, watched themselves in the water
as years before the German prisoners on the *Prinz Eugen*
dappled the Pacific with their sores, painted purple
by a Naval doctor.

(CP, 255)

But if ‘In Memory of My Feelings’ is a recollection of how it is possible to write, of the state of mind in which experience can both be had and reflected upon, then as a recollection it is necessarily at a remove from the act itself, a
watching of the watching through which composition can be achieved. Not that it is merely a proposal to write, just that it does not quite go on its nerve either. It is an account of composition rather than, in the purest sense, an act of composition. To catch O’Hara in the act one should read the poem he wrote next, ‘A Step Away from Them’.

A Step Away from Them’, written on 16 August 1956 – The first great ‘I do this, I do that’ poem, as LeSueur puts it – stands, in this book’s account of literary enthusiasm, as a major moment in the development of America’s written consciousness; of the consciousness made possible by American writing. When he removed himself to Walden Pond, one of the networks that Thoreau distanced himself from was that of the transcendental self. In a fully dramatized sense his gesture was profoundly philosophical, an attempt to reacquaint the mind with things-in-themselves. Finding himself in the middle of the twentieth century, where the things of the world are as much urban and manmade as they are natural, and in which the environment is characterized by new kinds and degrees of flux, O’Hara’s decision is that if a state of mind capable of intimacy with the world is to be viable, it must be achievable instantaneously, not through an act of prolonged separation: in a word, only a step away. What he achieves in the poem, in other words, is a state of mind equivalent to Thoreau’s at Walden Pond, but where Walden is mid-town Manhattan and where the necessary quietness (of mind not environment) is achievable at a moment’s notice. What I am interested in, in other words, is the poem’s act of composition, where composition, following O’Hara’s own critical sense of it, is taken to be the state of mind in which life can be known.

Not the least significant element of the poem’s moment is the fact that it was written the day after Jackson Pollock’s funeral, a day when, O’Hara not being prone to odes to dejection, he would have wanted to write a poem full of life; as full of life, perhaps, as he had ever written, requiring of him a special act of concentration. The poem is the record of that act, which is partly to make the simple but necessary observation that the poem itself is not O’Hara’s lunch hour, or not in the sense he implies it is; not the part of his lunch hour when he is going for a walk. The poem, in other words, is written not quite in the present, but the moment after, when he is back at the museum. We find O’Hara, as we read the poem, not in the street but in the equivalent of the studio, in the act of composition. Crucially, however, what we are invited to imagine is that the act of composition is continuous with the experience which fuels it. His quietness, we are to understand – the quietness of composition – has a man in it. So while it is in his quietness that he writes the poem – being the way, as LeSueur puts it, that he concentrates – it is his quietness, also, that carries him through the streets: the man in the quietness venturing out, experiencing ‘cats in saw dust’; the quietness, the
mood of composition, dwelling on the experience such that it can enter the poem. The poem is thus a true account of what has just passed. The state in which the poem is composed being the state in which the life the poem presents was experienced – O’Hara watching on as he has reflected, and reflects upon, what he encounters: ‘It is my lunch hour’, ‘/ look at bargains in wristwatches’.

The poem is therefore the equivalent, say, of Elaine de Kooning at work, when, as O’Hara said (as was mentioned earlier) ‘what she experiences goes straight to the canvas, partially due to her adroitness as a draughtsman in capturing physical movement’ with ‘the force of her perceptions obliterating stylistic effects’. In O’Hara’s poem the equivalent of this draughtsmanship is, in part, what one can call the poem’s measure, the line taking its shape from the thing or event experienced: ‘The sun is hot, but / cabs stir up the air’. It is also, in part, its rhythm, the pace with which, paratactically, the poem moves from one thing to another. There is a draughtsmanship, also, of sorts – if what draughtsmanship means is the capturing of movement – in the fluency with which the poem dissolves categories. Social categories – race, gender – are confused and pitched against one another. More fundamentally, space and time are characterized not by stability but by flux. Temporally this poem operates between the present moment and the eternity of death. Spatially it is poised between the construction of a building and the anticipation of a building being torn down. Outwitting categories throughout, in his experiencing and his writing, O’Hara has developed a way of holding things in mind. And it is easy to forget, O’Hara’s poem being fifty years old now, and given how influential its mode has been, just how lacking in life, as it was handed down from Eliot to the New Criticism, Modern American poetry had become. Against that background, O’Hara evolved a way of writing that would permit an intimacy with New York, where life is not a backdrop but the condition of inspiration, and where the object of composition was to be as close to that condition as possible. ‘A Step Away from Them’ is thus an inspired poem, a poem written not in an elegiac mood but in a state of enthusiasm, fuelled by and directly communicating life in the New York street, where the poet’s technical achievement is to let that life through.

Calling

O’Hara’s relation to the world has been presented in terms of intimacy, the poet having reconfigured the act of writing and developed a way of concentrating which would permit the closest possible relationship with his condition of inspiration. His relationship to other people, where other people are readers, but where readers might equally be friends and colleagues as
people he has never met, can be similarly understood. Intimacy with his interlocutor was quite as important to O’Hara as intimacy with things. As an interlocutor O’Hara is quite often described as an enthusiast. Introducing The Collected Poems Ashbery cites Schuyler’s description of O’Hara’s address as his ‘intimate yell’. Schuyler himself recalls:

His conversation was self-propelling and one idea, or anecdote, or *bon mot* was fuel to his own fire, inspiring him verbally to blaze ahead, that curious voice rising and falling, full of invisible italics, the strong pianist’s hands gesturing with the invariable cigarette. [H, 82]

This is straight out of the enthusiast’s handbook, or at least, straight out of the *Encyclopedic*, where Diderot defined enthusiasm as

>a living fire which prevails by degrees, which feeds from its own flames, and which, far from becoming feebler as it expands, acquires new strength in proportion to the extent that it spreads and communicates itself.11

O’Hara’s own picture of himself talking is very much like Schuyler’s, his memoir of ‘Bunny’ Lang catching the two of them in the act, the discovery of a shared admiration for Rimbaud and Auden leading to what O’Hara termed

our ‘coffee talks’ which were to go on for years, sometimes long distance. At 11 each morning we called each other and discussed everything we had thought of since we had parted the night before, including any dreams we may have had in the meantime. And once we were going to write a modern Coffee Cantata together, but never did. [SS, 86]

This is conversation as intimate yell, as, perhaps, the inspired ramblings of a mind open to the point of distraction, and where sometimes, as in the case of the conversation with Lang, the immediate mediating device was the telephone.

Direct address – as in conversation – was always, for O’Hara, integral to the creative act. In various ways, at different moments in his career, he envisaged the poem as an act of intimate communication, as if in order to write there had to be a tangible structure of address. Much more than most Modern poets O’Hara invoked the figure of the muse. Early on the muse was typically a woman painter friend, Jane Frelicher, or Grace Hartigan (for whom he wrote ‘In Memory of My Feelings’). Later it was Vincent Warren (for whom he wrote *Love Poems (Tentative Title)*), or sometimes Joe LeSueur, or Bill Berkson; and sometimes it would be one among his pantheon of heroes. Inevitably, though, there was a figure in mind who inspired the poem by supplying O’Hara with somebody he wanted to talk with. And sometimes,
crucially, the source of inspiration would be at the other end of the line, as when, as Koch reports it, he and O’Hara were writing their respective long poems ‘When the Sun Tries to Go On’ and ‘Second Avenue’, and when at the end of each day they would read their results to each other over the phone. For Ashbery the phone call has become one of the ways other voices are filtered into the poem, the work in progress, as Ashbery tells it, sometimes changing shape and direction when interrupted by a call. O’Hara, as his colleagues at MOMA remember it, was always on the phone, and in ‘Personism’, when he described his poetry’s direct mode of address, it was in terms of the call:

to give you a vague idea, one of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person [other than the poet himself]. ... That’s part of Personism. It was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959, a day in which I was in love with someone [not Roi, by the way, a blond]. I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem and so Personism was born. It’s a very exciting movement which will undoubtedly have lots of adherents. It puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages. In all modesty, I confess that it may be the death of literature as we know it. [SS, 111]

There is something very appealing, from the point of view of enthusiasm, of O’Hara’s positioning of the telephone at the heart of his aesthetic, as if the ‘call for’ – what calls for poetry – can be found in the ‘call to’, where what the ‘call to’ stands for is a closeness of community in an otherwise technologically alienating world. But there is more, I think, to the connection of O’Hara’s enthusiasm and his calling than such a play on words describes – even allowing for the fact that O’Hara was looking in every way to modernize the poet’s vocation – and not least because as he downgrades the book in his mock manifesto, he is deeply serious.

Ashbery registers this seriousness in his Introduction to The Collected Poems when he remarks on Donald Allen’s achievement in bringing the book together, given O’Hara’s indifference to keeping, let alone publishing, his work. ‘Given the instantaneous quality of the poems,’ Ashbery judges, ‘their problematical life seems only natural: poetry was what finally mattered to Frank, and even the poems themselves, like the experiences and personal relationships that went into them, were important but somehow secondary. His career stands as an unrevised work-in-progress’ [CP, vii]. LeSueur, it will be recalled, puts the point slightly differently, suggesting not that the experience was secondary to poetry but that his ‘being indifferent about publication ... allowed him to embrace life, not careerist concerns, and it was
through his everyday experiences that a poem might come to him’ (D, 276). Either way, O’Hara is serious when in his manifesto he declares Personism’s intention to put the poem between two persons instead of two pages. Thus, not only are the pages a matter of some indifference to him, they and the book they feature in are an intrusion between persons, the effect of the book being to distance the reader from the poem and the poet: hence the call. What O’Hara wants of and for poetry is the most immediate communication and community possible, and what he is all but proposing – witness the ambition to effect the death of literature – is the de- or un- or non-textualised poem. As an act of knowing, the poem barely requires preservation, the composition involved in writing having become, simply, part of the poet’s way of being in the world. But since it is to be preserved, and as the state of knowledge is to be passed on, the poem must be as free of textual constraint as possible. This is why he thinks of the poem as a telephone call. It is a way of thinking about the poem that puts it squarely between two persons, and a way of thinking about texts which, in turn, puts O’Hara squarely in the publishing traditions of enthusiasm.

Enthusiasm, religiously speaking, is precisely a downgrading of the book, at least where the book is understood as a final authority mediating between the individual and his God. Enthusiasm, by contrast, places the religious experience between God and the individual, and considers that experience to be, in one sense, sufficient in itself. In so far, however, as the enthusiast wanted to issue a written report on the experience, the preferred mode of publication – for economic, but also for religious reasons – was typically the pamphlet. The pamphlet is a text, of course, but a text which acknowledges its own lack of authority or incompletion; which recognizes the experience in question to be a work in progress, an ongoing experiment. Likewise, then, O’Hara’s poems were written down, though often in the most ephemeral, least durable of formats: in letters and as single copies (often mislaid). Ashbery recalled in his ‘Introduction’ how ‘Memorial Day 1950’ survived only because he copied it out in a letter to Kenneth Koch. And yet, if often after much cajoling, some of the poems were published in his lifetime, even then his strong preference, as with the City Lights Pocket Books Series, was for the small-press, ephemeral-looking, pamphlet-like book. This was, as O’Hara must have understood it, the closest thing he might get to the call as book (the book as call), the small press being a version of enthusiastic dissemination.

Which is not to argue that the mode of publication of Lunch Poems guarantees intimacy between poet and reader. The small-press publication, in its typically limited availability, can quickly acquire a distracting aura all of its own. Equally, the City Lights pocket format in particular – in its portability and general un-onerousness – does mitigate the distancing nature
of the orthodox book. Even so, the choice of format, from the point of view of Personism, is at best perhaps a damage limitation, with the intimacy of the poems, their hoped-for relation between persons, being secured not, in any unproblematic sense, by their mode of publication, but by the manner of the writing itself. As in ‘The Day Lady Died’, where the desire for closeness is inscribed into every line of the poem, the opening, for instance, establishing an intimacy with time and place:

It is 12.20 in New York a Friday
three days after Bastille day, yes
it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine.

(\textit{CP, 325})

12.20 on 17 July 1959 is an abstraction, so this opening suggests, unless the individual can strike up an association with the moment, unless it is understood as a moment lived, hence the fact that O’Hara reports going to get a shoeshine. Which he does because, as the poem says, he does not know ‘the people who will feed him’, and so presumably he would like to make a good impression. He buys ‘an ugly \textit{New World Writing}, in the hope of getting to know what the poets, whom he doesn’t know, in Ghana are doing. He goes to the bank, where Miss Stillwagon, whom he doesn’t know, recognizes him sufficiently not to look up his balance ‘for once in her life’. Then he chooses gifts, for Patsy Southgate and Mike Goldberg, demonstrating his fondness for each by, respectively, first agonizing over what best to give, and then knowing exactly what – a bottle of Strega – will be appropriate:

then I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue
and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and
casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
of Picayunes, and a \textit{NEW YORK POST} with her face on it

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
while she whispered a song along the keyboard
to Mai Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing.\textsuperscript{13}

LeSueur suggests why this particular moment should have come to O’Hara’s mind. Quite possibly the occasion in question was Holiday’s last live performance. It was also an illicit appearance in that, having recently been convicted of dope offences, she was banned from singing anywhere where liquor was served. What O’Hara dwells on, however, what makes the poem, is Holiday’s delivery, which is weakened, now, towards the end of her life, but which preserves the halting, breathy quality that was her signature: ‘she
whispered a song along the keyboard / to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing’. The beauty of Holiday lies largely in her address, which O’Hara catches in his phrase ‘everyone and I’, and which means that what marked Holiday out as a performer was her ability to put the song between two persons: between her and everyone, between her and I. Holiday’s delivery is, in Personism’s sense of it, a call, and what her premature death calls for is an act of homage, and the poem offers this by presenting a secret, breathless moment.

Love

This has been an essay about a state of mind. I have argued that for O’Hara the act of composition was, quite self-consciously, a mode of knowledge; that he evolved a way of concentrating such that there might be an immediacy of relation between ‘what is happening outside’ and ‘what happens in the poem’; that he reconfigured the practice of writing in order better to become acquainted with things. One word for this state of mind, following O’Hara’s own discussion of composition, is enthusiasm, a condition O’Hara in his person, but also in his poetry, passed on: hence Koch’s sense, on reading O’Hara, that ‘One’s feeling of being overwhelmed gives way to a happy awareness of expanded powers of perceiving and holding in mind’ (H, 207). I have also argued that the state of composition, or creation, invariably required intimacy, that the rhetorical structure of an O’Hara poem invariably consists in a direct address, the poem, as Personism puts it, existing between two persons. Another word, I want to end by suggesting, for this knowing, enthusiastic, intimate state, is love. Witness, for example, Joe LeSueur’s description of the effect of Vincent Warren on O’Hara’s poetry:

The deluge began immediately after ‘Joe’s Jacket’. Which is to say, right after Frank spent the weekend with Vincent. ‘You are gorgeous and I’m coming,’ ‘Saint’, ‘Poem’ (‘Hate is only one of many responses’), ‘Poem’ (‘I don’t know what D. H. Lawrence is driving at’), ‘Personal Poem’, ‘Post the Lake Poets Ballad’, and ‘Naphtha’ were written in the subsequent three weeks, and that was only the beginning. For over the course of the next twenty-one months, Frank’s output continued apace, steady and unbroken ... These marvelous poems testify to what finally came together for Frank, what he at long last experienced, love and the reciprocation of love – physical, sexual, romantic love, fully and deeply realized. (D, 223–4)

O’Hara met and fell in love with Warren, a dancer with the New York Ballet, in August 1959. The series of poems he wrote for and to him, many of which were published in Love Poems (Tentative Title), are a sonnet sequence by any other name, reproducing in their structure of address, and in the way they
dwell on presence, absence, secrecy and openness, the devices and themes that characterize Shakespeare’s Sonnets. And as LeSueur says, what distinguishes the poems within O’Hara’s body of work is the way, as he wrote them, everything seemed finally to come together. Which is to say, from the point of view of this essay, that the love poems he wrote between 1959 and 1961 are among the clearest, fullest, expressions of his enthusiasm.

The best commentator on the relation of love to enthusiasm is St Paul, his most famous treatise on love, 1 Corinthians 13, being also a treatise on enthusiasm. ‘Though,’ Paul writes, ‘I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity [by which, as modern translators understand it, he means love], I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal’. And though, he goes on, ‘I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith; so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.’ Love ‘suffereth long ... seeketh not her own ... rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth’. Love ‘beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things’. And so, of course, while, ‘now we see through a glass, darkly ... but then shall I know even as also I am known’. Thus love, as Paul presents it, acts like enthusiasm: it operates on the individual to animate and enhance the voice. It also acts as enthusiasm: it goes outwards, it seeks not itself, it permits knowledge and enables the knower to be known. It is also more than enthusiasm in that, for instance, it beareth and endureth, but then since, as Paul would have it, God is love, and since enthusiasm is, at its origin, a way of acquainting oneself with God, of breathing the god in, then there is, undeniably, an enthusiasm in love.

O’Hara’s poems to Vincent present the enthusiasm of love. One might quote any number to demonstrate this, but one short lyric perhaps makes the point.

Light clarity avocado salad in the morning after all the terrible things I do how amazing it is to find forgiveness and love, not even forgiveness since what is done is done and forgiveness isn’t love and love is love nothing can ever go wrong though things can get irritating boring and dispensable (in the imagination) but not really for love though a block away you feel distant the mere presence changes everything like a chemical dropped on paper and all thoughts disappear in a strange quiet excitement I am sure of nothing but this, intensified by breathing

(CP, 350)
This, I want to suggest, is one of those poems – it was written in the first flush of the Vincent period, in December 1959 – in which, for O’Hara, everything came together. What I want to suggest also, with the right degree of lightness and deadly seriousness, is that in this poem O’Hara rewrites 1 Corinthians 13. This second claim can only be a speculation, but I think one can hear Paul coming through, in the comic triad with which the poem opens, but also in the poem’s rhetorical arrangement, in its repetitions and its diction:

    since what is done is done and forgiveness isn’t love 
    and love is love nothing can ever go wrong

This is unmistakably an O’Hara poem, but these lines have a sonority and an insistence that comes from elsewhere: O’Hara doesn’t, typically, repeat for effect like that, his diction tending to alter as rapidly as it presses on. In this, and in the sentiment of forgiveness, there is, I think, a deliberate echoing of Paul.

The other claim, that this is one of those O’Hara poems in which everything comes together, in which he manages, in one brief utterance, to communicate the values which variously informed his writing, is less difficult to establish. In its basic mechanism, in its account of its compositional state, the poem is quite explicitly enthusiastic. Something overwhelming happens – here it is the presence of Vincent, acting on O’Hara’s sensibility like a chemical reaction – from which follows a mood Thoreau would have recognized, ‘a strange quiet excitement’, out of which emerges the possibility of intimate speech. Thus that triad at the beginning is comic, but it is also in earnest. Love, in O’Hara, seeks not itself, but invariably finds its articulation in things, actions and events, being a state of mind, like enthusiasm, in which nearness to life is possible. ‘Light clarity avocado salad in the morning’: the effect of love, O’Hara asserts, is to make details noticeable. So similarly, at the end of ‘Steps’, the balance is of excess and detail, intimacy with the world made possible by love:

    and the little box is out on the sidewalk  
    next to the delicatessen  
    so the old man can sit on it and drink beer  
    and get knocked off it by his wife later in the day  
    while the sun is still shining  
    oh god it’s wonderful  
    to get out of bed  
    and drink too much coffee  
    and smoke too many cigarettes  
    and love you so much

[CP, 371]
'Steps' is an entirely characteristic O'Hara love poem. It is 'for' Vincent but it is not about him, it is about what he makes possible. And what he makes possible, in the love he enables, is a closeness to life, to life's incidental and contributory details: the box 'out on the sidewalk / next to the delicatessen'. It is in his love poems, in other words, that enthusiasm is most obviously integral to his way of concentrating. Witness the end of the earlier 'Poem', in which in the act of love (which is the act of writing), O'Hara asserts that 'I am sure of nothing but this, intensified by breathing'. What he is sure of ('this') is love, but what he is also sure of in the poem ('this') is his relation with life. It is a poem of 'light' and 'clarity' made possible by 'strange quiet excitement'. O'Hara wrote as an enthusiast, and the fullest expression of his enthusiasm is to be found in the writing of his love poems – composition, as he has it, 'intensified by breathing'.

Notes

1. Bill Berkson and Joe LeSueur (eds), Homage to Frank O'Hara, Bolinas, Calif., Big Sky, 1978, p. 139; hereafter referred to in the text as H.
2. Frank O'Hara, Standing Still and Walking in New York, ed. Donald Allen, Bolinas, Calif., Grey Fox Press, p. 147; hereafter referred to in the text as SS.
9. Ibid., p. 4.
10. Joe LeSueur, Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O'Hara, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 276; hereafter referred to in the text as D.
12. Jon Mee provides an excellent discussion of the historic relation between enthusiasm and print culture, observing that 'Swift and Pope’ associated ‘the proliferation of print’ [which very largely meant pamphleteering] ‘with religious non-conformity’. ‘A large quantity of the eighteenth-century’s print production,’ he observes, ‘was taken up with religious disputation or ...