

# The Significance of Frank O'Hara

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Charles Altieri

Frank O'Hara's verse play, "Try, Try," provides us the most ready access to many characteristic qualities of his fictive world.<sup>1</sup> On the surface, and the play is all surface, it appears merely a reminder of how far verse drama has slipped even from Eliot's not very successful attempts to bring dramatic verse to the world of contemporary cocktail parties. "Try, Try" presents us with two lovers, Violet and John, whose delightful provocations of each other are rudely interrupted by the return of Violet's husband, Jack, from the war. Jack, though, proves not much of an obstacle to their love. Asked by Violet to leave, he calmly accepts his fate and the play ends with the lovers triumphantly in each other's arms. The play is farce, or better pop art, deliberately refusing Eliot's symbols and portentous psychological probings; the play, in fact, even refuses the conventional means for theatrical action in the love triangle plot. There is no violence, no passionate confrontation, and no insight or recognition of any truths, profound or otherwise, by the characters—if characters we can call such undifferentiated dramatic agents.

Yet the play is both entertaining in itself and indicative of O'Hara's world view—precisely in the way O'Hara manipulates absolutely trivial and conventional materials. We realize first of all that such materials are a comment on contemporary reality and on the materials that reality affords the artist. Traditionally verse was called for in drama only when the materials were of the greatest importance, when the playwright wanted to project the nobility of his characters or have at his disposal linguistic and rhythmic means capable of rendering serious and complex materials. In "Try, Try," on the other hand, verse is required because the material is so slight; only elaborate and witty language can interest us in such painfully insignificant and typical people and situations. Like many other pop artists, O'Hara is reminding us that our age has lost whatever it was that allowed people to think that certain materials were intrinsically significant and fit material for serious artistic exploration. The world no longer sustains or inspires powerful language. Yeats once said that modern tragedy was impossible because modern man, when deeply moved, did not indulge in emotional outbursts but stared quietly at the fireplace. Now, as Ionesco reminds us, even the man moved enough to stare at the fireplace seems

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<sup>1</sup> "Try, Try" is published in Herbert Machiz, ed., *Artists' Theatre: Four Plays* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), pp. 15-42. O'Hara's poems and essays are collected in Donald Allen, ed., *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Knopf, 1971). The two works will be cited in the text as *AT* and *CP*.

somehow ridiculous. Powerful language is no longer a response to the intensity of experience but to its poverty; we need the artifice of witty and elaborate speech because without it we would have only the pressure of an absurd and oppressive reality. In one of his poems, O'Hara is eating a cheeseburger in Juliet's Corner when he fantasizes an association with Giuletta Massina, "è bell' attrice" (CP, 258). In this situation, "è bell' attrice" is a contemporary version of Beatrice, now not a light leading us through the world to a transcendent informing principle but a goddess of illusion redeeming us only momentarily from the stereotyped trivia dominating our lives (cf. also "Galanta," CP, 463-64).

As a poet, O'Hara explores facets of the pop aesthetic which nicely complement and confute the thinking of Bly and Olson. In "Try, Try," the lover, John, does not win the girl from her husband, Jack, because of any inherent character traits. The men are almost exactly alike (as the names indicate), and if anyone were to have moral claims it would be the husband, who is also returning from service to his country. John wins simply because he has been living with the girl, wins that is because he has been present, there, while the husband was absent. Here is Violet's rejection of her husband: "I wish you'd/go away and stay away. All you've done is kept me/looking out windows, wondering what things were/really like. Get out!" (AT, 39). The lover's seconding remarks are as philosophical as O'Hara will allow himself to be:

You've got a claim on it, but I've got it  
These things don't happen temporarily . . .

I suppose I'm the snake-in-the-grass but  
I can't say I'm sorry. Someone has to smile  
at her as she comes back from the bathroom.  
Do you think everything can stay the same,  
like a photograph? What for?

(AT, 41)

Presence then is a central value for O'Hara; but what kind of presence is it he affirms? First and foremost it is a demystified one stripped of the ontological vestments with which Bly and Olson endow it. For O'Hara the open road has lost its resident gods capable of mastering and directing the ego. There remains only the present as landscape without depth, satisfying only by contrast to the anxiety Violet felt when she tried to refer her condition to the needs and demands of an absent master. And if the present is without depth, whatever vital qualities it has depend entirely on the energies and capacities of the consciousness encountering it. Olson had opposed the dangerous tendencies towards passivity (the merger with the all which is death) in poetics like Bly's by insisting that man fulfills himself only in action. Yet this active creative self is always grounded in a cosmos at once lawful and itself continuously emergent or creative. With O'Hara, the self must be creative without a ground; value depends entirely on the vitality with which one engages his experiences:

You are of me, that's what  
and that's the meaning of fertility  
hard and moist and moaning<sup>2</sup> (CP, 387)

In "Fantasy," the concluding poem in *Lunch Poems*, O'Hara tells us, "The main thing is to tell a story./It is almost/very important," and he ends the fantasy with the playful reminder, "Never argue with the movies" (CP, 488). Literally the lines refer to a movie, *Northern Pursuit*, which, because it is either in his memory or on television, keeps intruding into his consciousness as he prepares medicine for Allen Ginsberg and converses with him. Seen, however, as figurative comments on the poetry of the entire volume, the lines become much more resonant. We notice first of all, in this poem titled "Fantasy," the emphasis on story, an emphasis I take to be a way of summarizing the necessary and superficial creative intelligence celebrated in "Try, Try" and in the exuberance of *Lunch Poems*. The story is only "almost" very important both because the movie, *Northern Pursuit*, is a trite one, and more significantly because, given the centrality of stories or fictions, there are no acceptable structures of value to define genuine hierarchies of importance. And without terms which can distinguish the important from the trivial, there is a concomitant breakdown in our sense of the necessary boundaries between fantasy and reality. Why privilege reality, even if we can distinguish it from fiction? Matters of truth then merge with matters of the creative imagination, and the imagination itself can no longer assume its noble form-creating role but tends instead to be conceived as story-maker whose major medium is the B movie, the public equivalent of private daydreams. The movies then are at once emblem of contemporary views on the nature of reality (who hasn't seen his life as a B movie and himself as seedy director powerless to do more, with the budget and script he's been given<sup>p</sup>) and moral witness of our times. It is folly to argue with them for two reasons: our arguments have no grounds not themselves as fictive and superficial as the movies, and (as the poem, "Ave Maria" suggests, CP, 371-72) we stand to lose more than we would gain if we successfully argue with the movies. The movies at least engage our imaginations and enliven experience; most of the forms of argument used to refute movie truth are themselves analytic and sterile ways of returning us to the poverty of a present emptied of all vitality.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> O'Hara's differences from Olson on creativity are analagous to the difference between pop and dada acts of creativity which endow the objects with importance (Duchamp's urinal for example) and the abstract expressionist creativity whereby one is both subject and object of the forces realized in the act of creating. O'Hara though, as I shall show, often goes beyond pop creativity to merge his own creative acts with the energies of the city. But even then there is an emphasis on the surface qualities of the object foreign to Olson and to Pollock.

<sup>3</sup> "To put it very gently, I have a feeling that the philosophical reduction of reality to a dealable-with system so distorts life that one's 'reward' for this endeavor . . . is illness both from inside and outside" (CP, 495). Nonetheless, my own analysis of O'Hara, particularly the discussion of story is based on a philosopher, Jacques Derrida, who tries

The way out of this emptiness is the story, but story in O'Hara requires careful definition since he is in no way a traditional narrative poet. Possible forms of story, of course, are fantasy, and the witty artifice of "Try, Try," forms O'Hara normally equates with pop art (see "Poem" on Lana Turner, CP, 449). But for O'Hara life provides fictions both more superficial and more interesting than pure fantasy or artifice. The poet keeps his story alive by a loving fidelity to the specific facts and qualities of his daily experience—seen for themselves and not as the building blocks of larger, more significant wholes traditionally called poems:

I am mainly preoccupied with the world as I experience it, and at times when I would rather be dead the thought that I could never write another poem has so far stopped me. . . . What is happening to me, allowing for lies and exaggerations which I try to avoid, goes into my poems. I don't think my experiences are clarified or made beautiful for myself or anyone else, . . .

It may be that poetry makes life's nebulous events tangible to me and restores their detail; or conversely, that poetry brings forth the intangible quality of incidents which are all too concrete and circumstantial.

(CP, 500)

It is in this context of life continually providing materials for the story that we must understand O'Hara's love affair with New York City (cf. "Steps," CP, 370-71). For the city is a continual source of interesting and engaging details. Moreover, the city is a perfect metaphor for O'Hara's sense of the value in these details. Presence in the city is antithetical to presence in nature. City details after all have neither meaning, hierarchy nor purpose not created absolutely by man. And more important, the city is committed to perpetual change; there are no enduring seasonal motifs or patterns of duration underlying and sustaining the multiplicity of city phenomena. They exist completely in the moment. And they exist superficially. In the city, as in O'Hara's ontology, interesting and engaging details are continually becoming present. Yet not only do these momentary apparitions promise no underlying significance or meanings to be interpreted, they actually resist any attempt on our part to know them better. City life offers a series of phenomena to notice, perhaps to play with in one's own psyche, but very rarely do these phenomena inspire or welcome any attempt to participate in their lives. O'Hara's analogue for the specific form of presence manifested by the city is his way of naming. His texture of proper names gives each person and detail an identity, but in no way do the names help the reader understand anything about what has been named. To

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to work out the epistemological and ethical implications of a post-modern reality without depth and impossible to interpret. I use the term story as literary embodiment of what Derrida calls "free play," in a world whose givenness is all we can have. And central in that givenness is our own creative play among the phenomena we encounter. (Derrida insists far more than O'Hara on the strictly verbal qualities of this given reality.)

know a lunch counter is called Juliet's Corner or a person O'Hara expects to meet is named Norman is rather a reminder for the reader that the specific details of another's life can appear only as momentary fragments, insisting through their particularity on his alienation from any inner reality they might possess.

What makes O'Hara so interesting a poet is his sense at once of the necessity for story, of its superficiality, and of the pain potentially lurking in every moment. The dialectic between presence and alienation we find in his use of names is more strikingly evident in the larger rhythms of his work. Coexisting with O'Hara's evident joy in a kaleidoscopic rush of details and encounters are frequent perceptions of a lurking anxiety ready to seize him if the flow of events should give it a moment's foothold:

I ducked out of sight behind the saw-mill  
 nobody saw me because of the falls and the gates the sluice the  
tourist boats  
 the children were trailing their fingers in the water  
 and the swans, regal and smarty, were nipping their "little"  
fingers

I heard one swan remark "That was a good nip  
 though they are not as interesting as sausages" and another  
 reply "Nor as tasty as those peanuts we got away from the  
elephant that time"

but I didn't really care for conversation that day  
 I wanted to be alone  
 which is why I went to the mill in the first place  
 now I am alone and hate it  
 I don't want to just make boards for the rest of my life  
 I'm distressed  
 the water is very beautiful but you can't go into it  
 because of the gunk  
 and the dog is always rolling over, I like dogs on their "little" feet  
 I think I may scamper off to Winnipeg to see Raymond  
 but what'll happen to the mill  
 I see the cobwebs collecting already  
 and later those other webs, those awful predatory webs  
 if I stay right here I will eventually get into the newspapers  
 like Robert Frost  
 willow trees, willow trees they remind me of Desdemona  
 I'm so damned literary  
 and at the same time the waters rushing past remind me of  
nothing

I'm so damned empty  
 what is all this vessel shit anyway  
 we are all rushing down the River Happy Times

ducking poling bumping sinking and swimming  
and we arrive at the beach  
the chaff is sand  
alone as a tree bumping another tree in a storm  
that's not really being alone, is it, signed The Saw

(CP, 428-429)

To be "alone" is also to be all one, but again like city life O'Hara has only the unity of mad process trying to make up in motion what it lacks in meaning. The self threatens always to dissipate into the surfaces it contemplates, to become merely a "skein of lust" (CP, 403) unwinding in time. Yet one need only recognize the dangers to overcome them, to reaffirm his commitment and love of the processes he's engaged in: one must maintain, he tells us in his essay on Nakian, "a kind of despairing sensual delight" by achieving "a relation with physical truth that is both stoic and sybaritic."<sup>4</sup> Notice how in the poem I've quoted, O'Hara never dwells on the problems but keeps turning instead to the details of the scene or his own fantasies of future possibilities. "Naphtha" offers an even better example of a conclusion nicely capturing both the underlying sterility of his experience and the rich union of stoic and sybaritic he makes of it:

how are you feeling in ancient September  
I am feeling like a truck on a wet highway  
how can you  
you were made in the image of god  
I was not  
I was made in the image of a sissy truck-driver  
and Jean Dubuffet painting his cows  
"with a likeness burst in the memory"  
apart from love (don't say it)  
I am ashamed of my century  
for being so entertaining  
but I have to smile

(CP, 338)

He "has" to smile—because he has no alternative, but also because his and his century's absurd situation are genuinely entertaining. O'Hara has to smile, not to laugh, and in that small difference we can realize the distance between his genuinely sybaritic stoicism and the less humane anguish of the black humorist.

Ontologically, O'Hara's demystified sense of process is very close to the tragic Lowell of *Notebook*, but there are two major differences. First there is O'Hara's exuberance; his awareness of lurking emptiness generates neither a constant sense of how forced pleasure is nor the limited ego context which is all Lowell can trust. All O'Hara's poems are intensely personal, but they retain, even celebrate, the necessary public dimension and shared quality of the surfaces which

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Richard Howard's fine essay on O'Hara in *Alone With America* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), p. 403.

constitute his story.<sup>5</sup> The more important contrast lies in O'Hara's treatment of anxiety. For O'Hara the tragic themes so celebrated by the existentialist tradition are both ridiculous and dangerous. The tragic seems ridiculous because of its exalted and probably false sense of the heroic embattled ego—even if the ego is in the kathartic process of learning cosmic pity: "The strange career of a personality begins at five and ends/forty minutes later in a fog the rest is just a lot of stranded/ships honking their horns full of joy-seeking cadets in bloomers" (CP, 392). The goal is not meeting or defying fate but "avoiding it" (CP, 365), and tragic themes are dangerous because they encourage us to think we can turn on our anxieties and successfully wrestle them to the ground. But we are more like Actaeon than Hercules, more prone to be devoured by anxiety than to conquer it in direct conflict.

"Adieu To Norman, Bon Jour To Joan and Jean-Paul" summarizes most of O'Hara's poetic strategies and makes evident the differences from Lowell:

It is 12:10 in New York and I am wondering  
 if I will finish this in time to meet Norman for lunch  
 ah lunch! I think I am going crazy  
 what with my terrible hangover and the weekend coming up  
 at excitement-prone Kenneth Koch's  
 I wish I were staying in town and working on my poems  
 at Joan's studio for a new book by Grove Press  
 which they will probably not print  
 but it is good to be 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

yesterday I looked up the rue Frémicourt on a map  
 and was happy to find it like a bird  
 flying over Paris et ses environs  
 which unfortunately did not include Seine-et-Oise

which I don't know

as well as a number of other things  
 and Allen is back talking about god a lot

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<sup>5</sup> Derrida, in his essay, "Structure, Sign, and Play," in Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, eds., *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins, 1970), pp. 247-265, distinguishes between the "nostalgia" of most Western poetry and metaphysics seeking a center or source of reference and value which can define and interpret the value of specific phenomenal experiences and a kind of Nietzschean free play which, rather than lament the continually displaced quality of phenomena, accepts and revels in the freedom of their lack of external or referential definition. Lowell is a poet of nostalgia, while O'Hara keeps us aware of the potential nostalgia but refuses to submit to a suffering which seems even more purposeless than the phenomena he possesses. (To see how close O'Hara is to Derrida on this theme consult his refutation of Lionel Abel's "nineteenth century" expectations that Pasternak should exhibit the "grief-expression of the romantic hero," CP, 504.)

and Peter is back not talking very much  
and Joe has a cold and is not coming to Kenneth's  
although he is coming to lunch with Norman  
I suspect he is making a distinction  
well, who isn't

I wish I were reeling around Paris  
instead of reeling around New York  
I wish I weren't reeling at all  
it is Spring the ice has melted the Ricard is being poured  
we are all happy and young and toothless  
it is the same as old age  
the only thing to do is simply continue  
is that simple  
yes, it is simple because it is the only thing to do  
can you do it  
yes, you can because it is the only thing to do  
blue light over the Bois de Boulogne it continues  
the Seine continues  
the Louvre stays open it continues it hardly closes at all  
the Bar Americain continues to be French  
de Gaulle continues to be Algerian as does Camus  
Shirley Goldfarb continues to be Shirley Goldfarb  
and Jane Hazan continues to be Jane Freilicher (I think!)  
and Irving Sandler continues to be the balayeur des artistes  
and so do I (sometimes I think I'm "in love" with painting)  
and surely the Piscine Deligny continues to have water in it  
and the Flore continues to have tables and newspapers  
and people under them  
and surely we shall not continue to be unhappy  
we shall be happy  
but we shall continue to be ourselves everything  
continues to be possible  
René Char, Pierre Reverdy, Samuel Beckett it is possible isn't it  
I love Reverdy for saying yes, though I don't believe it

Just as one has no grounds to measure adequately good and bad and so must look only at the qualities of his life as process (ll. 10-11), the poem can only counter the anxieties which continue to oppress by turning time and again to the details and possibilities to which we can keep saying yes, even if we don't believe them. O'Hara's characteristic strategies are clearest in the fourth stanza. In the initial line he tries to encounter his present sense of emptiness with an escape into fantasy and a possible future, but the escape doesn't work. By the third line he is returned to a dangerously static vision of himself as object (instead of as actor playing a creative role in process), one he only escapes by completely changing his vision and his theme to an awareness of the weather.



And even here O'Hara is careful to avoid any illusion of depth. He swiftly metamorphoses spring's melting ice into the ice at cocktail parties so that none of spring's traditional symbolic overtones can emerge. For to admit spring as a symbolic entity is to remain on the symbolic generalized level of discourse where the problem of rootlessness is most pressing. While symbolic solutions might convince one for the moment he's overcome a philosophical problem, they also tempt his consciousness to continue operating on levels where further anxieties are inevitable. Symbolism perpetually promises qualities of experience which are not present and hence problematic.

O'Hara himself is one whom other poets love for saying yes but do not actually believe. His influence and popularity are considerably greater than his achievement—a phenomenon attributable to many factors including his sheer entertainment value and the notoriety of his pathetic and unexpected death. But most of all I think his popularity stems from his sybaritic stoicism, or perhaps affirmative skepticism, and from his articulation of strategies, attitudes and values which other poets find themselves momentarily sharing. In addition, many of O'Hara's strategies can be adapted to qualities of experience less camp and aggressively superficial. While O'Hara reduces the present to sheer surface and the creative play of the individual consciousness, he also points to materials and attitudes which might constitute a genuine moral vision free of the systematic and abstract distortions of most philosophical attempts to define value.

Let us take as an example of O'Hara's centrality the question of how poets can handle moral materials within a philosophy of radical presence no longer able to lean on Bly and Olson's ontological crutches. Given the insistence on the open road and the denial of referential moral systems, it is impossible for the poet to affirm a morality stressing contents. The poet cannot recommend specific actions to be universally imitated, nor even propose very specific moral criteria individuals can use in defining their own rights and wrongs. All he can do is offer a set of moral attitudes. The poet illustrates and exemplifies modes of engaging whatever experiences a person might have, and his work becomes testament to the kind of effects these attitudes might have.<sup>6</sup> This sense that poetry is moral through the attitudes it embodies permeates contemporary poetry, and O'Hara is an influential example of both a specific strategy and the general framework supporting such an emphasis: think for example of poets like Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, Bly and W. S. Merwin, who seek to embody modes of consciousness which one can or must inhabit to intuit moral truths; or consider others like John Logan, Bill Knott, David Ignatow and John Ashbery (O'Hara's close friend whose ironic and disembodied voice suggests a mode of living almost exactly opposite O'Hara's, though the two share the same ontology) whose attitudes are more directly moral, more concerned with ways of acting in relation to suffering and to other people, than they are with leading us to ontological truths. What all share, though, is a tendency to expand traditional lyric modes so that they become existential strategies. Lyric poetry has

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<sup>6</sup> This is precisely what Robert Motherwell does in O'Hara's collection of his work and his reflections, *Robert Motherwell* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1965), p. 53.

always had as its primary function the invention and testing of attitudes toward experience, and *persona* was a primary critical category for critics of the fifties. But within the tradition attitude was always supplementary to the moral qualities of the experience itself. Thus critics and poets could conceive *persona* ironically and contemplate the gap between ideal modes of response suggested by the experience and the specific moral or intellectual failures of the specific voice in the poem. Contemporary poets cannot afford to be ironic about their *persona* because they cannot trust, either in the poem or in reality, that the experience itself provides norms for judging the response. Rather only the response itself—its appeal for the reader and the possibilities it offers for keeping him open to the reality of his own experiences—can be the measure of the poet's moral value.

O'Hara's specific attitude is also very influential—not only to those New York poets who continue in the pop art tradition but to others more taken by his humility and affirmative skepticism. The qualities of skepticism and humility in fact often go hand in hand, for it is always tempting, if not always possible, to extend one's skepticism about external values to skepticism about the self. And O'Hara's poetry does just that: one so aware of the arbitrary creativity he requires to keep the present vital is not apt to take either himself, his poetry, or his world view as possible salvation for everyone. So O'Hara presents us with demystified views of both the reconciliation of opposites and the poetic image. The high Romantic doctrine of the form-creating imagination unifying and reconciling opposites promises a solution at once unlikely without distorting experience and undesirable. For what makes life interesting are precisely the facts of confusion, contradiction, and the constant presence of alternatives. O'Hara approaches Olson's contention that only the multiplicity of the real can reconcile images, but he remains aware that this multiplicity will always seem contradictory to human consciousness. Yet like Donald Barthelme, his counterpart in prose fiction, O'Hara celebrates just this ironic reality of human experience. In a similar way O'Hara presents a skeptical view of the poetic image: it is neither means for capturing the *Gott-natur* nor collocation of *topos*, *typos* and *tropos*. Most often it is merely *topos*, the accurate and engaged description of interesting facets of experience, but when topology is not creative enough the poet self-consciously creates startling images and metaphors. O'Hara never allows himself, or us, to confuse will and perception, to mistake careful rhetorical construction for discovered ontological or psychological truth.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> We might distinguish four attitudes towards the image-imitation, two traditional views and two versions of expressive immanence. Almost no contemporary poet has an imitative aesthetic; poetry for them is an act in experience, not copying of it. Nor are many poets self-expressive, in the sense of the Romantic or religious lyric. But many have a slightly different attitude towards expression: in expressing himself the poet presents an event in which the energies of experience find definition, form, and resonance through the poet's language. Poetics of immanence usually exhibit this conception of the poet as at once subject and object, as creative medium for the immanent qualities of experience always there but only brought to consciousness in poetic language. The danger of this conception, however, is that the poet often confuses his own will with genuine immanence. Self-expression masks itself as expression of the world, a

O'Hara's resultant universe may be superficial and impoverished, but it is also fun—and fun with a strong measure of truth. The second of O'Hara's "2 Poems from the Ohara Monogatari," with the skeptical attitude towards created images and monistic world views, exemplifies both the truth and the fun:

After a long trip to a shrine  
in wooden clogs so hard on the muscles  
the tea is bitter and the breasts are hard  
so much terrace for one evening

there is no longer no ocean  
I don't see the ocean under my stilts  
as I poke along

hands on ankles feet on wrists  
naked in thought  
like a whip made from sheerest stockings

the radio is on the cigarette is puffed upon  
by the pleasures of rolling in a bog  
some call the Milky Way  
in far-fetched Occidental lands above the trees  
where dwell the amusing skulls (CP, 213)

The poem is never really meditative, but given its oriental setting and religious overtones the first two stanzas could be a slightly cranky version of modish Western poems about Eastern religion. Even the transformation of the wooden clogs into stilts need not yet suggest an equation between humble Eastern religions and Yeats' self-conscious creative poet on his stilts. It is only in the third stanza that the irony takes over and reminds us that religion, Eastern or Western, is a creature of the fictive imagination. At the moment when the meditative state seems realized ("naked in thought"), O'Hara introduces the metaphor of a whip made of sheer stockings. The metaphor is high camp, at once completely arbitrary and an ironic reminder of how out of tune urban Western man is with whatever natural and religious energies he hopes to experience in the setting. Finally, this intrusion of self-consciousness leads to the last stanza's presentation of the pain and death we willfully overlook in turning to Eastern monistic visions of cosmic unity—a unity mocked, one might add, by the obvious way the poet's mind cannot satisfactorily merge into the scene.

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phenomenon we find recurrent especially in deep image poetry where often the most arbitrary images are proposed as dynamic experiences of creative objective energy coursing through the poet. The fourth approach to the image accepts, and often revels in, the self's freedom to endow experience with imaginative significance. O'Hara, like few other contemporaries, uses both the expressive and created images without confusing the two.

There is, however, another sense in which O'Hara's materials are at least as important as his attitudes to his influential position, not in their camp specifics but as indications of areas in human experience not often mined by poets. For O'Hara is quintessentially a poet of the domestic and the quotidian, and few poets, thank God, share his sense of what the domestic and quotidian entails. But the success of any domestic poetry encourages others to look freshly at the immediate experiences which matter to them and to ask poetically why they matter. As John Ashbery asks, "Have you begun to be in the context you feel?" Moreover, the philosophy I've extracted from O'Hara can be used to rediscover the moral content of domestic experience. For we need not believe in numinous forces in order to recognize specific values in the present scene. We are, in fact, continually creating not only stories but values in all sorts of pre-reflective and pre-philosophical ways—in our choices, our commitments, and even in our compromises and acceptances.<sup>8</sup> If we can become aware of how important these energies, desires, and commitments are to our enjoyment of life, we can realize how fully we in fact do live in a present charged with value contexts we can define philosophically only with great difficulty. In effect, O'Hara encourages us to take Olson's admonitions about use and our necessity to recover the familiar without the ontological, cosmic, and epic perspectives Olson cloaks them in. These grand ideas, as much of Olson's poetry unfortunately indicates, tend to lead us away from what they encourage us to recover. We need instead the joyful, confident humility and honesty so fully witnessed in O'Hara's poetry.

Paul Carroll is the first critic I know to claim a really influential role in contemporary poetry for O'Hara. My argument complements and extends his, which deals primarily with the aesthetic aspects of the themes of domesticity and the process of continual creation. O'Hara's influence, he says, stems from three related factors in his work. He makes clear for poets how the dada and expressionist doctrines of creation can work for them, for his poems continually insist that they are not representations of reality but the enactment by the artist of certain attitudes and choices within that reality. Consequently there are no canonical or privileged subjects for poetry: "Anything, literally, can exist in a poem; and anything can exist in whatever way the poet chooses." O'Hara then shows how the poet need no longer feel committed to organic unity as a principle of poetic construction. His details need not be chosen because they enhance a specific lyric point or attitude; the objects chosen can embody the multiple facets of experience, only some of which might be essential to the lyric

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<sup>8</sup> Kenneth Rexroth, in *Assays* (Norfolk, Conn., 1961) and *The Alternate Society* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970) is the poet and critic most conscious of how significant the contemporary emphasis on domestic materials can be. Opposing Williams to the poetic defenders of "civilization," he reminds us that the true "power" and "almost inextinguishable life" of civilization "consists of things like your cats stepping over the window sill." Williams had so much to give because he knew what he had already (*Assays*, 204). Few of us, Rexroth points out, are called to imitate the lofty actions of the world's great books, but "we are all called to be human" and can imitate a poetry of attention and reverence (*Assays*, 207).

feeling. This anti-organicist aesthetic Carroll defines as the aesthetic of the “impure poem.”<sup>9</sup>

The idea of the “impure poem” is both helpful and dangerous. It is helpful in so much as it calls our attention to the materials and attitudes the contemporaries try to give poetic expression, but it oversimplifies the texture of relationships in the best poems using such materials. The organic poem need not be the singleminded evocation of simple emotions; “organic” simply means that all the aesthetic choices contribute to the complex effect of the poem. It is true that many of O’Hara’s poems do not aim at single lyric effects but focus instead, like Duchamp’s urinal and Warhol’s Campbell’s soup cans, on celebrating the powers of artistic choice and thus reminding us of the simple levels at which value experience continually takes place. But O’Hara’s best lyrics employ details both as specific references to an impure, discontinuous texture of experience and as carefully related elements in a complex lyric feeling.

“The Day Lady Died” is Carroll’s example of the archetypal impure poem; but that poem to me is one of the finest examples of the rich poetic possibilities in the domestic lyric O’Hara encouraged. The poem not only captures the vitality of pre-reflective experience but arranges that experience so it participates in and evokes for consciousness a complex, satisfying and relatively traditional lyric emotion:

It is 12:20 in New York a Friday  
three days after Bastille day, yes  
it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine  
because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton  
at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner  
and I don’t know the people who will feed me

I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun  
and have a hamburger and a malted and buy  
an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets  
in Ghana are doing these days

I go on to the bank  
and Miss Stillwagon (first name Linda I once heard)  
doesn’t even look up my balance for once in her life  
and in the GOLDEN GRIFFIN I get a little Verlaine  
for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do  
think of Hesiod, trans. Richmond Lattimore or  
Brendan Behan’s new play or Le Balcon or Les Nègres  
of Genet, but I don’t, I stick with Verlaine  
after practically going to sleep with quandariness

and for Mike I just stroll into the PARK LANE  
Liquor Store and ask for a bottle of Strega and

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<sup>9</sup> *The Poem In Its Skin* (Chicago: Follett, 1968), 157-165; quote p. 163.

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 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 Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing (CP, 325)

One way of seeing how the poem is impure, Carroll suggests, is to recognize that twenty lines are devoted to the casual events of O'Hara's day and only four to the ostensive subject of the poem. He goes on, though, to offer two insights which help explain how the artist's apparently free creative selection of details really creates a single complex lyric emotion:

I wonder how touching that beautiful final memory . . . would be if O'Hara had preceded it with emotional tributes and 'props' customary in most traditional elegies. . . .

In another sense, 'The Day Lady Died' isn't about Billie Holliday at all. It is about the common but sobering feeling that life continues on its bumbling way despite the tragic death of an important artist or some loved one.<sup>10</sup>

But it is not only the general configuration of details, the contrast between bumbling life and the suddenness of death which unifies the poem. The actual particulars by which the poem captures the vitality of life at the same time constantly call attention to their own contingency and perpetual hovering on the brink of disconnection. O'Hara has plans for dinner but doesn't know the people who will feed him; he is divorced in space and attitude from the Ghana poets, in time and habit from the writers mentioned in the third stanza (one usually does not "sleep with quandariness"—one sleeps from boredom and the lack of choice—but O'Hara wants to suggest connections between multiplicity, lack of connections guiding choice and forms of death); he encounters probably for the hundredth time a bank teller he has no communication with, yet who also disproves his expectations; and even the apparently most arbitrary item, the reference to Bastille day, has a curious appositeness in a poem so thoroughly about death, separation, and the fragility of established order. Moreover, the "and" rhetoric so pronounced in the poem further enhances one's sense of the tangential and problematic links between particulars: parataxis calls attention to the rush of time piling up details united only by sequential time alien to more discerning, specifically human patterns of relationship. The rush of life then embodies also a process of continual death leading to the climactic stoppages of life and breath in the last four lines. But the initial twenty lines also allows the

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<sup>10</sup> Carroll, p. 160.

poet to find a meaning in Billie's death, to see in her art and his memories of it the experience of connection which counters and helps mollify the pains of discontinuity. What he remembers about Billie is a moment of stasis that is at once death and very intense life—death because it so divorces him from the normal (and insignificant) activities of his daily life, and intense life for precisely the same reason since it has been that life which is really involvement in continual deaths. The moment he remembers is one of absolute communication when Billie controlled the entire audience and led them to a single ecstasy ("everyone and I stopped breathing"). And O'Hara's poem is itself an act like Billie Holliday's; the full elegiac effect depends on our union with his memory. Like her singing the poem also can claim at least for a moment to transcend the contingent multiplicities of daily experience and, through the poem's deliberate slowing in these last lines, allow a brief space where we all stop that rushing breath always associated with process in O'Hara and realize how art and memory can console us in the face of recurrent death.

O'Hara is not often so good; but neither are any other contemporary poets. Nonetheless, Carroll is correct in insisting that "The Day Lady Died" is a crucial touchstone for contemporary poetry. The poem exemplifies how post-modern literature can thrive, though oppressed on the one side by philosophical nihilism and on the other by the oppressive burden of literary history always reminding us of how little room there seems to be for meaningful originality. Literature can remain honest and "de-mystified," without succumbing to self-pitying nostalgia or refining away its content in the self-conscious acrobatics of what Barth has called "the literature of exhaustion." Not only poetry, but even some of the basic values of civilized life can be discovered by pushing further than the past into the manifold particulars and the texture of domestic contemporary life.