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Not You:
Frank O'Hara's Personism as a Poetics of Queer Defiance

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Though Frank O'Hara's poetry is widely recognized as an important queer poet and read for its queer content, little work has explicated the ways in the poems serve as an example of a queer poetics. As such, this project reads O'Hara's poetic thinking, focusing on his college journal and early writing, his poems to and about Bunny Lang, his poems that explicitly address poems and readers, his love poems to Vincent Warren, and his poetic statements. In doing so, I argue that his poetic statement, "Personism: A Manifesto," is the culmination of a long history of thinking about poetry in which I read his concept of Personism as a poetics of queer defiance. I trace the figure of the poetic "speaking voice," a concept popularized by Reuben Brower—who himself drew upon a history of scholars whose work separated the poet from the "I" of a poem—which was coalescing at the same time O'Hara was emerging as a poet. This critical ethos would become a dominant model for thinking about poetry which

would be institutionalized into a norm, but at the time of his writing, I argue, O'Hara's work pushed back on this model. Instead of presenting a "speaking voice" detached from the poet and the poet's life, I argue that O'Hara's poetics of Personism allow him to assert historical presence as a queer person, fugitively documenting his life into history. His work defies New Critical logic around a poetry belonging to a reading public, which depends upon universalizing the poetic speaker, stripping the social specificity away from the "I" of a poem, instead writing poetry that refused that sort of removal. It can be difficult to see this resistance without reading O'Hara's work alongside its contemporary poetic thinking, because many current approaches in queer theory rely on a normative understanding of how to read a poem, which is informed by the New Critical model and can lead to a failure to recognize the ways in which O'Hara poems are inherently queer. My aim, then, is to recontextualize O'Hara's work, to trace his thinking about and against a "speaking voice," and present his poetics of Personism as a poetics of queer defiance.

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Orientation(s)

It is easy to take Frank O'Hara's queerness for granted. Certainly, O'Hara has often been labeled a "queer poet" and stands in that pantheon, and there is no question to the gayness of his poems. And yet, critical work on O'Hara has largely failed to adequately interrogate the relationship between his sexuality and his poetics. This is not to say that his sexuality is hidden or ignored, but the way his queer identity shapes his approach to poetry is surprisingly neglected and at times dismissed. For example, in Robert K. Martin's 1979 book, *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry,* he begins by explaining that his volume "is not a study of the poetry of any author who happens to be homosexual. Nor is it the study of homosexual incidents in American poetry." He explains that his focus is on "the extent to which an author's awareness of himself as a homosexual has affected how and what he wrote" and that his subjects are "restricted" to those who "may be considered to have defined themselves as homosexuals and to have given expression to their sexuality in their work" (Martin xv). Interestingly, Frank O'Hara is not included in this study–not because he was ignored, but because he was intentionally excluded by Martin, who explains: "He is not included, not because he attempted to conceal his homosexuality (it was a frequent subject of his poetic conversation) but because he does not seem to me to use his homosexuality as an element of self-definition in the way, say, that Whitman or Crane does" (xix).

Robert K. Martin's book came in a time before much of queer theory had been articulated so the language at hand was "homosexual," but thinking in today's terms, it seems

what Martin was trying to articulate here is that while he saw O'Hara as *gay*, he did not see him as *queer.* That is, he acknowledges O'Hara's sexuality but doesn't see it impacting his poetics. We might think of gay as an acknowledgment of sexuality and identity, whereas queerness–which is intrinsically tied to that sexuality–operates in excess of sexuality, For example, Jennifer Doyle, in "Queer Wallpaper," articulates a definition for "queer" that can be generative in thinking about this excess. In it, Doyle considers Warhol prints that depict homosexual acts and the way they hang in her local bar. Doyle posits that "what's queer about that Warhol image is not exactly what it depicts, but where it hangs—and what its location makes visible." It's easy to recognize these prints depicting close ups of anal sex as gay, but Doyle asks us to think about how they serve as background in the bar, how these Warhols go unrecognized as "queer wallpaper," in a local bar. Though she acknowledges that "the function of the word 'queer' in writing about art is hard to pin down," she presents a very lucid articulation of it. "We often use the word 'queer' to signal the things that can come with being gay or lesbian, with being a member of a lesbian and gay community, but which are not exactly reducible to sexual identity," she writes. "Thinking about queer [art], in other words, is more than thinking about art by gay men and lesbians. To pursue this line of inquiry is to ask questions about where and how that art happens, about who that art addresses, how that art is visible in some contexts and invisible in others, about what kinds of things that art makes possible" (Doyle 343-4).

Indeed, if we look at the critical work on O'Hara, we can see a wide array of scholars who treat his sexuality as incidental, but few scholars who consider how his queerness impacted his approach to poetry. The scholarship that does exist on O'Hara's work has largely either focused on the poetry and poetics, attributing his approach to factors like the Cold War and technological changes in his time period without much attention to sexuality. Since Martin's work, there have been relatively few books that explicitly attempt to examine the effects when queerness comes in contact with poetry, and none of them have included O'Hara. Michael Snediker's *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* doesn't mention O'Hara and with the exception of a reference to one book review O'Hara wrote, John Emil Vincent's *Queer Lyrics: Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry* doesn't include him either.

Even books that have been written about O'Hara specifically have failed to adequately combine these two important aspects of his life. In the 1997 introduction to her pioneering 1977 book, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters,* Marjorie Perloff explains that when she published her "historical/critical study of O'Hara's work," the "conventions of the seventies" were still largely homophobic, and her own work was "largely devoid of speculation on the role the sexual played in O'Hara's oppositionality. That he was a radical and 'different' poet was my premise, but I regarded that oppositionality....as a question of individual ethos rather than as, in any profound way constructed by the poet's culture or sexual identification" (xiii). And, despite having "homosexuality," in the subtitle Hazel Smith's *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of*

Frank O'Hara: Difference, Homosexuality, Topography doesn't engage much with sexuality other than using it as a bridge to talk about hyperscapes, postmodern geography and textual topography. Lytle Shaw's interesting 2006 book, *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* doesn't engage with sexuality, meanwhile, Micah Mattix's 2000 book, *Frank O'Hara and the Poetics of Saying "I"* which does not often engage queerness and the times he addresses love, he reads the poetry through gay stereotypes, as in reading the line, directed at the frustration of a lover not devoting himself to him, "I am the simplest of men. All I want is boundless love," as referencing desire to have a polyamorous relationship (despite no evidence for this outside of assumptions). And *Frank O'Hara Now,* a collection of essays edited by Robert Hampson and Will Montgomery contains works that are focused on O'Hara in relation to the city, the idea of the self, and his collaborations with others.

Now, this is not to say that many of these texts that I have mentioned don't provide rigorous and provocative scholarship on O'Hara–many of them do–and I don't mean to sound overly critical in expecting them to do things that they aren't setting out to do. Ben Epstein's chapter in *Beautiful Enemies,* Jasper Bernes's chapter in *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization,* and Seth Perlow's chapter in *Technology and the American Lyric* is all provocative and useful work on O'Hara and the topics that they focus on. Rather, my point is that in this body of work, queerness is often treated as an incidental component and considered primarily in relation to other things like friendship or Cold War masculinity, rather than thinking about how it might shape the poetics from which he writes. Few scholars have

really engaged with O'Hara as a queer poet, and there is much left to be considered. José Esteban Muñoz does consider O'Hara's work in relation to queer meaning, though in his work O'Hara serves primarily as an example to help ground concepts for a few pages in his introduction and is not the focus of his major analysis. Another volume, Alice C. Parker's 1990 book, *The Exploration of the Secret Smile: The Language of Art and of Homosexuality in Frank O'Hara's Poetry,* focuses primarily on reading homosexual imagery in his poetry and contextualizing it to develop meaning. Terrell Scott Herring's 2002 article, "Frank O'Hara's Open Closet" does a better job attending to O'Hara's queerness than most, but as I will argue later, presents a reading that I don't necessarily agree with in that it relies upon some stable ideas of the lyric that I find problematic. Meanwhile, Simon Glavey's 2019 article, "Having a Coke with You is Even More Fun than Ideology Critique," which I'll discuss further later, goes furthest in addressing O'Hara's queerness.

But, perhaps, the one study that does the best, in many ways, is an early article–Bruce Boone's 1979 "Gay Language as Political Praxis: The Poetry of Frank O'Hara." In it, he sets out to correct the question of sexuality that is "largely repressed from critical discourse to date," echoing the contexts that Perloff explained (59). Boone's focus in the article is mainly to point out the way that O'Hara's work was knowing within gay communities, and "expressed an awareness of gay language and social life," which he attributes to being the cause for straight readers like Helen Vendler to find the poems to be "'not very good'" in that they had become "a language without syntax, or entertainment and gossip" when cut from the communities

they represented (61). He describes a process in which the critical context for O'Hara's posthumous publication necessitated many critics to not discuss his sexuality, and thus many aspects of his poetry that represented gay culture or language had to be re-cast as other things such as "frivolity" (61). Boone's aim is to recontextualize these works with historical understandings of gay culture in order to show where the opposition in his poetry lies, through his use of gay language as "praxis," and much of this article is focused on arguing for O'Hara's poems to be acknowledged as gay language, as "he *sounds* like a gay person when he talks. There is an accent on conversation as chatting, an enjoyable and 'unserious' social occupation much like gossip," which "*relates* rather than describes" (80, 82). In the end, Boone points to a process of reception in which in order for O'Hara's poetry to "now [have] become 'literary'" important contingencies and contexts for it had to have been lost. If we think back to what Doyle says about queer works of art, Boone is showing that the contexts and the readers can shape what we see or what we don't see, how queerness becomes visible or how queerness is lost. Perhaps, then, this is why it feels as if something is missing in the work on O'Hara– because it *is.*

One of my central arguments is that much is missing because much is *missed.* My argument is that if we understand the moment of poetic history in which O'Hara is writing, we can begin to see his queerness and the ways in which he pushed back against trends in criticism that would work to erase him. As a queer person, insisting upon presence in his poems was an act of defiance, and this defiance culminated in his concept of "Personism,"

which I view as a poetics of queer defiance. However, this is easy to miss because many of the ideas and reading practices which O'Hara pushed back on have become so institutionalized and unrecognized that it is difficult to set them aside and see the work he was doing. To articulate O'Hara's poetics as queer defiance requires that we trace O'Hara's poetic statements through poems, letters, interviews, unpublished archival texts, and poetic statements to sketch out a fuller view of Personism, contextualizing it in the specific moments in poetic history and critical reception. To do so, though, requires being properly orientated, which requires that we think about how we approach and use poems.

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As Sara Ahmed explains in *Queer Phenomenology,* "orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance" (*QP* 2-3). She explains that in her previous book, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* where she explored the intentionality of emotion, that "we are affected by 'what' we come in contact with" and emotions then "move us 'toward' or 'away' from such objects." In other words, when a "feeling of fear is directed toward" something, that object becomes seen as "fearsome." She concludes, "it is not just that bodies are moved by orientations they have; rather, the orientations we have toward others shape the contours of space by affecting relations of proximity and distance between bodies" (*QP* 2-3). The objects we align with shape our

orientation in the world, and in turn our orientation in the world shapes the objects we align with.

Ahmed states, building on her previous work, "a queer phenomenology might turn to phenomenology by asking not only about the concept of orientation *in* phenomenology, but also the orientation *of* phenomenology" (*QP* 3). To do so is to ask questions about what is left out when we don't consider how our orientation frames our thinking. To explain this approach, Ahmed uses the example of the table, an object riddled throughout philosophical thinking as an object par excellence to think with, explaining "I bring the table to 'the front' of the writing in part to show how 'what' we think 'from' is an orientation device" (*QP* 4). Discussing Husserl's example of the family home, with objects such as a "'table with its books,'" Ahmed explains that focusing in on an object can cause other things to recede into the background: "being orientated toward the writing table not only relegates other rooms in the house to the background, but also might depend on *the work done to keep the desk clear'" (QP* 30). She draws on feminist scholarship to point out the traditionally gendered labor of keeping tables clean, of making homes, of keeping domestic spaces as well as, later, Marx's writing on the commodity, pointing to the material, the wood, and the labor involved in making the table come to be.

"For Husserl," she writes, "to see the table means to *lose sight of its function."* That is, "'this table' becomes 'the table'" where the thinker is able to bracket off its specificity—its history, contingency, the others that come in contact with it. This is in service of not just as the

objectification, but through abstraction and the "putting aside" function and use, the thinker turns the table not just into object but into idea: "Apprehending the table as an object means that I must walk around it and approach it as if I had not encountered it before; seeing it *as an object* means not describing the table as occupying a familiar order, as the writing table or any other kind of table. Such biographical or practical knowledge must be bracketed" (*QP* 35). She continues, "I want to relate what is 'missed' when we 'miss' the table to the spectrality of history, what we miss may be behind the table in another sense: what is behind the table is what must have already taken place for the table to arrive" (*QP* 36-7). Ahmed asks us to consider what this objectification leaves "behind," both in the sense of what is bracketed off (the use, the setting) and what creates the conditions of existence (the creation, the material). This is not just an argument about considering the specific, contingent circumstances of what is "behind" the table, however, it is also a reminder that we must ask what renders these as behind in the first place—how and why does the "behind" get bracketed away. How does what *is* missing *go* missing?

While at Harvard in the late 1940s and receiving a master's degree in the first years of the 1950s at Amherst, O'Hara was positioned in the midst of an important moment in poetic history. For a few decades, New Critical ideas around who the "I" of a poem ought to be attributed to and the ways we should read a poem had been coalescing and institutionalizing, drawing upon a history of "lyricization" which Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins trace, explaining, in their introduction to *The Lyric Theory Reader,* that in "the middle of the

century, [the] first person subject of the poem came to be called 'the speaker,' a dramatic persona considered a fiction made for the purposes of the poem…a fictional person of all times and all places" (5). Prins and Jackson go on to describe lyric reading, a process in which ideas of the lyric and what it has come to be inform the reading practices and ways we approach a poem, shaping how and what we see, but also what goes missing. In other words, reading practices that were at this time becoming so institutionalized that they were becoming "virtually invisible as a norm" have shaped what we can and can't see in O'Hara's work; but at the time he was writing, these conventions, though strong, were not so stable (Jackson and Prins 162). By contextualizing his work and putting it back in history, understanding its contingency, we can see what he was responding to and pushing back against. From our vantage point, we may not see what he opposed because to us it is invisible, having been cast as logic and truths about poetry, but by reorienting ourselves we can see these assumptions as historical arguments and make visible the structures he pushed against and we can better understand his positioning, which was one of queer defiance.

This has implications for queer theory, too, in that some features of queer theory have actually produced a practice that aids in the erasure of his queerness. As John Emil Vincent explains, in *Queer Lyrics,* "the lyric itself…as a literary form, has not been examined for its relation to queer meaning," and he explains that it "has been neglected by queer theorists due to an interest in historical readings of texts and an allergy to approaches that appear transhistorical or formalist" (xiii). He continues, saying "form appears ahistorical. The lyric,

imagined as a record of a single voice speaking to one person or no one, seems to have been puked up whole from the whale of English Literature onto the beach of the present" but he finds that in the lyric "powerful survival and world-making strategies" have "transmitted queer meaning across the span of American Poetry," offering "performances, or demonstrations, of living and feeling." Vincent pushes against what he calls "heteronormative reading practices," by imploring us to read queerly, thinking about queer meanings within poems, and positioning the "I" of a poem as being "is and is not the reader's" position, which creates "identity slippage and interpenetration…central to any lyric" (xix). Vincent's project provides an example in ways that we can read queerly *within* a stabilized structure of lyric reading. Or, put differently, his focus is not to trouble the category of lyric or how it is applied to poems, but to find queer meaning within those conventions we have inherited.

In that regard, it makes sense that he doesn't include O'Hara, because O'Hara's queerness, I argue, can't be seen within those conventions; it can only be seen once we disrupt those conventions. Where slippage of identity and "negative capability can model…queer ontology" for Vincent, as I will argue throughout my project, this slippage and negative capability, for O'Hara, was a form of erasure that he rejected. This is to say that what may look queer or be a mode of being queer to us, today, may have unintended consequences when used as a lens on past time periods. Queer theory knows this, for the most part, but queer approaches' common resistance to method and methodology, we can sometimes miss this. That is, to look at what is behind the poem, and to consider O'Hara's critical context is to

engage in a methodological conversation that requires thinking about poetic history, something that queer theory doesn't often do; but it also requires using a queer lens to think about poetic history, something that hasn't been adequately done in O'Hara's case.

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In some ways, the ways in which O'Hara's queerness is difficult to see is a symptom of queer theory's own resistance to cohesive methods. Recently, scholars have been grappling with the idea of method and methodology in terms of queer theory. In their provocative collection, *Imagining Queer Methods,* Amin Ghaziani and Matt Brim explain that "queer theory was inspired by social movements of the day, especially ACT UP, which linked 'deconstructive reading practices and grassroots activism together.' A focus on methods, which directs techniques for gathering data, and methodologies, which pertain to the logics of research design, would have risked a confrontation with queer claims to interdisciplinarity, if not an antidisciplinary irreverence" (3). They continue, "questions of method incite heated discussions of disciplinarily, since our theories precede and largely determining the particular research strategies that we adopt in our work. Yet queer studies have staked its claim by working within, against, across, and even beyond disciplinary boundaries, thereby blurring distinctions between the field and its methods" (3). Jane Ward, in this edition, writes: "to pair the terms 'queer' and 'methodology'—the former defined by its celebrated failure to adhere to

stable classificatory systems or be contained by disciplinary boundaries, and the latter defined by our orderly, discipline-specific, and easily reproducible techniques—produces something of an exciting contradiction, a productive oxymoron" (26).

Heather Love, in her entry in this volume, explains that despite her resistance to "traditional method," she sees "the failure to acknowledge that queer scholars, too, have methods as a disavowal of forms of institutional belonging, attachment, and affiliation" ("How the Other Half Thinks" 30). She argues that, "this refusal to locate ourselves or to identify our methods has resulted in a failure to grapple with queer studies as a positive knowledge project…To see one's practices as beyond method and utterly undisciplined is a failure to recon with queer scholars' position in the university; it fails to recognize the violence of *all* scholarly research—even its most insurgent and intimate forms" ("How the Other Half Thinks" 30). But, as Love points out, the stakes are high in thinking about "queer" and "method" together: "for those trained in the humanities…the anchoring of *queer* to *method* threatens to drain its political potential by submitting to regimes of statistical reduction, the reification of identity, the overvaluing of visible behavior, and the foreclosure of speculative, the counterfactual, and the 'not yet here' José Esteban Muñoz designated as queer utopia" (33). Love points out the tension here between the idea of method and queer's attachment to a horizon, which echoes another entry in this collection by Kadji Amin, who, in addressing Judith Butler's tying of "queer" to the action of "queering": "we see here…that the future of queer scholarship depends on always queering and being queerer than what came before"

(280). Further, Amin explains, "we find the claims, which Eng, Halberstam, and Muñoz echo and sharpen, that *queer* must always be 'queered from a prior usage,' never allowing its meaning or field of reference to settle, and what guides this constant queering moment is none other than 'the urgent and expanding political purposes" (280). "Born of a desire to fuck up the 'normal business in the academy,'" Amin writes, "by carrying into scholarship the political charge and current urgency of sexual politics, queer theory was, as Heather Love reminds us, *never intended to age*" (281).

And yet, it has, and in that aging, the field is grappling with a variety of questions regarding method, aims, and temporality. Valerie Traub, in *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns,* also addresses this, explaining that "queer studies has yet to reckon with the methods that have developed in the wake of its institutionalization" and the field, she says, has spent more time focusing on specific theories than on "what it might mean to espouse or enact a queer method, much less to forthrightly contend with the range of methods circulating within its purview" (314). She gives us clear and useful definitions for "theory" and "method," explaining that theory "names a broad or strong interpretation of why something exists and/or how it functions: it aims at generalizable principles that not only explain multiple instances and have explanatory power when applied to new cases" whereas "method concerns *how* we implement the theories that most compel us. It generally involves applying broad frameworks to particular questions and texts, and it tends to bear the imprint of disciplinary genesis" (314-5).

Traub pushes back on the work of Madhavi Menon. Madhavi Menon, a queer scholar and Early Modernist, pushes against restrictive historical protocols in many places, including her essay "Period Cramps." She writes, "acting as though knowledge of chronology is fundamental ground from which to build, we ignore to our peril the explosion of queer theory as that which challenges all categorization" (233). Further, "Renaissance queer theorists confine themselves to being historians of sexuality" and "those Renaissance scholars who want to be read for their queer theorizations often have to remove themselves from the field altogether" (233). Traub's response is that "rather than practice 'queer theory as that which challenges all categorization,' I believe there remain ample reasons to practice a queer historicism dedicated to showing *how* categories, however mythic, phantasmic, and incoherent, *came to be*" because doing so is a practice of historicism that does not "create categories" but "one that seeks to explain such categories' constitutive, pervasive, and persistent force" through "understanding[ing] the chance nature of coincidence and convergence, of sequence and consequence, and to follow them through the entirely contingent outcomes to which they give rise" (81). Though it may seem as though these scholars have dug into different sides, I think this debate gives ample proof that queer theory needs both: for the effort to defy categories requires that we understand them. Know thy enemy.

We might think of the Sara Ahmed's method—which describes her work in a series of books (*Queer Phenomenology, The Promise of Happiness, Willful Subjects*) as being to "follow

words around, in and out of their intellectual histories" (Ahmed, *Use* 3). This is a simple way of explaining a complex theoretical investigation. She writes that "To follow a word is to ask not only how it acquires the status of a concept in philosophy but how that word is exercised, rather like a muscle in everyday life....Thinking about the use of words is to ask about *where* they go, how they acquire associations, and in *what* or *whom* they are found" (Ahmed, *Use* 3). For example, in her previous book she took the idea of "the will" and "willing" as her object of analysis. This work, though, does not amount to a catalogue of use, but instead works in a very queer way to denaturalize to word/concept. To explain her approach in *Willful Subjects,* Ahmed writes, referencing her previous work:

> In *Queer Phenomenology,* I combined phenomenological and genealogical approaches (in this case to tables, and yes, tables will return) by reflecting on the temporal as well as spatial aspects of "the behind." As Husserl showed in the first volume of *Ideas,* we cannot see the object from all sides; the object is viewed in profile. If I walk around the table, the "one and the self-same table," my perceptions change but the table does not. As such, the table as a self-same object can only be intended by consciousness: an intentionality I redescribed in queer terms, *as a conjuring of the behind.* What is behind the object in a temporal sense also involves secrecy or withdrawal: it is not available from a viewing point. (Ahmed, *Willful 25)*

In order to get a better sense of the object, we must dedicate "time and labor to see more than a profile (to reveal an object, however partial this process of revelation remains, since we can never quite "catch" the whole thing at once); so too it involves time and labor to recover an object's historicity (to reveal what is behind an object, its conditions of arrival)" (Ahmed, *Willful* 25). She reminds us that, "an object can be a material thing in the world. Or an object can be what we apprehend; what we turn toward; or what is created as an effect of turning"

and to "relocate the will as an object of thought, as what we are apprehending, requires the use of phenomenological and genealogical methods. We need simultaneously to suspend our commitment to the will as what is behind an action and to give a history of how the will comes to be understood as 'behind'...When we give a history of this assumption, we are putting it out of action; we thus achieve an ability to describe willing as a mode of experience" (Ahmed, *Willful 25).*

Rather than disavowing method I want to "front" method up to understand the conventions and reading practices–straight and queer–that have orientated us. My goal, here, is not to undo nearly a century of reading or centuries of reading practices–I can't–but I can trace a history of specific New Critical reading practices in order to make them visible enough that we can see how they shape our understanding of O'Hara's poems. To give an account of this history, and to explicate the ways in which it shapes our viewing of the poems, how we turn toward them, we can better understand what is "behind," so to speak, both our reading and the poems. In doing so, we can then reorient ourselves to see how O'Hara thought about his poetic project and the ways he used it to defy conventions. For us to see what he was doing, we must suspend certain ideas that we might think of the "logic of lyric reading": that the speaker of a poem is dramatic and fictive, that intention ought not be considered, and that the moment of a poem is the moment of our reading it. Thus, this project is not a comprehensive reading of all of O'Hara's work, nor do I present theories that account for all of the many various genres, subjects, forms, approaches, or styles in which O'Hara writes. Instead, my aim

in this project is to trace a specific history of his thinking about poetic reception and the ways in which conventional reading practices that were coalescing in his time might lead to universalization that would erase his identity as a queer person. By reading his work and thinking *with* him, I will follow this thread which culminates in Personism, which I see as a queer poetics of defiance.

In chapter one, I follow O'Hara's beginnings as a poet in his college days and early work to contextualize the critical atmosphere that surrounded his emergence. At this time, the young poet was attending Harvard, where he kept a Journal for a few months. Through that journal, it is clear that he was thinking about trends in literary criticism of the time, most prevalently the injunction that intention is a fallacy which should not be considered by the critic, which has a stifling effect on his poetry. We can see this influence in the journal, writing things like "I must take pains not to *intend* anything" and "in the journal are the things which would intrude on the purity of the work" (*EW* 104). In this chapter, I sketch out a brief history of some New Critical norms that were coalescing and institutionalizing at this time, such as the rejection of intention and the subsequent attribution of the "I" of a poem to a dramatic, fictive "speaking voice." I put this alongside his journal which functions as a snapshot into his thinking at the time of his emergence in college, as well as a few early poems, and the comments left by his professor on his creative work for a class. In doing so, we can see not only the way that he understood this critical moment and tried to implement what it required, but the ways in which the critical forces created depression and dissatisfaction in his

writing. Surrounded by forces that told him, in his writing, that he must separate himself and present texts divorced of his social specification, while also coming of age as a queer person in the late 1940s, the feelings of suppression must have been suffocating, leading him to feel like an image he opens the journal with: narcissus peering into a cesspool.

Alongside O'Hara's thinking and the New Critical norms that were developing, I argue that it is important to remember his relative autonomy. That is, at the time O'Hara was writing, these trends were current—not yet the pervasive practices that we have inherited as norms—which means that it was not a foregone conclusion that they were correct or the proper way to read; he could still push back at these practices that were in flux, and later would. Using Sara Ahmed's work on "use" to think about how we use poems. I explicate the way in which these New Critical reading practices function as "ground clearing" methods, stripping away any persons or socio-historical specificity that might make the poem less than habitable for any given reader. We may think with Eve Sedgwick on this, considering these methods that create a dramatic fiction centered on the reader's interpretation in their own moment in terms of her discussion of ignorance. For Sedgwick, ignorance has a gravity to it, and "it is the interlocutor who has or pretends to have the *less* broadly knowledgeable understanding of interpretive practice who will define the terms of the exchange" (*Epistemology* 4). The comportment of a New Critical reader, who brackets off intention, minimizes biographical information, and turns the poem into a dramatic fiction meant to be read and interpreted by them exerts a great deal of gravity on the text through their willed

ignorance to what we may call the "behind" of the text. By historicizing these trends and understanding them not to be truths about reading but critical constructions, we can begin looking for what is there when we try to set them aside.

Chapter two, then, explores how O'Hara develops his poetic project in relation to these trends. Though many scholars have gestured toward "Personism," critical readings of it tend to be insubstantial, sometimes dismissing it as half-joking, or pointing to a quote where he calls it "a little diary of my thoughts" and "a diary of a particular day." However, my goal in the chapter is to provide a comprehensive reading of "Personism" by recontextualizing the ideas he discusses in it within a much longer history of his thinking about them. That is, though the manifesto may be a diary of his thoughts on a day, those thoughts are part of a career-long contemplation about abstraction, intention, and personal removal. By stepping back and focusing on his relationship with friend and poet Bunny Lang, we can see a trepidation about publication or publicness and how it might involve separation between the poem and himself. In "Personism," O'Hara makes a distinction between abstraction in poetry and in painting, aligning himself with the latter. To help understand this, I bring in an unpublished short piece written for and given to Grace Hartigan which explores the idea of paradox—which critic Cleanth Brooks declares poetry to be the "language of paradox"—to argue that painting is a rejection of paradox, or the type of abstraction that allows for two things to inhabit the same space, like negative capability. Instead, it is work of affirmation, which aligns with what he discusses in "Personism." I point to O'Hara's art writing, and his

declaration that "art is not *your* life, it is someone else's" as a means to understand his concept of Personism (AC 6).

If the logic of New Criticism, which is the logic of lyric reading says that a poem is a dramatic fiction with a speaking voice that is not the poet's, that the poem is about our reading, then Personism is an attempt to defy this logic. While it may be true that the way we access poems is by reading, that doesn't necessarily need to mean that reading is what they are about, or their *raison d'être.* O'Hara isn't ignorant to the fact that poems are read, or that published poems have a publicness, but Personism makes those facts secondary and unimportant. Instead, he uses abstraction that he says is like that found in painting, which is "so totally opposed" to that found in poetry and associated with negative capability, which allows him to put the poem "between two persons," and to maintain "love's life-giving vulgarity" (*SS* 111). While poetry scholars have in differing degrees acknowledged some of what O'Hara is saying in "Personism," few have actually considered the role that sexuality has to play in development of it and instead have focused on using it to think about mid-century poetry more broadly and the experiments that were happening. However, I argue it is vitally important to understand it as tied to his identity as a queer person, an identity that was still illegal and dangerous in the 1950s and 60s with a world that would tell him to hide. Because of this, it was important for him to insist upon a resilient personhood that couldn't be erased by straightening, normatizing reading practices. In this capacity, once again drawing on Ahmed's work on use, I argue that O'Hara's Personism is a "queer use" of poetry; that is, if poetry was

to be written in such a way that would be habitable to a New Critical reader, he defied this, instead using poetry to document his life as a queer person in the mid-century, refusing to allow for its grounds to be cleared.

Having established what a poetics of Personism looks like, I then turn, in chapter three, to poems written to and about Vincent Warren. These poems, which are widely considered to be some of O'Hara's best, exemplify Personism, but are not often read in such a way. I begin by looking at the work of José Esteban Muñoz, who uses the poem "Having a Coke with You" as a central example in the introduction to his influential book, *Cruising Utopia.* For Muñoz, whose position toward the text is a "backward glance to enact a future," the poem is imbued with optimism and utopian potential which we the reader can feel and harness for queer potentiality in the future (4). Muñoz's reading is one model of how we might "use" O'Hara's poems, focusing on the act of having a coke which "signifies a vast lifeworld of queer relationally," and "in its relationally promises a future" (6). This reading is exemplary of Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading and is generative for Muñoz and his important project. His project is about us and the utopian feelings we can glean from texts that capture queerness in the past, which is necessarily a project about *our* reading, and doesn't necessarily trouble the reading practices that I am looking at as invisible norms. My use of Muñoz is not to argue against him, but to show that when only that reading is presented—and it has been such a widespread one in queer theory—we can easily miss what happens if you look at the poem not in terms of futurity but in terms of its present-ness. While Muñoz may be more

interested in the gesture that is captured in the poem, I'm more interested in *how* it is documented—that is, how O'Hara resists modes of New Critical reading.

In looking at the Vincent poems, I start to unravel the ways in which stories about O'Hara's relationship have been constructed but which the poems don't necessarily support, turning to notes that Vincent Warren wrote on copies of the poems that O'Hara had sent to him, which he sent to Donald Allen. By looking past some of these narratives, recontextualizing the poems as between two people, and focusing on the ways they document feelings and present-ness, I argue that what we can begin to see is that O'Hara is able to capture what I refer to as "extimate emotions." Drawing on Lacan's term "extimité" and Thomas Meyer's review of O'Hara, I point to emotions such as anticipation, care, excitement, and expectation, noting the quality that they all have in requiring contingency. By seeing the poems as contingent and between persons, these emotions become clearer and more vibrant; something that is lost if we see them as a character in a dramatic fiction, or a as a moment in a plot rather than a present moment in the past that was still possible. In this way, Muñoz and I both see a sense of possibility in the past, but our approaches to finding it and what we do with it may be different (and perhaps, complementary).

While there is a certain truth to the fact that we read poems and have desires for them, thinking with O'Hara's poems and Personism, I explore what happens if we don't assume that they are *about* us or our reading. When we do so, we can begin to see that the stakes for O'Hara were high: faced with critical reading practices that would erase him as a poet to substitute a

universalizing speaking voice, he insisted to still document his life and love as a queer man in the 1950s and 60s by creating a persistent personhood in the poems that defies these universalizing logics. As a queer reader, then, it is important not just to mine these texts for queer meaning, identification, or how they can stir futurity in us; we must also recognize how this queer person in the past took a stand and refused to be erased. Yes, we can know him, but we must remember that "art is not our life, it is someone else's." We can identify, love, or find hope in these texts, but as Traub explains, "the past is not cut whole cloth from our desires. However much we construe the past through our desires, those desires remain *ours,* not those of historical subjects." When we recognize this, we confront "*impasse*...the irreducible, intransigent quality of any given other's experience, including experiences lodged in the past" (136). By recognizing this impasse, and by being clear about our desires of the work, in this case, we can let O'Hara's Personism succeed in ways that, confronted by the dominating force that the reading practices he pushed against have become, it might not otherwise. To me, this is about seeing Personism as a poetics of queer defiance.

Though I do read many poems, letters, short works, and essays in this project, my aim is not to provide interpretations or to read queer content in O'Hara's work. My goal is also not to account for every O'Hara poem, as O'Hara's poetry evolved with great variety throughout his career, and his addressivity, as I will show, evolved throughout that time too. Naturally, like most poets, O'Hara wrote a variety of types of poems, and that variety included multiple forms of address. I am interested, though, in tracing specific ideas about how O'Hara thought

about his poetry in relation to a reading public, how that idea was informed by his queerness and the relationship between it and the world he lived in. If, as Jennifer Doyle says, an aspect of queerness is about "how that art is visible in some contexts and invisible in others, about what kinds of things that art makes possible," then this is a project in *re-reading* O'Hara to show what becomes visible when properly oriented, and we can find queer possibilities and provocations that such reading makes possible.

Chapter One: The Speaking Voice

For three months of his junior year at Harvard, he kept a journal. Included in Donald Allen's collection *Early Writing,* it is a text at the margins of O'Hara's work, and having been out of print since 1977, it is rarely cited, but it gives us a glimpse into what he was shaped by and reacting to in college. The journal opens in a very different voice than the O'Hara we have come to know through poems, recordings, and interviews. Rather than a cavalier, brash, and confident poet, we see a pensive, still witty, but insecure, and incredibly depressed young writer. The journal opens, on October 8th, 1948, with the lines: "I wonder if the course of narcissism through the ages would have been any different had Narcissus first peered into a cesspool. He probably did" (*EW* 97).

In short entries throughout October and November, O'Hara documents a few day-to-day experiences, as well as cataloging his thoughts and reactions to his voracious reading of texts by authors as varied as Ernest Hemingway, John Donne, and Henry Miller, but also including legibly queer reading, like Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood,* Radclyfe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness,* and various texts by Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster. A pervasive self-questioning and general unhappiness permeates each entry, as we see the young poet struggling to reconcile his desire to make important literary work and the feeling that he isn't able to do so. "I must take pains not to *intend* anything but the work itself," he writes on October 26th, 1948, echoing the critical ethos, seeing his work as separate from himself even in the conception of it. He continues, "I must think only of and for the emergent work and not allow messages or

ideas to displace the validity of the work with their sham importance or subtle derangement of emphasis…The artist works and his preoccupations appear in the work inadvertently; only the inferior artist, or the non-artist, needs the artificial stimulus of intent" (*EW* 103-4). The effect of New Criticism, which was pervasive in the academic space O'Hara was occupying, is palpable in this entry—we can hear echoes of the "intentional fallacy" writ large on his relationship to his writing in the pejorative tone he uses to address intent. It's no wonder that, operating under such alienating maxims, the young O'Hara felt so frustrated with his writing. "I want to move toward a complexity which makes life within the work and does not (necessarily, although it may) resemble life as most people seem to think it is lived…The only simplicity I want is that of a coherent thing, a result of the work-as-a-whole's integrity," he writes on the previous day (*EW* 102).

Hardly a scholar would label themselves a New Critic these days, and yet some ideas that New Criticism helped to institutionalize have remained pervasive in the way we read. Because of this institutionalization, we often fail to see the way some of these norms have formed. One of the norms that the New Critics helped establish in literary studies, though it didn't start with them, is the idea that the "I" of any given poem is a fictive or dramatic speaker, or "speaking voice" as Reuben Brower labels it. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins explain in *The Lyric Theory Reader*, "the New Critical fiction of the lyric speaker has become so fundamental to our teaching of poetry that it has become virtually invisible as a norm. Most readers who have had any secondary training in reading poems would be lost without the

fiction of the speaker as referent" (162). In his book, *Theory of the Lyric*—which may be at odds with Jackson and Prins over many ideas—Jonathan Culler, too, recognizes this phenomenon, writing that "a variant which treats the lyric not as mimesis of the experience of the poet but as a representation of the action of a fictional speaker," has come to be the dominant approach and "puts readers on a prosaic, novelizing track: the reader looks for a speaker who can be treated as a character in a novel, whose situation and motives one must reconstruct" (2). This model "has become the dominant model in the pedagogy of the lyric in the Anglo-American world, if not elsewhere" (2).

As Culler explains, the goal of normative reading practices is to produce interpretations (which he correlates to the "diminution of interest in the lyric") despite the fact that "in prior centuries readers expected poems to teach and delight" and approached them with a variety of stances and reading practices (5). But modern criticism is largely influenced—whether explicitly or implicitly—by the assumption that the speaker in a poem is a fictive persona and "interpretation of the poem becomes a matter of reconstructing the characteristics of the person, especially the motives and circumstances of this act of speech—as if a character in a novel" (109). For the New Critics, with "the insistence that interpretation focus on the words on the page rather than the intentions of the author," Culler asserts, "it became a point of doctrine that the speaker of a lyric is to be treated as a *persona*, not as the poet him- or her-self, and the focus becomes the drama of attitudes expressed by the speaker-character" (109).

In our moment, the invisible norm of a New Critical speaker is so pervasive that it cannot be undone, but we can historicize it as a means of destabilizing what we have come to know and how we have come to view poetic speakers. If we look at O'Hara's work *without* destabilizing the norms that have only found their codification *after* his writing, I argue that we miss a tension that is fundamental to understanding all of his work. Coming to writing in the late 1940s, at Harvard, O'Hara's college journal and writings document both the understandable impulse to comply with these critical dictums and create work that is praised as well as the depression that comes with feeling like a failure in being unable to conform. Later, in chapter two, I'll explore how O'Hara resolves this tension to instead write against these norms, pushing back on their assumptions, but in this chapter, I'll explore the critical ethos of O'Hara's college experience alongside his contemporaneous writing. Because work on O'Hara's poetry has so often focused either on interpretation in the way that Culler describes, understanding O'Hara's poetry within the framework of a fictive or fictionalizing speaker, it is important to reconsider his historical positioning and understand the world he was writing in—a world that, as a queer person, would sooner erase him.

While New Criticism has become shorthand for a certain set of formalist principles, including this idea of a fictive speaker, they were reacting to trends that already existed. As Jackson and Prins explain, "it is more productive to view New Criticism as part of a longer history of abstraction in which various verse genres...were collapsed into a large, lyricize idea of poetry as such. This 'super-sizing' of the lyric remained in place after the New Criticism, and

in fact critics were struggling with it before the New Criticism" (5). In other words, the New Critics were reacting symptomatically to questions about the lyric and poetry in general that had been brewing for over a century. As they argue both in the *Lyric Theory Reader,* in their individual work, Jackson and Prins write that "reading lyric, where *lyric* is the object of interpretation, necessarily involves lyric reading, where *lyric* is part of the interpretive process to be called into question" (6). In *Dickinson's Misery,* Virginia Jackson sketches a "theory of lyric reading" that argues a wide variety of verse (and in some cases, non-verse) has come to be read homogeneously according to specific abstracting conventions in the nineteenth century and gained wide prominence in the twentieth century by way of the methodologies we now associate with the New Criticism. Through a process of "lyricization," she writes, "lyric takes form through the development of reading practices in the nineteenth and twentieth century that become the practice of literary criticism…the notion of lyric enlarged in direct proportion to the diminution of the varieties of poetry" (8).

The idea of "lyric reading" builds on Paul de Man's assertion, in "Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric," that "no lyric can be read lyrically nor can the object of lyric reading be itself lyric"—and thus, that lyric is not a genre but rather a "defensive motion of understanding" (303), a reading practice that presumes knowledge of an object and reads accordingly. Rather than thinking of the lyric as a transhistoric genre or mode, Jackson documents that the expectation of an object as poetic presumed a certain type of knowledge that carried a certain type of reading, which then reinforced the object's status as lyric, and was

cast retroactively onto historical verse. In other words, to be presumed lyric was to be read lyrically, which then confirmed the status of the object as lyric. This mode of lyric reading carried with it the associations of a poetry "that expresses personal feeling (G.W.F. Hegel) in a concentrated and harmoniously arranged form (E. A. Poe, S. T. Coleridge) and that is indirectly addressed to the private reader (William Wordsworth, John Stuart Mill)" (Jackson, "Lyric" 826). Though the "collaps[ing] of various verse genres into a large idea of poetry as such...had been going on for a century and a half" prior, I. A. Richards's *Practical Criticism* (1929) did contribute to its coalescing (Jackson and Prins 159). As Jackson and Prins explain, Richards experimented by giving students poems stripped from any context in order to "train students to develop what he called the 'craft or technique of reading. His exclusion of authors and historical context from his experiments were mans to that end, not ideological positions in themselves" (160). In a changing academy, where students from broader walks of life and varying backgrounds began entering college, due to shifts such as the GI Bill, this idea was appealing, offering a practical way to teach students how to approach poems.

In the introduction to the primer, *Understanding Poetry* (1938), Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren sketch out an approach to the "I" of a poem. Interestingly, they note that most of the examples they have given in their chapter "are drawn from plays and do not represent poetry as we more ordinarily find it," however, "the principle illustrated by these examples applies to all other poetry...even short lyrics or descriptive pieces involve a dramatic organization" (190-191). As they continue, they assert that "every poem implies a speaker of

the poem, either the poet writing in his own person or someone into whose mouth the poem is put, and that the poem represents the reaction of such a person to a situation, a scene or idea" (191). Here, though they encourage a dramatic understanding of a poem, their conception of the "speaker" in the poem still allows for more nuance than would other approaches. It makes a lot of sense, in teaching students, to ask them to consider who the "I" of a poem belongs to—it is a way of teaching new readers to attend to an important aspect of the poem, and here they leave enough room for possibility. Yet, less than a decade later, the framework for attending to a poem's speaker became more rigid.

In 1946, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley wrote their formative article, "The Intentional Fallacy," which in some ways echoes Brooks and Warren, but takes a more forceful approach. "Judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine," they famously write, "one demands that it work" (469). Wimsatt and Beardsley are writing in response to "recent discussions" where the "author's 'intention' upon the critic's judgment" are challenged, citing *The Personal Heresy,* C.S Lewis and E. M. W. Tillyard's exchanges, as one such discussion. In *The Personal Heresy* (1939)*,* Lewis goes as far as to say, "in this paper I shall maintain that when we read poetry as poetry should be read, we have before us no representation which claims to be the poet, and frequently no representation of a *man,* a *character,* or a *personality* at all" (5, emphasis his). For Lewis, the experience of a poem, the "I position, "is certainly not 'ours' in the sense of being normal to us, or typical to us" but "it is 'ours' while we read: that is what is meant when we say the poem creates it in *us*" (20, emphasis his). This echoes a trend we

will see in subsequent New Critical positions that I'll address where the poem is dependent upon its reader and what we might think of as its moment or temporality is the reader's present, even if the poem is about another time. That is, this trend sees poems as needing readers, being about readers' experiences, and existing in their times.

Moreover, for Lewis, the poem does not represent a person or a personality but "a mood or mode of consciousness, created temporarily in the minds of various readers by the suggestive qualities which certain words and ideas have taken on in the course of history, and never, so far as we know, existing normally or permanently—never constituting the *person*—in any one" (21, emphasis his). Tillyard pushes back, using various approaches and other terms to recover some significance to "personality," such as relating it to an author's style and the qualities that make their poetry recognizable as being their own. While I don't necessarily agree with Tillyard's positions, he does push for a more open understanding and less dogmatic approach to poetry. In his closing section, Tillyard states that "the ever-varying interplay of the personal and the communal is one of the first attractions of poetry," which points to the reason we've had so much discussion and debate over time about the writers, readers, audiences, worlds, and speakers of poetry (175). This statement leaves open the debate about the interplay here, the degrees of it, the possibilities for it—but this is what Lewis's statements would foreclose. For Lewis, there is no interplay—there is no personal; the poem is communal in that it belongs to and is manifested in "the minds of various readers."

Wimsatt and Beardsley view intention as "neither available or desirable," defining it through the phrase "*what he intended"* calling it "the design or plan in an author's mind" with "affinities for the author's attitude toward his work, the way he felt, what made him write" (468-9). They explain that "the meaning of a poem may certainly be a personal one, in the sense that a poem expresses a personality or even state of soul rather than physical object like an apple. But even a short lyric poem is dramatic, the response of a speaker (no matter how abstractly conceived) to a situation (no matter how universalized)" (470). The reader "ought to impute the thoughts and attitudes of the poem immediately to a dramatic *speaker,* and if to the author at all, only by a biographical act of inference" because "the poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge" (470, emphasis theirs). For them, this comportment differentiates what they call the "criticism of poetry" versus "author psychology."

What is important to note here is that Wimsatt and Beardsley's focus on intention seems to focus on poems "working"; that is, if an author intends something, but the poem doesn't display what that author intends for the reader, it has failed. They aren't explicitly saying that authors shouldn't intend, or that intention doesn't exist or matter—but rather that for the public presented the poem, we can't necessarily know the intention, and even if we were to, if the poem does not work, that intention does not save it. "The evaluation of the work of art remains public," they explain, "the work is measured against something outside the author" (477). There is a slipperiness in the way they deploy intention, though, that goes

beyond what I have just described. Using T. S. Eliot as an example, Wimsatt and Beardsley caution against criticism that "in the spirit of a man who would settle a bet" writes to the author for clarity. "Critical inquiries, unlike bets, are not settled in this way. Critical inquiries are not settled by consulting the oracle," they conclude (487). In other words, the work of the critic is not to look for answers through intention or from the author, but instead based on what the work does.

They aren't exactly articulating anything new—for centuries literary criticism has been concerned with meting out accolades and determining what writing should be canonized, but what seems remarkable here is the way this focus on critical judgment converges with reading practices. Critics have always applied different reading practices to texts, and come up with different judgements, but what we see in this trend that culminates in New Criticism is a systematic approach to reading based on a set of assumptions that *seem* logical and are cast as truths to the extent that they have been accepted without enough scrutiny. While it seems logical that since we can't necessarily recover an author's intention, or if an author's intention isn't apparent in a work, then we shouldn't hold that intention as arbiter of meaning, this focus on intention exacerbated the gradual separation of the text from its author, and in turn imbued the critic with great privilege. Implicitly, it seems that Wimsatt and Beardsley feel a discomfort in attributing a poem's responses, feelings, and attitudes to a poet, but the discomfort resolves when it is attributed to a fictional speaker. In many cases, this works and is appropriate. It would be inappropriate and problematic to attribute characteristics of "My

Last Duchess" to Browning, but this forecloses the possibility of poets to assert any sort of personality or personhood. It answers the question of what degree the "I" of any given poem plays with the personal and communal by saying simply "no." We have to ask—thinking back to Traub's words in my introduction—what happens to a text when we, the critic, exert such a gravitational pull? This is a question I will return to again and again and we move forward in order to explicate the privilege of the critic in these models, and the way that privilege displaces the writer. If we demand that a poem "work"—that is, if we look at the poem like a machine that fires properly, without considering what the author intended, we have to think about the ways in which our reading practices and approach influences what "works." That is, an author may intend, and may succeed, but if our reading practices foreclose possibility and the work does not align with assumptions we make about poetry, we may not see what is doing. This is one of my central arguments: even with a desire to view O'Hara through a queer lens, if we do not recognize these invisible norms, our reading practices often don't allow us to see what O'Hara's does in his poems.

In his journal, we can hear O'Hara—writing only a few years after Wimsatt and Beardsley—echoing these critical debates, but not as a reader or critic, but as a writer trying to constrain himself to fit their model. "For the reader to be involved in ritual is for him to say, 'This work is an experience of something which I would rather receive through this artistic medium than through direct apprehension of the thing itself,'" he continues, "the writer does not create this response deliberately, at least not often, but rather it is a measure of his success

in the work itself...The artist must make his work as perfect as possible, and trust that out of the welter of intentions, some will come clear and mean something to someone" (*EW* 103). Life and intention is saved for elsewhere: "In a journal are the things which would intrude on the purity of the work" (*EW 104).*

There is some potential appeal in a New Critical approach to the young queer writer. In "A Critic's Job of Work," from 1935, R. P. Blackmur asserts that "poetry is life at a remove of form and meaning; not life lived but life framed and identified" (372). In envisioning poetry in such a way, he addresses the example of André Gide, who "we should remind ourselves not that he has been the apologist of homosexuality, not that he has become a communist, but that he is part excellence the French puritan chastened by the wisdom of the body, and that he has thus an acutely scrupulous ethical sensibility" (377). This separation allows a work to not carry the stigma of queerness. We see the student O'Hara practicing the common thinking of the day: the struggle to depersonalize, to create art free from intention or overt messaging. But at what cost? And so, these journal entries sound nothing like the poet who would later, in a 1965 interview with Edward Lucie-Smith, say: "One of the most infuriating things in American literary life...is that....the work, the original work, the novel, the poem, the play, whatever it may be, is supposed, you know, is really tacitly assumed to be the raw material for a wonderful piece of criticism, in the tradition of R. P. Blackmur...There's a, you know—so that you really think that Robert Frost and Lowell and all those people are dumping their raw

material into the mind of a critic who will then place it in history. And, of course, by the way, themselves" (*SS* 25-6).

Through these touchstones, we can see what started as practical experiments turning into critical theorization that more and more articulated a dramatic speaker that was separated from the poet. As Jackson and Prins describe, "Wimsatt and Beardsley tended to assert that poems could speak for themselves but did not explore the dynamics of fictional speech. That exploration became the project of Reuben Brower, perhaps the most influential (though seldom acknowledged) critical reader of poetry of the mid-twentieth century" (164). In 1951, Reuben Brower, a former student at Harvard who would return to teach there a few years later, published the influential text, *Fields of Light: An Experiment in Critical Reading,* which sketched out his approach, "slow reading," which serves as the foundation for today's "close reading." In the first chapter, entitled "The Speaking Voice," Brower asserts as fact, without explanation or argument that, "a poem is a dramatic fiction *no less than a play*, and its speaker, like the character of a play, is no less a creation of the words on the printed page. The 'person spoken to' is also a fictional personage and never the actual audience of 'you and me'" (19). Further, Brower asserts that "the voice we hear in a lyric, however piercingly real, is not Keats's or Shakespeare's; or if it seems to be...we are embarrassed and thrown off as if an actor had stopped and spoken to the audience in his own person'" (19). Brower articulates his position in some way as aiming "to show that naïveté of a certain sort is indispensable in criticism" in order to "[translate] the unfamiliar into the familiar and the complex into the simple" (5, 16)

In a preface to the edited collection of essays, *In Defense of Reading* (1962), Reuben Brower and Richard Poirier present a defense and revival of New Critical methods, which they describe as an intervention into a situation where, akin to a "melodramatic allegory," New Critical ideas have been cast "in the role of the obnoxious and doomed dragon," and thusly assailed. They describe their approach as "tend[ing] less to create 'methods' than to resist them," stating that the critic "is always—it is hoped—trying to answer some questions about the literary event, about the place of the work here and now in relation to himself and to all he has read" (vii). Instead, their approach constitutes a "recovery of the respect for the text" (ix). Yet, in defining their position in such a way, they work to erase its own ideological assumptions about speakers and authors—assumptions that over time have become norms that are often unchallenged or even unacknowledged as norms despite their pervading influence.

Brower's formulation builds on the previous but leaves no nuance or exception: the speaker of a poem is "a fictional personage," and this articulation is *a* culmination and coalescences of the process of "lyricization" Jackson and Prins describe. "When we speak these days of the poem's 'speaker,' or of a 'close reading' of a poem, it is by and large Brower's concepts of those ideas we employ, though most readers who do so don't know how much they owe to Brower," they explain, "by making the poem's audience into a fiction that mirrored the fiction of the poem's speaker, Brower could read each poem as a drama sufficient

unto itself. Further, he could read those poetic genres as all equally 'lyric'" (164). This "marked a decisive shift in the definition of the lyric, a new chapter in the history of lyric reading" (164).

In the 1960s, Roland Barthes would write "The Death of the Author," speaking of writing as "that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away" and that when "the voice loses its origin and the author enters into his own death, writing begins" (142). For Barthes, instead, "the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's city lies not in its origin but in its destination" (148). Much later, we see this trend in the work of Brower's student, Helen Vendler, who later writes, perhaps more dogmatically, that "lyric is intended to be voiceable by anyone reading it, in its normative form it deliberately strips away most social specification (age, regional location, sex, class, even race). A social reading is better directed at a novel or a play: the abstraction desired by the writer of, and the willing reader of, normative lyric frustrates the mind that wants social fictions or biographical revelations" (2). We can add sexuality, here, too. Today, New Criticism seems old-fashioned, but there can be no doubt that some of its core principles, including this idea of a speaker, have maintained currency not only in how we teach students to approach poetry, but in how we read it and write about it. How many of us have been in a class, or even taught a class that reinforces these principles?

I once encountered a colleague's student who was writing an analysis of O'Hara's famed love poem, "Having a Coke with You." The student recognized the poem as a love poem, but his central argument revolved around how the poem was a love poem about the

ordinary things the author shared with his *girlfriend.* I think most of us would recognize the error here—without knowing O'Hara is gay, the student made an assumption based on his own life experience and presumably his own sexuality. Reading the poem in such a way diminishes its importance—the line where he talks of the "secrecy of our smiles" in front of passers-by hits differently, is weakened. Yet, if we teach students that the lyric is "voiceable by anyone reading it" and it strips away these social aspects, this reading is not wrong, however problematic. And, even though this example seems fairly straightforward—being the case of how the student reads the gender of the loved one, the question of sexuality is directly confronted—what about those parts, as Doyle describes it, that "come with being" queer, "but which are not exactly reducible to sexual identity" (343-4)?

More famously, we can see the effects of these ideas in the exchange between Helen Vendler and Rita Dove over Dove's edition of *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth Century American Poetry.* While the debate is not about speakers or speaking voices, it is simplicity about the same quality of identification and ground-clearing. Vendler takes offense at Dove's selection of poets for the edition, citing issues with the fact that Dove "shift[s] the balance, introducing more black poets and giving them significant amounts of space, in some cases more space than is given to better-known authors"—*white* authors. She explains that "there is a certain objectivity bestowed by the mere passage of time, and its sifting of wheat from chaff" and defends the "'poetry establishment,"' by denying such a thing exists: "The members (whoever they are) of this so-called "establishment" "entrench" themselves (as in a war) and,

implicitly racist, appear "whitewashed" like the "whited sepulchres" denounced by Jesus. How is it that Dove, a Presidential Scholar in high school, a *summa* graduate from college, holder of a Fulbright, and herself long rewarded by recognition of all sorts, can write of American society in such rudimentary terms?" In her response, Dove highlights the "barely veiled racism" that is "lurking behind" assumptions and charges in Vendler's review, such as the inclusion of too many poems Vendler labels as having '"restricted vocabulary.'"

One point of contention in this exchange is the poet Gwendolyn Brooks, who Dove claims "confirmed that black women can express themselves in poems as richly innovative as the best male poets of any race," to which Vendler replies, tellingly "as richly innovative as Shakespeare? Dante? Wordsworth?" For Vendler, ability to appeal, over time, to critics who have been white, mostly male, and mostly straight or closeted is the determining factor of a work's excellence is the standard for excellence—she doesn't recognize the privilege inherent in this. She dismisses as "sociology" anything about race, class, gender, and sexuality, and in doing so says that to consider these things is not to consider the poem or its value as a poem. She doesn't see that what Wordsworth might have done for some; Brooks might have done for others in ways that are opaque to her. We can think about this quality of being able to identify with or appreciate a poem for it to be valuable akin to the directive to put yourself in someone else's shoes—it is problematic in that it requires intelligibility for respect, rather than acknowledging the opacity that exists sometimes between identities—an opacity that feels like a "not you," but that should be respected.

Though we can see the logical ends of this trend, stepping back, though, it was at this moment in poetic history, Frank O'Hara was emerging as a writer, and we can see the toll it takes on him. O'Hara attended Harvard from 1946 to 1950, in the time when the idea of a dramatic "speaking voice" was coalescing and current—this was right after Brooks and Warren and Wimsatt and Beardsley had written their works, and contemporary to Brower's writing of *Fields of Light,* so these debates were contemporary for the student O'Hara. As Mark McGurl chronicles, in *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing,* New Critical ideas became doctrine institutionalized in American schools during the 1940s and 50s. Speaking about fiction—which was addressed by most authors *after* poetry, but in a similar way, since their approach to poetry saw it as a dramatic fiction—McGurl writes that authors like Brooks and Warren understood the audience of their books not just to be the "'student reader of fiction'" but also the "'student writer of fiction'" (133). We can say the same for their work *Understanding Poetry.* He says, of their New Critical approach, that it "put the point of view of the artist at the very center of postwar literary studies, where New Critical textbooks served as an aid to understand, and potentially emulating, his 'creative process'" (133).

We can see this in Brooks and Warren in their section on "How Poems Come About: Intention and Meaning," a section that focuses on showing that whether a poem is an act of imagination, or has connections to real life, it is the product that is to be judged at the end of the day. They compare this to scientific discoveries, noting that it doesn't matter what the impetus for the discovery is, what matters is that it works. This separates off the poet from the

poem, though "the poet is still responsible for his poem," but their book creates a model where readers are encouraged to think like writers. We can look at this along with "The Intentional Fallacy," which pushes this further, stating that "judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands it works. It is only because an artifact works that we can infer the intention from the artificer…A poem can *be* only through its *mean*ing" (469). Together this sets up a situation where poems *are* because of their meaning; in turn, they sketch rules for meaning that separate it from the author, attaching it to a dramatic speaker, and in turn we see this play out in O'Hara's anxiety about intention and the feeling that he must separate himself from the work and not intend.

This anxiety is prevalent throughout the journal, and we can see it feed into larger trends where the young writer sees himself as different, surrounded by people who conform, leading to depression. He begins the entry for October 11th writing, simply: 'Utter depression" (*EW* 98). On October 12th, after discussing "'self-prohibitions'" he proclaims that "our guilt stays in our blood, passed down generation to generation, like syphilis." The extent of October 13th's entry is: "The world is inside my head, spinning slowly" (*EW* 99). On October 17th, he writes, "I often wish I had the strength to commit suicide, but on the other hand, if I did, I probably wouldn't feel the need. God! Can't you just let us win once in a while" (*EW* 100)? And, on October 18th: "If one could manage not to think. Life might become bearable" (*EW* 100). He writes, on October 24th, two days before his entry about intention: "The impulse, the, at times, compulsion, toward normalcy must be avoided, when its fulfillment is known to

be unsatisfactory, and the level of endeavor is, as it is by definition, inferior to the possible through idiosyncratic behavior" (*EW* 101). Further, he says: "one must not be stifled in a closed social or artistic railway station waiting for the train; I've a long way to go, and I'm already late" (*EW* 101). Both life and his outlet, his poems, appear to be suffocating under the constriction of normative expectations.

This self-restraint is set against a backdrop of "the silliest and dewiest of hopes" for his own work: "to contribute something to life's fabric, to the world's beauty...simply to live does not justify existence, for life is a mere gesture on the surface of the earth...but oh to leave a trace, no matter how faint, of that brief gesture! For someone, some day, may find it beautiful" (*EW* 105). He wants desperately to write something that is recognized and great, but also seems to register the toll it takes on feeling like he must separate himself from what he is doing, almost as, in his first entry, Narcissus looking into a cesspool. Yet, a few weeks later, he copies into an entry a story of "St. Steven" being ridiculed and tied to a cross that he had to carry while onlookers refused to help and jeered him. It ends, '"And so St Steven died before he reached his destination" (*EW* 107). This is especially jarring, considering his talk of suicide in subsequent entries. At the end of November, after Thanksgiving, the entry reads: "Oh my no—but you are the soul within the flower, and my heart beats still. Everything is just fine, I tell myself, and grit my teeth until my gums bleed" (*EW* 108).

He is stifled, feeling the necessity to both conform and follow convention while also desiring to create something wonderful and beautiful. However, after the winter holiday, his tone changes. In the first entry he writes:

> Walked around Fresh Pond and into Watertown this afternoon full of physical well-being and joy...drank beer in a small dark-wood bar filled with men in lumber jackets, a neighborhood pub; came back in the dark and driving snow—we thought of the last of *Les Patineurs* and did entrechats and pirouettes in the wind along the Charles, completely happy; good to be [away?] from people who are embarrassed by enthusiasm. Back at school the same old depression reestablished itself, settling over me like a brown stain of the dining hall's walls. That hall full of people worrying about what anyone else is saying or thinking about them! Why would anyone stifle an impulse to be uniform? Je ne Luis pas come les actress, if I remember Rousseau, and if I am not better, at least I am different. (*EW* 108)

Away from the college, away from his classmates, we see energy and excitement—an entry that is more recognizably O'Hara. The snow, like his childhood bed sheets provides comfort, and being out in the world we see joys like men in lumberjackets and dancing along the river. I quote so substantially here, because I see this entry as best articulating the tension in this journal: on one hand, there is the "normalcy" which O'Hara recognizes and actively tries to avoid because it is "unsatisfactory" and "inferior." He recognizes the need to *live* and not conform, and yet at the same time, when he turns to his writing, we see a view that prizes the suppression of living, of the writer's life and intentions. At school he is surrounded by "people who are embarrassed by enthusiasm," which we could read through a queer lens: the enthusiasm in this post is drinking amongst men in lumber jackets and pirouetting around a river. How fabulously gay. Yet at school, he is surrounded by "people worrying about what

anyone else is saying or thinking about them." Yet, he concludes to not "stifle [his] impulse[s]" to be "uniform." Instead, quoting Rousseau, he resolves to be *different.* How fabulously *queer*.

From this point, we see a different tone in the few entries that make up the remainder of the journal. On the following day, he writes: "I refuse to be a slave; if life were merely a habit I should commit suicide but even now, moreoreless desperate, I cannot but think, 'Something wonderful may happen.' It is not optimism, it is the rejection of self-pity (I hope) which leaves a loophole for life" (*EW* 108). He continues "We must have the courage to choose and to choose the nebulous possible positive rather than the definite negative. If negation is the only definite alternative, to will is vanity. Negation is always evil; in it consists the only depravity of which the living are capable" (*EW* 109) And yet, in both stark relief against and great synergy with these lines, his entry a week later says "the fragility of things terrifies me! However belligerent the cactus, ash from a casual cigarette withers its bloom...everything fades changes dies when its meddled with; if only things weren't so vulnerable! We're all children playing naked in the sun" (*EW* 109)! This entry echoes a preoccupation with fragility and mortality that chapter two of this project will explore more in depth, but here we see a resoluteness and sense of wit that was subsumed in previous entries in the journal.

In the middle of these two entries, he writes, On January 22nd, "the saddest moment of one's life would seem to be that in which one first becomes aware that sensibility must be protected by intelligence if it is to survive living" (*EW* 109). Read together with his previous

entry, away from school, this entry echoes the idea that at school he was surrounded by "people who are embarrassed by enthusiasm"—indeed, this would be an apt way to describe the New Critical position, as embarrassed by enthusiasm. As we have seen, the young poet had to dampen his intention and depersonalize in order to focus on the work of art as a thing in and of itself. We can see this as a moment of protecting "sensibility" with "intelligence"—the cold logic of depersonalizing so that the work can become public language, as opposed to embracing attachment. After all, as O'Hara writes in Personism, "pain produces logic, which is very bad for you."

The journal ends on January 28th with one last post, seeming to continue the thread of the previous, pondering mortality and possibility. Toward the beginning of the entry, he references a comment about Rilke, made by the author's friend Rudolf Kassner, that "'the conflict between judgment and feeling which is so masculine, so peculiar to men, did not exist to him,'" and identifies as feeling that way himself (*EW* 109). He then writes of the interplay between writing and being in a way that seems to embrace the feeling of his more exuberant entries, the glimmers of joy, and reject some of the self-inhibition and critical anxieties that others held. He writes:

> I do maintain that there is no greatness divorced from being...you cannot sell yourself, you cannot stand that afar apart from your self to dicker, if there is any integrity in you. There is only the giving of self and the having, the always being...I am not metaphysical, quite vulgarly I mean realization of personality, but it is in the being as an entity, and in the realizing of things as entities, that one establishing being, that one lives...for in the realization of being one can cope with life as it comes with suffering but no bitterness.

> I have not achieved being. I face sacrifice with the trembling of a coward, and suffering is deep enough and dark enough to extinguish the flame; but trembling is not defeat; I love, I create.....and I almost am. (*EW* 110, final ellipses).

After this, we also see much more recognizably O'Hara poems, published in *Early Writing,* such as 1949's "For Edward Gorey"—a poem addressed to a close friend, as we will see frequently in O'Hara's career— "New York," and 1950's "America," "Another American Poem," "A Litany."

We can get a glimpse into what his college experience was like, and the feedback he was getting on his writing, too, from archival documents. His college transcript, which lists a composition class with Professor Guérard in the 1948-49 school year, the same year the journal spans a portion of, for which he wrote a piece of nonfiction called "Lament and Chastisement: A Travelogue of War and Personality." In it, he documents his time during World War II, serving as a sonar man in a submarine and working as shore patrol in various locations. Throughout the work he documents the men around him, sketching brief accounts of their personalities and idiosyncrasies, while also telling of encounters and events that troubled him, such as walking in on the beating of a black prisoner by a preacher-turned-head-of-lock-up who had a deep belief in punishment, and his experience being in charge of pushing the "red button," which meant destruction and likely death of others.

One of the threads that flows throughout the piece is the idea of losing one's identity, and O'Hara plays with being both anonymous, one of many, and the ways that each individual is important and sacred. In the first section, he describes his intake into service saying, "we

were broken in and we all looked the same so nobody could tell anybody else from anybody else; everyone without an eye, the mouth a line, and a stupid soul to stare on every face I'm dead I'm dead; nothing to do but say this isn't really me because the real me slipped away just before you got here" (*EW* 112). He questions in section three, "if I should die would anyone care? Am I really me? Is there a me to be" (*EW* 114). When his parents visited, he writes: "I barely recognized them and they thought I was suffering from malnutrition; all through the weekend they were not sure it was me and I was not sure it was me, but I was sure it was *them* after a few minutes" (117).

In the twelfth section, he recalls the day that FDR died. He writes: "There was no moderation, no intelligence, no proposition, in our mourning; no man is indispensable? every man is indispensable. And it is the illusion which great men create that the world will not long service them. There is no leader but a summing up of wills: our flag at half mast for our ideals." Yet, he juxtaposes this with the murder of a black cook, who "living in their segregated hut, his soft laugh, and his hat dyed yellow with an atabrine tablet" was violently and sadistically mutilated. For this man too, "the flag was at half mast" (*EW* 125). This echoes back to section ten, which provided the revelation, after reading *Ulysses,* "no one way of life is more valid than another" (*EW* 123). Section thirteen turns to questions, asking provocatively: "How can you be right if you kill everyone who is wrong?" Before turning back to art, asking: "Does the artist do enough for humanity to obviate fascism? Can you fight ideas without ideas?...Could even the greatest symphony drown out the screams of Jews" (*EW* 125)? In his last sections, he

continues this thread, stating "for my generation there is no hero, only the man aggregate of conflicting psychological tensions" and that "we killed the great Japanese architect the great German scientist the great Italian musician dropped death on Hiroshima killed killed killed and yes I hate us for it killedkilledkilled" (*EW* 128). He then ends with the lines, lineated like a poem:

> for
> O Lord
> be it said not sadly for us:
> we have done that which we had to do.
> Amen. (*EW* 131).

His thinking about the role of the individual would continue throughout his career—in the next chapter, we will return to this, especially through his dialogue with Bunny Lang—but I juxtapose this piece, here, with the New Critical ethos he was surrounded by because in both he was surrounded by a world that wanted to eliminate his individuality—to turn him into a soldier, to take his poems as artifacts free from the artificer. This alone is certainly anxiety producing and no doubt depression-inducing, but as a gay man, too, who was not out (at least not yet in the writing—he goes so much as to talk about other soldiers being "queers" in "Lament and Chastisement"), who was not able to be himself amongst people who would "stifle an impulse to be uniform" and yet feeling like he too must do so—in writing and in life—it all amounts to a tremendous weight to bear. Interestingly, this piece, perhaps most of any of his early writings, feels most like his later work.

On this piece, Professor Guérard gave him a B+, and his comments surely couldn't help his confidence, his feeling constrained, or his preoccupation with intention. Guérard writes:

> All free-association is of interest...to the psychiatrist or analysis. And to the critic at least this interest: It shows what this or that writer can do when relaxed (however "excited"), rather than alert, energetic, dominating. There is of course much here to indicate that you are a writer of talent...but I already knew that. Otherwise I think this extreme letting go of oneself is a mere squandering of talent. This...given direction, pressed of all mere "showing-off," subjected to selection and to pressures of hard thought and a desire for exactness of feeling and evaluation—could be very fine. But it is now random recollection; mere self-expression rather than self-scrutiny, rather than active explanation.
> I expect to see you do some good work, once you've accepted responsibility for what you write.(O'Hara, "Lament and Chastisement")

Given what we have read in the journal, roughly at the same time as this piece and grade, no wonder the depression.

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So much of the New Critical positioning we have just seen involves thinking about the *use* of poems, so it is productive to turn to Sara Ahmed's extensive and important work not just on orientation, more specifically, her work in thinking about *use* in her recent book, *What's the Use?* in order to think about how these norms, ideas, and practices would have us *use poems*. In her introduction, she provides some seemingly simple, but extremely generative questions that we can apply to and use in thinking about our orientations as readers to poems:

"Who gets to use what? How does something become available to use? Can something be available as public facility—like a well from which we can draw water—without being usable by everyone?" (7). Who gets to use poems? How do poems become available for use? Can a poem be public and yet not usable by all? Can a poem be published and have an "I" that can still say *this is me, not you*?

If we think about poems as objects, then, we can consider, as Ahmed writes, "an object has been shaped by the requirements of use" and this "use often comes with instructions" (*Use* 26). In this case, if we think about the New Critical instructions I've discussed, we are a reader, a critic, judging a poem like a machine, expecting it to "work." Intention, in this case, is unavailable and even if it was, it would be undesirable—we don't care what the author intended to do. We are to see the poem stripped of all social specification, as transcending class, race, gender, and sexuality. We are to consider any instance of "I" or person in a poem as fictive, as if a character in a play and never as a real person. We may link a reference or allusion here or there to the author's biography, but we are careful to use that in service of our reading. When this norm was developed, in the early to mid-twentieth century (though with deeper roots before), the "universal" subject position was mostly male, almost exclusively while, fairly affluent, and straight or closeted. These critic-scholars also, for the most part, read the work of poets who were also mostly male with a few exceptions, almost exclusively white, often affluent, and mostly straight or able to be read as straight. When your identity mostly fits with a universal position, there is much less that can be lost or unrecognized in this way of reading.

However, for people of color and queer people, there is much more to be missed. But isn't that what privilege does? It makes us blind to the positions or nuances of others' lives and struggles. New Critical reading is privileged reading—it is reading that privileges the reader. Certainly, there are ways in which such a position, when the reader *isn't* traditionally privileged or comes from a marginalized group that this can be radical and transgressive—we could consider this "queer use," in Ahmed's terms, but we'll address this later on—but it isn't in all circumstances, and it also isn't without an effect on how we see the poems and their writers.

The New Critics may have started with methods that asked the reader to mirror the construction of the poem, but by the end, the emphasis moved toward the action of reading in the present—that is, the moment of the poem was the moment of its reading. We can think of reading as one use for poems—it is one—but we might consider that this particular form of reading functions in the same way Ahmed describes museums as functioning, as spaces where "objects are stripped of use and put on display" warning that they too are stripped of "the communities for whom those objects matter" (*Use* 33). If we consider that once the poem is read, or published, or written, it becomes language that "belongs to the public," to think of Brooks and Warren, in displaying it for the public, we are stripping it of certain contingencies and anything else the poem might have meant. Things can be lost in this process. In some cases, this is unintentional, but in the case of New Criticism, it is a feature not a bug.

This opens up particular questions in the work of Frank O'Hara: a majority of his poems were either never published or published posthumously. Most of the works we have

were found in desk drawers, files, notebooks, coat pockets, or saved by friends who received them in letters. Relatively few poems were published in his time. As Donald Allen explains in his editor's note: "O'Hara did not keep copies of a large number of poems which have only survived, as John Ashbery remarks in his Introduction, through the care of friends and collaborators to whom he sent them" (*CP* vi). We can see in Donald Allen's archive of papers, collecting poems to publish O'Hara's works was not an easy task. In perusing these papers, I noticed how different the provenance of various poems was. While some poems were recognizable as O'Hara's final draft—he kept a neatly typed copy, with his name and date at the bottom, sometimes adding the location of writing in his distinctive handwriting—there were also a vast number of poems that were collected in files, submitted by friends. In some cases, the same poem would have a few variations from which draft you find, to which Allen worked to publish what he thought to be a "final" version. One such example is a poem that was enclosed in a letter to composer Ben Weber, titled "Poem" in O'Hara's hand, having crossed out the previous title, "To Fairfield." It reads:

> That's funny, there's blood on my chest
> oh yes, I've been carrying bricks
> what a funny place to rupture
> and now it is raining on the ailanthus
> as I step out into the window ledge
> the tracks below me are smoky and glistening
> with a passion for running
> I leap into leaves, green like sea (O'Hara, "Poem")

This poem may seem familiar, though it was never published as such: it became part of "Mayakovsky," the third section. As James Schuyler, in a letter to Donald Allen, explains, "'the 'bricks' he was carrying were the supports for John Ashbery's bookcase, which he had Fairfield [Porter] helped John with'" (*CP* 533). Schuyler explains he suggested O'Hara' combine a few of these short poems, which he did. This is an example of a poem that was published, as "Mayakovsky" was published in *Meditations in an Emergency*, but to me, this more complicated story of the poem is interesting--the bricks and rupture in this poem, when in the context of "Mayakovsky," a poem that has a lot of self-reflection and insecurity can seem figurative--we can see the bricks as metaphorical, as weight he is bearing from trying to write, from failed love, and the rupture as the result of this weight--but we can also see them as actual bricks, an actual cut, all in the circumstance of an act of friendship and connection, helping a friend move. I'm not arguing that the former is wrong, but I am arguing that when our reading practices which allow it *don't* allow possibility for the later. Indeed, Ashbery remarks that "one of his most beautiful early poems"—and I might add, one that is commonly read in criticism—"'Memorial Day 1950,' exists only because I once copied it out in a letter to Kenneth Koch and Kenneth kept the letter" (*CP* vii). I once asked Jonathan Culler, in a post-talk seminar, "at what point does a poem become the public's?" His answer was that at the moment it was written, and that a poet would know this in the writing of a poem as such, as a convention of it. There is a logic to this, but there *can* be other possibilities. These poems weren't just written for an abstract public in an unknown journal—many of them had social lives.

"When you preserve a life by stripping something from use," Ahmed explains, "what you are preserving is not a life but the rights of some to decide what and who counts as life" (*Use* 33). Donald Allen included many notes in his *Collected Poems,* which in some ways leaves a trace of the poem's contexts and relationships. But its publication marked a form of preservation in which new spheres of readers were brought into the mix. Ahmed continues, "Preservation without use can mean preservation without life. The question of use becomes a life question; a question of whose life matters is bound up with who gets to use what" (*Use* 40). To be clear though, I'm not arguing that we have to attend to every context, every connection, or every contact in a poem's existence: poems exist in many spaces and are ready in many ways. Rather, my argument is that the New Critical norm restricts use, preserves the poem as something to be read in specific ways, and relegates the author to the margins. O'Hara was writing at the time that these use instructions were current, codifying, and pervasive; understanding his work requires, to me, understanding this context because it is both vitally important in that it is what he is reacting to and pushing against, while it simultaneously stacks the deck so that later readers cannot see him doing.

"It is not simply that use makes something 'mine' or 'ours' but that use is understood as a particular kind of activity, a way of getting the most from things;" Ahmed reminds, "a way of framing activity *is* an activity. Land occupied by virtue of not recognizing those who already existed on the land as using the land; the land is occupied by being rendered unused and thus wasted" (*Use* 48). She is speaking about settler colonialism's "use" of land, explaining that

because some people have seen land as not being *properly* used, it is seen as unoccupied and open for occupation. She explains, "if the expression 'ground clearing' can refer to the removal of traces of those who were here before, then paths as well as people can be *made to disappear.* What appears as an activity (use as becoming used) provides a way of framing an activity (an idea of use as being used) and can become a technique (how something is stopped from being used)" (*Use* 48). Is this not what we do with poems? Viewing the "I" of any given poem as a dramatic, fictive speaker whose situation *we* must (re)construct; the rendering of intention as fallacy; the stripping of social specification; the judging, as a machine, of whether a poem works for us, and can be seen as a way for us to "get the most from" poems. In this time period, this was also a way to teach students to "get the most from" poems. But, aren't these all methods of "ground clearing"? Is not the activity of reading, the framing we use as critics to separate the "I" and see it as a dramatic, fictive speaker, a technique that shapes and precludes certain ways of reading and poetic being before we even encounter a poem?

As I explored in my introduction, one of the difficulties that stems from queer theory's aversion to avowed methods/methodologies is, at times, a misrecognition or failure to recognize assumptions about reading practices, such as the norms I've been discussing. Of course, there is enormous queer potential in Sedgwick's reparative reading, which has generated important work and orientations. Interestingly, there is a moment in Sedgwick's essay where she thinks about reparative practices, noting that "what could better represent" the reparative, "'weak theory, little better than a description of the phenomena which it purports

to explain' than the devalued and near obsolescent New Critical skill of imaginative close reading" (145)? This statement is why my argument here, I believe, is so important. Written in this essay almost as an aside, this statement is one that clearly is presented without much gravity; that is, this isn't a primary argument of Sedgwick, nor does she seem very invested in it, but rather it functions as just a comment or quick example. However, what I see here is a failure to recognize New Criticism and close reading *as* a "strong theory" and its method. I take Sedgwick's point about the perceived "devaluation and near obsolescence" of New Criticism, and yet the norms that it helped institutionalized haven't been properly identified or questioned, particularly in relation to queer studies. So, what seems like a "nonce taxonomy" that reads the poem for what it presents, particular to each poem it comes across, it in fact has created reading practices that are standardized as norms and embody a specific ideological position. I don't believe the creation of these practices was meant to be ideological—it was the result of unrecognized privilege and the belief in a "universal" that wasn't problematic.

I'm not arguing against reparative reading practices, or identification, or the pleasure of reading. But it is important to remember, that Sedgwick's essay first appeared in *Novel Gazing,* a book which had a subtitle, "Queer Readings in Fiction." In that version, she begins very clearly talking about novels and fiction, and explains:

> Yet what seems least settled in any predetermined idea about what makes the queerness of a queer reading. Often these readings begin from or move toward sites of same-sex, interpersonal eroticism—but not necessarily so. It seems to me that an often quiet, but

> very palpable presiding image here—a kind of *genius loci* for queer reading—is the interpretive absorption of the child or adolescent whose sense of personal queerness may or may not (yet?) have resolved into a sexual specificity of proscribed object choice, aim, site, or identification. Such a child—if she reads at all—is reading for important news about herself, without knowing what form the news will take (Novel Gazing 2-3).

When we think of this essay in its original context—this all makes sense, because the stakes are different: we are talking about works of fiction, where any resemblance to a lived life explicitly invites a separation, rather than poetry, a more slippery and contested ground. For a queer reader, this act of "helping [oneself] again and again," to objects that are sustaining is vital. We might think of some forms of reparative reading as "queer use," which Ahmed describes as "when things are used for purposes other than for which they were intended" (26). Indeed, one example of this type of reparative practice is José Esteban Muñoz's work on disidentification, which describes the "survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punished the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). Using Sedgwick, he explains that "identifying with any object, person, lifestyle, history, political ideology, religious orientation, and so on, means also simultaneously and partially counteridentifying, as well as only partially identifying, with different aspects of the social and psychic world" (8). In a world no made for the queer subject, or the queer person of color in this case, his descriptor helps us understand how folks still can find sustenance and refuge in the world around them. It surely can be radical to read in this way.

However, my goal is to show that even some efforts to repair can inadvertently damage. This is one reason why even if we practice queer theory that defies categories and methods, we must acknowledge and historicize them, in order to not fall into the trap of unknowingly using the master's tools. In *Willful Subjects,* Ahmed uses the story of "The Willful Child," throughout her text to explain her points. In the story, a child's willfulness led to her death. Even in death, she refused to submit and pushed back, stretching her arm out of the grave, above the earth. The mother, in a final act struck the arm with a rod which was then drawn back in, finally submitting (1). In the conclusion of her book, "A Call to Arms," Ahmed talks about the necessity to seek "a history of rising up, of not being reduced to dust" (199). She cites Fred Moten's conceptualization of the "resistance of the object" to say that "a history of willfulness would thus include a history of objects that are not empty enough to be filled by human will, objects that refuse to provide containers" (200). In her metaphor, this resistance is equated to the arm that reaches out of the ground. When O'Hara breaks from this New Critical model, exploring his own—which I address fully in the next chapter—he is an arm sticking out of the ground, resisting. However, our ability to see this arm depends upon our ability to see the very ground he pushes through and requires historical thinking about poetics. This explicates a problem: Ahmed brings up the provocative situation that "you might feel like an arm but act like a rod" (167). We must grapple with our reading practices and know where they come from, or we risk acting as rods in our effort to be arms.

Even when we aspire to be arms, we may act as rods. My aim here is not necessarily to argue how we *should* or *shouldn't* read, but to bring attention to what happens when we take reading practices for granted and not account for specific contingencies—generic history, disciplinarity, history. Our disciplinary training, tools, and methods come from somewhere, even if we and rather than rejecting method or disciplinarity, perhaps a very queer approach is instead to making how we use texts clear—after all, queer theory has been shaped by a style many of its practitioner's share in beginning with stories, personal or about interactions with others. If we don't account for poetic history, we may not see dynamics that are important, dynamics that obscure. As Valerie Traub writes, in *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns,* "I am interested in what happens when we approach earlier texts as objects of our desire, I wonder what happens to the lives of past historical agents under the influence of our gravitational pull" (135). It can be our love of reading, of poems that can inadvertently clear the ground and make historical lives disappear.

My goal has been to open space for us to recognize that the documentary quality of O'Hara's work, the capturing of life in poems which was queer resistance in the 1950s and 60s, where homosexuality was criminal. This is not an argument that we must read the "I" in all of O'Hara's poems strictly as autobiographical or sincere—and there are plenty of other studies who have read his poems in various ways—nor is it an argument that we should read all of his poems in the same way. Instead, my argument is that by disrupting some normative reading practices that would *foreclose* his ability to lay any claim to the "I" of his poems by

understanding their history, we can see new possibilities in his work. In the chapter that follows, I will look at O'Hara's poetic statements. I'll begin by tracing his relationship with friend and poet Bunny Lang, we can see his more unfiltered ideas about poetry, and then look at poems that specifically address critics and ideas of poetry. I'll focus on other poetic statements, too, including an unpublished short piece from Donald Allen's archive, and moving on to a deep reading of "Personism," addressing how it has been read (and misread). All of this will help us to understand how O'Hara saw poems, their uses, and his project as a poet.

"Attending to use allows us to explore the oriented nature of spaces, including public spaces," Ahmed writes, and it is useful to think about the poem as public space in this instance (*Use* 27). Using the example of a toilet, Ahmed draws our attention to the sign that signals it as "occupied." She explains that "when we say something is *in use*, it can mean that it is not available for use right now" and uses the example that many of us have had a situation in which we have walked into a stall and found a person, saying "failure to lock the door, to signal that the toilet is in use" can cause "embarrassment" (*Use* 27-8). She concludes that "having a sign to signal something is in use is a convention...If the status of something as being in use or occupied requires a sign, we learn that it is not always clear whether something is in use" (*Use* 28). Using this metaphor, I would argue that the New Critical norms we have discussed, inheriting the trend from a longer history of lyricization, disabled the lock/sign. In this model, the "intended functionality"—which Ahmed describes as a reference "not only to *what*

something is for but *who* it is for"—of poems is to be reserved for a reader, like the sign Ahmed presents that says "No Parking - doors are in constant use"—no poets, poems are in constant use. If "I" is the sign of documenting a self, and our instructions for use are that "I" is fictive, then we foreclose its use to document. What happens, when a poet asserts that I, or "seems to" as Brower says, is that "we are embarrassed and thrown off," like walking into a toilet we see as unoccupied and finding someone in it (19).

Let's take, for example, a poem like "Nocturne," which starts: "There's nothing worse / Than feeling bad and not / Being able to tell you." We are confronted by an "I" behind the poem that is in conversation with a "you" and one way to overcome that difficulty and explain this relation is to think about the "you" as an audience, a reader. In this scenario, this could be a grand statement about how feelings can be distilled and communicated in poetry, which sustains them. This poem was published posthumously, and we don't have the history (at least not readily available) of its context—it could have been in a desk drawer, a pocket, or a letter. What if, instead, we think of this "I" and "you" as historical persons? What does this open up? What function does the poem then serve? To place the poem in a historical contingency, as between historical persons is to confront opacity, a term that Valerie Traub uses. As Traub advocates, when "we confront what we *don't know* as well as what we can't know" then "this confrontation with the variety of ways that it is possible not to know implicates the investigator, if willing, in various considerations of pedagogy and ethics" (5). To think of it this way is "an argument on behalf of the element of surprise and, more particularly of *impasse:* of

the irreducible, intransigent quality of any given other's experience, including experiences lodged in the past" (136). Rather than assuming the poem's moment is our own, and our own experience of it is its meaning, what if we approach it—as I will argue O'Hara's poetic statements and poems encourage—as not about us. What if we take seriously what he says in his writing about abstract expressionism: "Art is not *your* life, it is someone else's" (*AC* 6). If art is not our life, it is somebody else's and that experience does indeed contain moments of lucidity, but it also comes with opacity, distance, and impasse. There are references in O'Hara's work, including "yous," and groundings in specific places and times that we can never *know* because they are in the past, and some are lost.

As Traub reminds, "the past is not cut whole cloth from our desires. However much we construe the past through our desires, those desires remain *ours,* not those of historical subjects" (136). Like Traub, my argument is not against desiring, nor is it against reading or identification, but rather a reminder that we, as readers, exert gravity, and that our desires and our readings can create impressions on texts, they can create well-trodden paths and smooth the rough and messy edges. "Friction is the resistance the surface of an object encounters when moving over another. The more people travel on a path, the flatter and smoother the surface becomes," Ahmed reminds (*Use* 41). "What about an unused path?...In the case of the unused path, more effort is required to use it. You might have to push your way through the growth. A consciousness of the need to make more of an effort can be a disincentive (*Use* 45)." To read in a normative way is to read without thinking much about how we read. The path of reading

with a New Critical speaker offers little resistance and its impressions, its history has been smoothed into an invisible norm. But, as Ahmed reminds, one way "to queer use is to make use audible, to listen to use, to bring to the front which ordinarily recedes into the background...to make use strange (*Use* 198). Or, as she continues, more specifically, "to queer use can be to linger on the material qualities of that which you are supposed to pass over; it is to *recover* a potential from materials that have been left behind" (*Use* 208).

In the next chapter, I will focus on working through what O'Hara writes about poetry and poetics, thinking through him, applying it to his poems, but before doing so, it is important to acknowledge the work that this chapter has done. One of my arguments thus far is that we must recognize what desires are ours, what gravity our reading practices exert, and how these invisible norms have shaped not only what we see but what we can't see if we "read poetry as poetry should be read" (Lewis 5). In "fronting up" the history of this reading practice, and understanding how tied O'Hara's own historical position and temporality is to it, my hope is that we can see that something that we could perhaps say we are at the end of, or "after," was still developing and there was possibility for it to *not* gain the prominence it had. In such a position, O'Hara could push back, he could refuse, and if we don't acknowledge this, we can't properly see that. If we can't properly see that, we can't properly see how deeply *queer* his poetics are. He *used* poetry in a way it wasn't supposed to; he wrote poems that defied proper use.

"Uses are queer because spaces are not," Ahmed explains, and as poetry became a space for the universal, for public language, for a fictive speaker projected by a straight, white, masculine critic, to insist on your particularity as a historical person is queer use: "queer users might leave traces of ourselves behind. When queers use spaces, spaces might become queer" (201). As a young writer, in college, O'Hara struggled to not "intend," to separate himself from the text. But, as we will see, he develops an approach that no longer tries to conform; rather, he pushes back on the reader who might clear the ground of the poem for themselves. He asserts presence and personhood, says *not you*.

Chapter Two: Personism

In September of 1959, Frank O'Hara wrote "Personism: A Manifesto." It's undeniable that this short piece is dripping with O'Hara's signature snark and wit, as he says in the first paragraph, "I don't even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve. If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don't turn around and shout, 'Give it up! I was a track start for Minneola Prep'" (*SS* 110). Or, in discussing his position on determining measure and lines: "if you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you. There's nothing metaphysical about it" (*SS* 110). While a bit dismissive, there is a lot in "Personism" that provides insight and statements about O'Hara's poetry and poetics to be sure. What's interesting, though, is how critical writing about O'Hara has both used and dismissed "Personism," almost simultaneously, often cast as a "mock manifesto" and using its "tongue in cheek" tone to arbitrarily pick which parts are serious and which can be dismissed as jokes. This is not to say that there aren't scholars who take it seriously—they do—but I would argue that it is the single most misread piece of O'Hara's work.

In this chapter, my ultimate goal is to provide a reading of "Personism" that puts many of the claims and statements made in it into context with poetic statements, poems, short nonfiction, and conversations that preceded "Personism" in order to correct misunderstandings about what he is saying in the text. To do so, however, requires embedding "Personism" in a much longer line of thinking about poetry, beginning in his college days (as

we explored in the previous chapter). In continuation of my argument from the previous chapter, by re-contextualizing "Personism," amidst the backdrop of lyric reading and the invisible norms around poetic speakers, it is easier to see how the misunderstanding and misreading of "Personism" is a symptom of these reading practices. For me, it is generative to think of "Personism" having two parts—the first half, which concludes in a discussion of abstraction, which we might think of setting up the premises he will use to define "Personism," and then the second half which is more definitional. This second half is the part where most scholars engage with the work. Very few critical accounts engage with "Personism" and don't primarily focus on his statement comparing writing a poem to picking up the telephone, or to the section that puts the poem "Lucky Pierre style" between "two persons instead of two pages" (*SS* 111). Often when scholars use this piece, they turn outward to compare his work to other poets or make grander statements about the connection between readers in the world; rarely do scholars actually engage with what it could mean or open up in approaching O'Hara's poetry.

More importantly, though, scholars tend to gloss over O'Hara's discussion of abstraction, making assumptions on what he means based on normative ideas of lyric and reading practices, rather than engaging with what O'Hara is actually articulating. This is problematic because that discussion of abstraction is key to understanding what is written later in "Personism." In it, O'Hara explains:

> Abstraction (in poetry, not in painting) involves personal removal by the poet. For instance, the decision involved in the choice between "the nostalgia *of* the infinite" and "The nostalgia *for* the infinite" define an attitude towards degree of abstraction. The nostalgia *of* the infinite representing the greater degree of abstraction, removal, and negative capability (as in Keats and Mallarmé). Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody knows about, interests me a great deal, being so totally opposed to this kind of abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry. (*SS* 111, emphasis his).

O'Hara defines abstraction in poetry as being about removal and distance from the poet, though in painting it is different, perhaps what he would call "true abstraction." Personism is "so totally opposed" to "removal," to the constraints he registered in his college days. Thus, in this chapter, I will trace a history of O'Hara's thinking about poetic abstraction and removal before grappling with "Personism" and how it is often read in order to tell a more cohesive, and different story. To do so, I'll start with O'Hara's thinking about poems, poetry, and critics, which he often does with friends, like Bunny Lang and Grace "George" Hartigan.

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Violet Raney Lang, also known as Bunny, has remained a somewhat forgotten figure even in literary circles. Though a young aspiring poet herself, Bunny Lang helped mentor artists like John Ashbery, Edward Gorey, James Merrill, Kenneth Koch, and Frank O'Hara. In her lifetime, her poems appeared in a number of places, including *Poetry* magazine, but since only a small run of her collected poems and plays were published with a memoir by Alison

Laurie, was released in the mid-seventies. To the best of my knowledge, the only critical work that exists on her poetry is a few pages in Maggie Nelson's *Women, the New York School, and Other Abstractions* and less than a handful of articles discuss her plays. Her work is vibrant and charismatic—so strongly resembling O'Hara's poems that, interestingly, as Nelson notes, one of her poems, "Words to Frank O'Hara's Angels" found amongst the papers of O'Hara, was published in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* as his because of the similarity, though it was removed from later editions.—though the argument could be made that her work predates his, or at least they developed as poets contemporaneously (Nelson 62). As Joe LuSueur, remarks in *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O'Hara:*

> How touching and somehow appropriate that this poem of Bunny's should have found its way into the book! The manuscript was found among his papers, right where he'd put it, apparently in 1950, and as his poems piled up through the years, it remained nestled next to bona fide O'Hara poems, just as the grief over her death remained with him to the end of his life. (110).

Bunny Lang is a figure that looms large over O'Hara's poems, and interestingly her name comes up usually in spaces that seem like our most coherent and explicit moments of clarity about O'Hara's thoughts about poetry.

Bunny Lang died at 32, on July 29th, 1956, after a long and painful battle with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. Her name appears in O'Hara's famed elegy, "A Step Away from Them": "First Bunny died, then John Latouche, then Jackson Pollock. But is the earth as full of life as was full, of them?" and he describes his first encounter with her, in "V. R. Lang: A Memoir": "I first saw Bunny Lang 10 years ago at a cocktail party in a book store in

Cambridge, Massachusetts. She was sitting in the corner sulking and biting her lower lip—long blonde hair, brown eyes, roman-striped skirt. As if it were a movie, she was glamorous and aloof. The girl I was talking to said: 'That's Bunny Lang. I'd like to give her a good slap'" (*SS* 86). This was during O'Hara's college days, in the late 1940s. She was an enigmatic character, which O'Hara describes as "always keep[ing] certain areas of mystery intact," and who curated an eclectic and idiosyncratic persona—which one could perhaps gather from the collected work's cover image of her in a harlequin costume. She was larger than life, with a flair for big gestures, as Bill Corbett explains. As "revenge on a New York minor executive who did something unspeakable to her" she had 1,000 pink stickers printed saying "My name is Parker and I am a Pig," telling the print shop "they were for a bank's campaign to encourage children to use piggy banks" (222). Instead, she posted these labels "anywhere in Manhattan where Parker and his friends might see them" In her memoir, Alison Laurie writes,

> She was of medium height and rather heavy, with firm, fair heavy flesh. Her hands were broad, with short fingers; her face molded in low relief like a face made in clay by a child. There was something childish too in the full pout of the mouth and the placing of the rather round eyes. On this simple base Bunny built her many appearances. Her drawers were filled with extra attachments: long golden switches of hair, bunches of curls every shade from peroxide to henna; pink sponge-rubber breasts; thick false black eyelashes; artificial fingernails like fragments of seashell...She had trunks and closets of clothes put away all over the house...what was no longer a dress would become a costume....she would pull something out of a closet and use it until it was filthy. (3)

Despite this, she was known for her lavish parties which always featured lobsters Newburg and champagne. Though avowedly straight, Bunny was in many ways a queer figure, always on the outskirts, flirting with the performance of identity, often on the margins and in extremes.

After a "fencing period" where they "sounded each other out for hours over beers" their friendship developed into "'coffee talks'" which O'Hara describes as "go[ing] 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" (*SS* 86). It should come as no surprise that some of the poems about or addressed to Bunny Lang give us lucid statements about poetry, and later, after her death, O'Hara invokes her in further thinking about presence and what poetry does (or doesn't do).

The first poem addressed to her is "An 18th Century Letter," written in May 1950 and inscribed "*to V. R. Lang*," followed in July of that year by "V. R. Lang," but it is in October "A Letter to Bunny," a poem unpublished before *The Collected Poems,* just two years after the journal we previously discussed, that he thinks provocatively through self removal. The poem begins with "Once before I tried to tell you / about the incinerator," referencing an incinerator in the theater which they did plays together in. In section two he writes:

> Now, as if this had bothered me ever
> since, I find the words are at the
> front of my mind. The incinerator
> is clearly horrible, soundless, cold.
> I went there too often with those things
> dear to us both: the tinsels and the
> velvets of the stage, the broken sets

and used drapes and tattered scrims,
and they were not consigned to
any glorious or at least bright
immolation. Just a clean dump. (*CP* 21)

This incinerator that haunts his mind, prompting him to tell Bunny is a space where the materials from their shows are destroyed, not even in "glorious or at least bright immolation." These artifacts of their experiences are destroyed in "just a clean dump." He continues:

Do
you wonder if it bothered me? you
don't, we troupers in private know
all about carnival gestures. Before,
I wrote, "it's grey and monstrous" which
is false, and fumbled after "hints of
mysticism" or "death's shrewdnesses,"
all notions, all collections of sentiment
that make a poem another burner full of
junk. You enable me, by your least
remark, to unclutter myself, my
nerves thank you for not always laughing. (*CP* 21)

As he "unclutters" with more thoughts, to an absent Bunny, he expresses his bother by the machine. Though he recognizes as a theater "trouper" the process of destroying materials and moving on, it sticks with him. He muses, though, relating it to poems, the words he could have written, the way he could have transformed the incinerator into something grander or different, making him muse that in doing so, in the collecting of "sentiment," the poem becomes "another burner full of junk" (*CP* 22). To see the poem in such a way is to see them as junkyards where artifacts, people, and events from real life as it is lived after those moments are gone. Like the play materials that are incinerated after their use for the duration of the play,

once the play is over, he relates poems to an incinerator where remnants of life are dumped. If we link this to his previously thinking through the journal, we can see links between this and the feeling that he must work to not intend, that he must create life in the work that is separate from his own and there is unease at this separation.

This carries on through the next section of the poem too, though he does not focus on the incinerator. Instead, he shifts to mention blue flowers, presumably from one of their shows, presumedly put in the incinerator. He writes:

> But I still fear to mention the blue
> flowers. They scared me most and I
> prolong other talk. There were fields of
> them around the place, all blue, all
> innocent. The artificial is always innocent.
> They looked hand-made, fast-dyed, paper.
> They nodded ominously in the sun, right
> up to the edge of the concrete ramp, a
> million killing abstractions, a romantic
> absence of meaning, a distorted prettiness
> so thorough that my own eyes rolled up
> in fear for their identity and I involuntarily
> cried at the thought of tiny mirrors where
> the object is lost irretrievably in its own
> repetition. (*CP* 21-2)

O'Hara expresses a specific fear in these lines, conjuring the idea of mirrors reflecting an object in repetition until it is lost, becoming only a sparkling pattern. In this circumstance "the object is lost...in its own repetition." These flowers, though pretty, are "innocent," and "artificial" seemingly lacking anything that makes them special, unique, or individual and that makes them fearsome, "a million killing abstractions" that contain a "romantic absence of meaning"

which alludes to the way in which they are pretty and idealized, but contain a vacancy we can see in the image of them "nod[ing] ominously in the sun," unaware of their fate at the "edge of a concrete ramp."

These lines help us understand his particular thinking about abstraction—these blue flowers representing such—and here, he is considering poetic abstraction (to echo his differentiation in "Personism") which involves personal removal and negative capability: the flowers, though "hand-made" are vacant, "innocent," and "artificial" with a "distorted prettiness." They are "a million killing abstractions." Directly following, he continues:

> Is this how beauty accompanies
> fear so it can escape us? Do you think these
> flowers could be auctioned tintypes or souls
> outside hell? Is blue what they mean by
> "shun posterity" and "the price of fame" and
> "Fear of death"? Have I learned it wrong? (*CP* 22)

What is most striking in the images he uses here, is his relating the blue flowers to "auctioned tintypes," old, early photographs, at auction, purchased by individuals who may have no knowledge or attachment to the subject, but rather are purchased for their aesthetic beauty or what they are as objects. Or "souls outside of hell," individuals lost to the mass of the lost. He relates both of these images, dealing with loss of some sort of essence or individuality, with "'the price of fame.'" He is thinking about the cost of being saved or read and that the cost might be to lose something, some individuality, lost in one's own repetition. To create work, as

the world around him is telling him, is to separate oneself and to not intend; doing so can be an avenue to fame and posterity, but it comes with consequences.

In the concluding section of the poem, he writes:

> When anyone reads this but you it begins
> to be lost. My voice is sucked into a thousand
> ears and I don't know whether I'm weakened.
> Bunny, when I ran to you in the summer
> night and upset us both it was mostly this,
> though you thought I was going away. See?
> I'm away now, but I'm here. And even if the
> rose has been ruined for all of us by religion
> we don't accept these blue flowers. The sun
> and the rain glue things together that are not
> at all similar, and we are not taken in
> by the nearness, the losses, or the cold.
> Be always my heroine and flower. Love, Frank. (*CP* 22)

Here, he returns this thinking about the incinerator and blue flowers back to poems and his own voice. Like the object lost in its own repetition in mirrors, the poem read in repetition causes him to be lost. Instead of his voice talking to bunny, it is "sucked into a thousand ears" and he questions to what degree it weakens him. He'd thought about this before, becoming upset, as he documents here. Instead, he rejects what the blue flowers stand for, choosing to not "accept" them, to not be "taken in by" this separation, signing off with a personal address. Bunny, also a poet, seems to be pondering similar topics, such as the importance of referents, in her poem "Argument," which asserts, "Poetry can never be much more than commentary, / At best a breathless summation, for what words, / What words existed before their source?"—she repeated the first line here again later in the poem. In the last stanza she declares "But it is

not enough. It never was enough. Words are not *there.* / Are never absolute to those who love them, do them honor, / Do not themselves create, but feed upon creation, lie upon it" (82-3).

In this period, when O'Hara was in Ann Arbor, Michigan, working on his master's degree (1950 through August of 1951) and the year or so after that we can see O'Hara thinking more about poetry in relation to critics, readers, and what happens to people and objects that appear in poems when they are interpreted. Just three months later, in January 1951, O'Hara wrote the poem "The Critic" which contains some of these themes. It is easy to see how the wittiness and tone of poems like these and not take them seriously or to think that he is being ironic or sarcastic; in fact, perhaps one of the things a casual reader of O'Hara might most miss is that his humor can often throw shade or be facetious of something without being ironic, or sarcastic. "The Critic," read with more serious ones, like "Letter to Bunny" can provide us with insight that, if we just assume it is meant to be funny, we miss. In it, he calls the critic "the assassin / of my orchards," writing:

> You lurk there
> in the shadows, meting out
>
> conversation like Eve's first
> confusion between penises and
>
> snakes. (*CP* 48)

The critic, here, resembles closely what we might think of the New Critic, one that reads to interpret and to serve as arbiter of meaning. In this image, the shadowy, hermeneutic figure

"lurks," interpreting "conversation" in the same way they might view the snake in Eden as a metaphorical phallus. To this parody of a critic, he says:

> Oh, be droll, be jolly
> and be temperate! Do not
> frighten me more than you
> have to! I must live forever. (*CP* 48)

What does it mean, we might ask, to say "I must live forever" in this case? It's easy to read it as sarcastic, and it would be easy to read it as desire for fame, but if the critic is the assassin that lurks, and his temperament and actions can prevent living forever—those actions being interpretation—then living forever means *not* being interpreted. Thinking about "A Letter to Bunny," as his contemporary worries about the price of fame and posterity when it comes at the removal and diminishment of the self, this makes sense. The individual is lost, as if reflected in tiny mirrors or sucked into a thousand of ears, by being broken into "a million killing abstractions," distorted and artificial. To live forever is to defy interpretation, to defy this kind of abstraction, and to assert presence; to refuse.

Readers of poems are often represented ways that are unfavorable in the poems, figures that would consume without care for the poet or his project. In May 1952, he wrote a poem that Donald Allen published first in *Poems Retrieved,* titled "Prose for the Times." The provenance of this poem is interesting: *Poems Retrieved* was a later volume Allen edited, noting that after *The Collected Poems,* "there remained many poems of which I had never heard or doubted that he would have published without revising, ones seemed too similar to other

poems of the same period or were to fragmentary...however, I came to realize that O'Hara at one time or another would most likely have published all his poems, and that the present volume was the logical and necessary completion of their publication" (*PR* xvi). This particular poem is interesting in that the copy in Donald Allen's archive in the collecting of this edition was one of O'Hara's final drafts—when he completed a poem, he would type a final copy to keep, and at some time (presumedly later) he went through and added the location and date to many of these poems, including this one, marked New York, May 1952. Interestingly, too, the title on the poem was written as "Prose for the Times" but the "for the Times" is deeply blacked out, leaving the title "Prose," and the original copy shows the first line of the poem indented—the entire poem is written in prose, though the first line in the publication is not indented, making it feel less prosaic in its publication.

As the piece begins, he attends a party when confronted by a "perfect stranger whom I immediately and unwittingly admired" who asks him "if [he] were a poet." Drawing a crowd, he replies "'I suppose I am...for I do write poems.'" To this, the stranger replies "'Well write one now, will you?'" The image of the stranger shifts from admiration to one of skepticism and distrust, noting that "a few tendrils of hair escaped the opening of his shirt, fled upward to his neck, and they were not the color of his eyebrows!'" He continues:

> "I'm sorry, but I don't feel like one just now, if you don't mind," I said, thinking of many things, chiefly, perhaps, of childhood, when I would make myself vomit so that I wouldn't have to go to parties.
> "Well, what makes you feel like writing one?" he said, and kicked me in the balls.
> Ugh!

> As I hobbled to a chair, however, I managed somewhat to regain my composure. "You needn't be afraid of me," I said, turning. "I don't love you." (*PR* 70).

The poet is expected to act, to perform on command. There is not consideration of what is needed or required for a poem. In the flippancy of asking the poet to create on command, the stranger devalues his process and his approach.

This scenario does lead to writing, and while this piece is about poems, it is about a situation in which the requirements to write a poem are not met, and this is underscored by the title that tells us it is "Prose." Though initially taken in or at least not startled by the stranger, he becomes fearsome as the scene plays out, drawing a similar connotation to the critic, as assassin. In another poem, titled "Poetry," from 1951 the relationship to a "you," who is a reader, is similarly fearsome, though not as dismissive or abhorrent as this stranger. In this poem, the reader causes anxiety and self-doubt, which leads to unrefined poetry:

> The only way to be quiet
> is to be quick, so I scare
> you clumsily, or surprise
> you with a stab.
> [...]
> All this I desire. To
> deepen you by my quickness
> and delight as if you
> were logical and proven,
> but still be quiet as if
> I were used to you; as if
> you would never leave me
> and were the inexorable
> product of my time. (*CP* 49)

While I don't think the "you" in this poem and the stranger have the same charge or connotation, in "Poetry," he talks about a quietness that is desired in his work. There is showing off, it seems, but in the end the goal is to be "quiet as if I were used to you." Despite self-consciousness, this poem seeks comfort. With the stranger, he is clearly made uncomfortable, the questioning feeling like a "kick in the balls." The demand to write a poem is what makes such impossible, shifting the situation out of comfort, or as it seems in his last lines, out of a love that is required for such. The quietness in this poem is interesting, too. It isn't quiet in the sense of not talking, but in the sense of subtlety, which recalls the notes he received from Professor Guérard, telling him to show what he can do "relaxed" rather than "alert" and "showing-off." The only way to achieve that relaxed, quiet state, here, is through quickness, and yet there is still tension for him in what he aims for and maintaining that quietness. We can think, with these lines, that in a way the condition required for poems is love, at least the poems O'Hara wishes to write, the poems that don't act like an incinerator, a junkyard of life. This stranger doesn't get a poem, instead he gets only prose.

Though we can see the poet questioning these interpretive and dismissive readers, he hasn't actually articulated much about poetry or his goals in these poems—certainly, we can deduce from his orientation to these readers—but in another poem from roughly the same time, titled "To the Poem," (this poem, originally titled "To the Reader" and then changed, is undated but Donald Allen places it in 1952 or 1953, which makes sense given the work

O'Hara was doing at that time), provides his most clear articulation, I would argue, of his project in many poems. He writes:

> Let us do something grand
> just this once Something
>
> small and important and
> unAmerican Some fine thing
>
> will resemble a human hand
> and really be merely a thing
>
> Not needing a military band
> nor an elegant forthcoming
>
> to tease spotlights or a hand
> from the public's thinking
>
> But be In a defiant land
> Of its own a real right thing (*CP* 175)

This poem shows a project: to "do something grand / just this once" and that something is "small and important," "unAmerican." Though something might resemble, that doesn't mean it needs to be read in such a way; something may "resemble a human hand" but be "merely a thing" in the way a snake may resemble a penis, but still just be a snake. The thing doesn't need to be celebrated with a band, or spotlights—it doesn't have to be grand in that way. Nor does the thing have to be connected to "a hand / from the public's thinking"—it can be just a thing. The last two lines are interesting to me, most perhaps because of how we often think of "defiant" or radical reading in queer theory as reading against the grain, reading reparatively, identifying. Indeed, those are "defiant," but in the specific landscape of poetry, in the wake of

New Criticism at this time, what was most "defiant"—and most queer, at a time before queer reading practices where articulated—was insisting on standing one's ground, maintaining presence, and not yielding to interpretation or poetic removal. It is in that "defiant land" that the thing we have been tracing throughout the poem is able to be "a real right thing" and *not* "a hand / from the public's thinking." This is a position that refuses the ground-clearing of New Criticism, the erosion of sexuality and social specification or the experiences that come with to yield some experience of lyric as Brower or Vendler might wish it to be.

The clearest articulation from O'Hara, comes as he continues this thinking even more explicitly in a short, unpublished manuscript. Originally titled "Both Hartigans on Sunday" and "Two Hartigans on Sunday," he crossed out the originals optioning for the title "George Hartigan, and Grace, a Sunday Afternoon." The two Hartigans referenced in the title are both the painter Grace Hartigan, for she used the pseudonym "George" to break into the art world. This manuscript is archived with other pieces mostly found in *Early Writing,* and still in a somewhat rough form with handwritten edits, is undated, but we might place between 1952 when he met Hartigan and 1954 when Hartigan stopped using the pseudonym "George," shifting to use her real name. A large portion of this piece is dedicated to thinking about paradox in painting and poetry. In a section subtitled "The Nature of Paradox," he begins by saying "a paradox is when someone looks at an abstract painting and says it looks like a science-fiction magazine cover, or when a magazine says a mural looks like a flung egg. Despite Oscar

Wilde no paradox is interesting, because only the truth is interesting, and only the truth about Wilde is interesting, not his paradox" (2-3).

Before digging into what O'Hara is saying here, and throughout this essay, it is important to contextualize his thinking about paradox with contemporary critical statements. Specifically, in his 1947 book *The Well Wrought Urn,* New Critic Cleanth Brooks declared "the language of poetry is the language of paradox" and it's necessary to consider O'Hara's use of paradox in this context (3). Admittedly, Brooks "overstates" the relationship between poetry and paradox, but this couching isn't consistent with the avowedness of his statements: "It is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox" (3). For Brooks, paradox adds dimension to poems; he explains, using Wordsworth's poem, "Composed upon Westminster Bridge," that "I believe that most readers will agree that it is one of Wordsworth's most successful poems; yet most students have the greatest difficulty in accounting for its goodness" (5). The breakdown, he explains, is that when explained on the level of what "the poem merely says" or "in terms of the brilliance of its images" doesn't succeed, it "quickly breaks down" (5). He asks, "Where, then, does the poem get its power? It gets it, it seems to me, from a paradoxical situation out of which the poem arises" (5). Brooks then invokes I. A. Richards, explaining that "the poet has to work by analogies. All of the subtler states of emotion...necessarily demand metaphor for their expression" (9).

Paradox is essential to New Critical reading because it is a form of ground-clearing. By insisting that the language of poetry is the language of paradox, a language that works through analogy and metaphor, the language of the poem is untethered from its referents because without the assertion of such, interpretation becomes problematic. As Ahmed explains, using the example of bathroom occupied signs and locks, if something is in use and we don't see it as being used, we are liable to walk in on someone and both cause and feel embarrassment (28). We can use this to think about what happens when we try to interpret or make metaphorical something that is referential and based in actuality. In fact, this embarrassment is registered by Brower, when he states that if a "speaking voice" seems to be real, "we are embossed and thrown off as if an actor had stopped and spoken to the audience in his own person" (19). Paradox allows for two contradictory things to exist: it allows for a reader to exist in and act as arbiter in the space of the poem. Paradox allows *a* to be read as *b,* for *a* and *b* to exist in the same space at once. It allows snakes to at once be penises, speaking voices at once to be dramatic masks for readers.

There is no doubt that many poems are great because of their use of paradox; I'm not arguing against this possibility—but as we turn back to O'Hara, we can see that he sketches out a stance against paradox, against this assumption that painting relies upon paradox, or that poetry can only rely on it. In the statement quoted above, he is defining paradox as someone saying a specific work of art *looks like x.* Here, he is most interested in painting (though poetry does come up in the essay), and this aligns with his work because later statements, as in

"Personism" he situates his work within painterly abstraction, which is different, he says, than poetic abstraction which it is opposed to. He asserts that painting is a non-paradoxical form of art. We can imagine, using his example, someone seeing a Pollock and saying it "looks like a flung egg." To O'Hara, though, "no paradox is interesting, because only the truth is interesting"—in this case, seeing a Pollock, thinking it looks like a flung egg is uninteresting; however, we might say the truth of the painting, that it is an artifact of the painter's experience listening to jazz with paint on a brush, dancing, would be more interesting.

For someone to find paradox, he writes a bit later, is merely "a sign of diversion or of negative capability in the looker"—that is, if a reader or viewer can find some way to identify or interpret, it doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the work itself. "Indeed paradox is very like a hyena," he explains, "a sneaking hyena seeking to further itself on almost-living flesh, it calls forth from us a cry which is nearly a scream and is closer to choking, and as such it is an abstraction of human evil: self-destructiveness" (3). Paradox is a predator, like the critic-assassin, living on "almost-living flesh," which chokes and threatens, and the will toward abstraction in art for the artist O'Hara aligns with self-destruction, for it is literally the removal of the individual, subject, or of the circumstance, as in "Poem (As you kneel") where he writes:

> It is ink
> on paper love
> and I am dead
> because I am attributed
> to the moods of others
> like a peony. (*CP* 137)

Painting is representative, even if abstract, and to interpret it or to see it as something else is wrong, here. Interestingly, names are important in this text too, and one thing that is widely recognized in O'Hara's poems is his use of proper names—of cities, streets, friends, celebrities. Names, in his work, can signal things that are widely known, but they can also signal people or places lost to us. In this essay, he addresses names very explicitly saying: "the possibility of names, their usefulness and their meaningfulness, bars paradox from nearing us" (3). When something is specific, it resists interpretation.

He continues sketching a spectrum in which painting "is almost always absent" of this "self-destructiveness" because it "cannot be paradoxical," yet poetry and prose often do contain and deal with the "ever-present" threat of it, and music, he explains is too ambiguous to "provide a scene for paradox" because it lacks referents (3). He further reinforces this spectrum by "casting" a "play" with these forms of art in which they play their role: music plays the role of ambiguity, painting the role of affirmation, and poetry the role of "nervousness about affirming" (5). This label for painting, which he has defined as being absent of paradox, then, makes sense: affirmation is about affirming and asserting a type of presence. So, it is interesting, here, to see that poetry too, for O'Hara, is aligned with this kind of affirmation, but with the addition of "anxiety." We might better understand this considering a riddle he tells as an example. In it, he explains that "a landscape painter who never found nature sufficiently realistic or his own work sufficiently abstract," and saying "'I must paint from life,'" blows up several nations. In painting the experience, he finds fame and

humanitarian's "[does] not mind" him doing so because the art is great. O'Hara asks, "how is this the opposite of a paradox" (4)? The answer, of course, is though there is destruction, it is not destruction of the *self*. If painting affirms and is opposed to self-destruction, poetry is a space that can affirm, but does so with anxiety because of conventions that mean that the idea of self-destruction, of paradox are "ever-present" threats. This echoes his 1956 poem "Why I Am Not a Painter," which juxtaposes Mike Goldberg's process as a painter, in which a can of sardines appears in his painting only to be eliminated, turning into letters in the final painting—which we might see this as destruction of the sardines, rather than the self—before explaining his own process:

> But me? One day I am thinking of
> a color: orange. I write a line
> about orange. Pretty soon it is a
> whole page of words, not lines.
> Then another page. There should be
> so much more, not of orange, of
> words, of how terrible orange is
> and life. Days go by. It is even in
> prose, I am a real poet. My poem
> is finished and I haven't mentioned
> orange yet. It's twelve poems, I call
> it ORANGES. (*CP* 262)

Perhaps we can think of the anxiety he mentions as what produces more than something that just affirms orange, but that does not necessarily mean that such poems create paradox. Writing about orange in such an indirect way, in creating twelve poems, not yet mentioning orange, doesn't create a paradox. It shows an experience of the word orange that isn't

destructive of it, the way Goldberg destroys sardines, but it isn't destructive of the self either. As we can see, destruction weighs heavy on his mind: poems, containing paradox and self-destruction, are like incinerators, painting has the boldness to destroy that outside the self, but poetry, where O'Hara is, seems to refuse destruction, affirming, but anxiously. It's important to recognize he isn't rejecting figurative language or metaphor—his language uses still uses such to get across objects and feelings; rather, we can think of paradox as something that transcends the object and threatens to destroy it; paradox allows a negative capability, where mere figurative language is in service of relaying the "real right thing" itself. The problem, in "To the Poem," is not a thing resembling a human hand; it is the thing being interpreted as a human hand, and thus not being the thing itself.

The stakes for affirming and preserving the thing itself were about to change, though, with the death of Bunny Lang—a death that shook O'Hara, and that through the poems in which he mentions it, affect how important presence in poetry is. On July 29th, 1956, Bunny Lang died of Hodgkin's Lymphoma at the age of 32. In a series of letters that summer, O'Hara had been working with composer Ben Weber to put poems to music. In one letter, originally dated at the end of July, and crossed out to be dated August 2nd, he adds a second postscript, explaining "sorry this letter is such a mess but I've been terribly depressed lately." Two weeks later, on August 16th, the day after Jackson Pollock's funeral, he wrote the famed poem, "A Step Away from Them," which long-time roommate Joe LeSueur describes as "his first great 'I do this, I do that' poem," starting: "It's my lunch hour, so I go / for a walk among the hum-

colored / cabs" (LeSueur 109, *CP* 257). Documenting life moving on the street, the second to last stanza shifts in tone, away from the vibrancy of the city into retrospection as he writes: "First / Bunny died, then John Latouche, / then Jackson Pollock. But is the / earth as full of life was full, of them?" From that point, instead of the "I" that is so prominent in the earlier part of the poem, he shifts into using "one"— "And one has eaten and one walks"—though eventually going back to work, ending "My heart is in my / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy" (*CP* 258). We can see him pondering, already, what their loss means—leaving the earth feeling less full because of their absence.

"Nothing is made up in this perfect poem," LeSueur explains, "right down to that little volume of Reverdy—yes, I'm sure it was in one of the pockets of his Brooks Brothers seersucker jacket...so like everything else in 'A Step Away from Them,' the detail about the Reverdy poems wasn't dreamed up to make the poem work, though work it does with uncontrived finesse" (109). He explains, too, noting the lines in the poem that it is 12:40 on Thursday, "did he write the poem immediately after he was back at his desk? No doubt; and since the Thursday he refers to corresponds to the date on the manuscript, it's clear the poem was completed then and there—he must have got it right in one draft, as was so often the case in short poems like this" (110). Though he documents "a warm beautiful day," and though "it's clear that he's glad to be among the living on such a day," he still "Feels close to the departed." And, speaking of Bunny, LeSueur writes:

> Of the three, Bunny was the only one he knew really well, and because of a falling out they had shortly before her death—it was apparently precipitated by her getting married—his grief must have been all the more difficult to bear.
>
> I am not exaggerating about his grief. In 1963 or '64, Kenneth Pitchford and his then-wife Robin Morgan were visiting us...and Kenneth, curious about Bunny, asked Frank what she was like. The mention of her name caught him off-guard; cut to the quick, he burst into tears and fled to his bedroom, as though he'd just received word of her death. (110-11)

We can see this, too, in the poems. In July 1957, one year after Bunny's death, he wrote the poem "To Hell with It." In this very freeform poem, he appears to start a poem, "'Hungry winter, this winter,'" before becoming unsatisfied with "meaningful hints at dismay," and then moves to provide a short section called "Mock Poem," with nonsensical, but elevated sounding lines like "To knead the balm, preppucible depense, / Be undezithered pounance." After this, he writes "I clean it off with an old sock / and go on:" which leads us to the bulk of the poem. In it, he laments dead friends, speaking of:

> all things that don't change,
> photographs,
> monuments,
> memories of Bunny and Gregory and me in costume
>
> Bowing to each other and the audience, like jinxes)
>
> nothing now can be changed, as if
> last crying no tears will dry
> And Bunny never change her writing of
> the Bear (*CP* 275)

He moves on to write "Little Elegy," a section in the poem that is a much more standardly linefeed poem, starting:

> Let's cry a little while

as if we're at a movie
And not think of all life's
fun for a little while
And how it is to be alive.

Once this short two-stanza elegy is done, we return to the more free-form meta-writing, which comments:

For sentiment is always intruding on form,
the immaculate disgust of the mind
Beaten down by pain and vileness of life's flickering disapproval,

endless torment pretending to be the rose
Of acknowledgement (courage)
and fruitless absolution (hence the word: "hip")
to be cool,
decisive,
precise,
yes, while the barn door hits you in the face
each time you get up
because the wind, seeing you slim and gallant rises

to embrace its darling poet. It thinks *I'm* mysterious.

All diseases are exchangeable. (*CP* 276)

From this point, he moves into a section titled "Envoi," which address the wind referenced in the previous:

Wind, you'll have a terrible time
smothering my clarity, a void
behind my eyes,
into which existence
continues to stuff its wounded limbs

as I make room for them one
after another filthy page of poetry.

And mean it. (*CP* 276-7)

This poem documents a scene of writing: it shows, in the beginning, a mock poem that uses fake words that sound elegant to create a masturbatory poem (which he cleans away with an old sock) that sounds academic but is free from any actual meaning or feeling. Instead, his friend's death, on this anniversary of losing Bunny, intrudes on his mind, and even letting that emotion in, sentiment intrudes on form. This poem documents the struggle to distill feelings into poems, as they might be expected to look by the critic, but how that distillation into structured form fails. "To be cool, / decisive, / precise" does nothing to combat the actual pain and experience of loss, and he sees no virtue in trying to write in such a way "while the barn door hits you in the face / each time you get up." And yet, despite this, he ends with another poem within the poem—this one is not an attempt to restrain his feelings, but rather an affirmation of them, vowing not to the hardship of living smother his clarity, but instead to "make room" on his "filthy" pages of poetry. Rather than transforming these feelings and experiences into something diminished but elegant, he'll document them filthily, "and mean it."

A few years later, on January 27th, 1959, he wrote another poem, originally titled "A Short Story in the Only form I Can Find," and then retitled "The 'Unfinished'" and dedicated "in memory of Bunny Lang." It begins with a lover in bed, pretending to be asleep, before leaving for cocktails without telling him, which creates the mood where he asserts "I will be as

unhappy as I damn well / please" (*CP* 317). He chides his generation, saying that "nobody wants to make a big *histoire* about anything" but then explains he is "just like everybody else," noting if an earthquake came and "gulp[ed] down the whole of Madrid" he would "only get kind of hysterical about one person" (*CP* 317). Toward the middle, the poem shifts as Bunny's death is introduced out of seemingly nowhere. He writes:

> I'm impersonating some wretch weeping over a 1956 date book and of course
> I pull myself together and then I wipe my eyes and see it's my own
> (date book, that is)
> and everything becomes history.

He snaps back to present, at "the Paris branch of contemporary depression," and he looks for his friend Gregory, "because I want to cry with him / about a dear dead friend, it's always about dying, never about death / I sometimes think it's the only reason than any of us love each other" (*CP* 318). Turning, in digression, he addresses the reader:

> the casual reader will not, I am sure, be averse to a short
> digression on this splendid narrative by which the nature
> of the narrator can be more or less revealed and all sorts
> of things subsequently become clear*er* if not clear: picture
> a person who one day in a fit of idleness decides to make
> a pomander like the one that granny used to have around the
> house in old New England and so he takes an orange and sticks
> a lot of cloves in it and then he looks at it and realizes
> that he's killed the orange, his favorite which came from
> the Malay Archipelago and was even loved in Ancient China,
> and he quickly pulls out the cloves, but its too
> late! Orange is lying bleeding in my hand! and I
> suddenly think of the moon, hanging quietly up there
> ever since the time of Keats, and now they're shoot-
> in all those funny looking things at here, that's
> what you get, baby (end of digression). (*CP* 318)

This short tale, like so many other examples I have just provided, discusses the loss of a thing when we attempt to transform it. The orange, pierced by cloves, is lost—transformed, perhaps, but the original is lost. Even removing the cloves, it lies bleeding. The tragedy here is not about "death" but about "dying"—perhaps because death means becoming history. An earthquake swallowing Madrid is tragic, but as he explains, for him it would be about one person—as the event becomes history, that individual loss is lost to the event. Dying, for O'Hara, is fearsome, because dying is the loss of the thing as it is. For the pomander to exist, the orange must be lost; for paradox to exist, the thing must be penetrable, and, for O'Hara, if not lost, diminished.

It is important to remind, once again, that in "Personism," O'Hara aligns his poetry against poetic abstraction, which is different from abstraction in painting, which he does align with. This is important to remember, because one of his most explicit explanations of abstraction in painting, in 1962's "Art Chronicle," might then also open up the project of his poetry. "In a capitalist country fun is everything," he writes, "fun is the only justification for an acquisitive impulse, if one is to be honest" (*AC* 5). Speaking of Abstract Expressionism, he continues that the works are not fun, and their "justifications must be found elsewhere." Rather than fun, these works are serious, "because they are *not* isolated. So out of the populated cavern of self come brilliant, uncomfortable works, works that don't reflect you or your life, though you can know them" (*AC* 6). What we see, here, is a type of opacity: these works are not reflective of the viewer, nor do they allow the penetrability required for identification.

As we have seen, associating them to something else, like a flung egg, is also wrong and implies paradox where it doesn't exist. If we take, as an example, a Pollock painting, it is a representation and artifact of an experience: the movement and paint on the canvas stand as documentation of the painter's movement, his experience, perhaps, of moving to jazz—we can, at times, even see traces of footprints. When we see the painting, we can't place ourselves in the position of "I"—we know that we are not the painter, that the movements are not ours, not something we would attempt to identify with. We can, however, get impressions of the work, be moved by it, or appreciate its process and composition. In his essay on Pollock, O'Hara writes that Pollock's paintings are marked by him "being 'in'" them, seeing the composition principles not as "automatism or self-expression, but insight" which "appl[ies] a specific truth to the specific cultural event" (*AC* 13). As in "The 'Unfinished,'", we could think of this akin to the idea that, even in a tragic earthquake, the individual might find most tragic the loss of one person. This is art that documents an individual, who may be part of a bigger "*histoire,*" affirming a specific truth, a specific presence.

He continues, in "Art Chronicle," writing: "art is not *your* life, it's someone else's." Abstraction in painting, abstraction that is opposed to personal removal and negative capability, is abstraction that is derived not from its separation from the artist, but the way it pushes back on the consumer, saying *not you.* We can know it, or of it, but it resists interpretation and penetration by so strongly affirming the personal experience, rather than removing it. When we read, in "The Day Lady Died," "It is 12:20 in New York a Friday / three

days after Bastille day, yes / it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine," there is such a strong presence in the documenting of this experience, a strong sense of date, and time, and event in such a way that we know we can't have this experience, but we can know what he tells us of it. This is "very difficult for the acquisitive spirit to understand, and for that matter the spirit of joinership that animates communism" (*AC* 6). This opacity is not fun because it stifles the acquisitive: we may think of this impulse as that which animates a lot of the New Critical norms—the impulse to *know*, to interpret, and to declare meaning by separating off intent. But it also poses difficulty, too, for "the spirit of joinership" which wants to be a part of the experience, which in some ways resembles readings of many of his critics or reading with strong identification. The difference between these two might be the degree of ground clearing—joinership opening it enough to be a part, whereas acquisition wipes away all traces. If not these two practices, then what? Rather than seeking empathy by asking us to place ourselves in another position—which can lead either to the erasure of that experience if we can't understand it, or our interpretation and potential co-opting of that experience—this is art that represents another experience, documents it, affirms it. Our job, then, is to respect it, and to do so it to be clear about the separations between that work, that experience, that life and whatever that work stirs in us. If we interpret, if we identify, if we love, if we connect, if we find meaning, if we are inspired to develop theories—those are ours, not what the work is about. Recalling Traub, we must keep in mind the gravitational pull of our desires, which can open up new possibilities. But what possibilities?

With better context, then, we can return to "Personism." Speaking of abstraction "in poetry, not in painting," which "involves personal removal by the poet," and "negative capability," he says that Personism is "so totally opposed to this kind of abstract removal that is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry" (*SS* 111). The following section proves more difficult to decipher if we haven't fully understood his statements about abstraction. In it he writes:

> Personism has nothing to do with philosophy, it's all art. It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it! But to give you a vague idea, one of the minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity, and sustains the poet's feelings towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person. (*SS* 111)

Using the example he gives, we can see that the poem is addressed to "one person." Doing this evokes "overtones of love" without "destroying love's life-giving vulgarity"—which echoes the line, in "My Heart," where he writes, "I want to be / at least as alive as the vulgar" (*CP* 231).

Friend, poet, and critic kept a "Frank O'Hara Notebook," which was published in 2019, and contains his musings and thoughts regarding O'Hara's work. He zeroes in on the term "vulgarity," which is helpful to unravel this passage. To do so, he quotes Willem de Kooning, as saying "I always seem to be wrapped in the melodrama of vulgarity" before connecting it to art historian, T. J. Clark, who writes about Abstract Expressionism's vulgarity (Berkson 262). Clark states, "I think we might come to describe Abstract Expressionists paintings better if we

took them, above all, to be *vulgar*. The word for us is pejorative, and to be understood as such in the arguments that follow...they all try to conjure back depth and tactility...into paintings that hinge, in my view, on not having much of either" and what they work to incorporate is not "the 'popular' or 'low'" but a quality of bad taste, of "foulness and degeneracy" (Clark 375, 379, 384). In defining vulgarity, Clark cites the Oxford English Dictionary, and Jane Austen, amongst others, which Berkson notes, differentiating what Clark says and what de Kooning means: "the word means one thing to the Dutchman who has paid close attention to American slang and something else to an Englishman who quotes liberally not from de Kooning but from Matthew Arnold, Ruskin, and Jane Austen" (Berkson 262). What is significant here is that Berkson is pointing out a nuance in the term vulgar that is important to our understand of O'Hara's work, as his use is contextually much more similar to de Kooning, who would have been in more similar times and spaces in the art world that Clark, approaching it from an academic standpoint. My citation of Clark here is necessarily reductive, and his argument is much fuller and more nuanced, but my purpose here is to unravel how Berkson uses him as a foil for de Kooning, and in turn O'Hara. For Clark, vulgarity is used with pejorative connotations, where de Kooning and O'Hara don't seem to attach these—for them, vulgarity is associated with life as it is commonly lived, not theoretically but actually. Berkson wonders if vulgarity is "simply the energy that comes from the vernacular of life at street level?" Then, stating it "is a constant source, where the action is & what anybody knows, verses all kinds of cloistered assumptions," then quoting O'Hara's line from "Personism"

(262). For Clark, vulgarity is pejorative, it seems, in part, because it defies the critic; perhaps this is the very reason why, for O'Hara, vulgarity is life-giving. It asserts a "street-level" view, an affirmation of life as it is lived commonly, every day—not life transformed. It isn't inherently about having bad taste, or being opposed to a certain "bourgeois sensibility," as Clark puts it, but rather about being aligned with life without pretense.

When O'Hara says that Personism has "nothing to do with philosophy," and is "all art," he is asserting that it is not about removing, transforming or abstracting the everyday and life lived into something philosophical, pretentious, or paradoxical, but rather documenting life in art. So, O'Hara writes that Personism "evok[es] overtones of love, without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity," and we can understand that a poem may involve love, may be about or on the occasion of feeling love, but it is not a poem that transforms love or creates a paradox; it can be a poem about the everyday feelings of love, how it is wrapped into the fabric of everyday life and gives life. In this section he aligns Personism as being opposed to Wallace Stevens, and we can see this play out: whereas Stevens may take an experience, such as getting ice cream, and turn it into a poem with grand language and imagery, elevating it into something bigger, as in "The Emperor of Ice Cream," Personism is about *not* transforming experiences, but documenting them in ways that capture their "life-giving vulgarity," something we might see as absent in Stevens's elevation. Similarly, he writes, this allows the poet to remain in the writing of the poem, rather than becoming "distracted" into feelings about the person: there is no moony dreaming about the lover, just the documentation of

what love, as lived, is like—and this will be a primary topic of my third chapter, as we look at the poems O'Hara wrote about and for Vincent Warren. This, however, is not to say we shouldn't consider vulgarity in other ways at all. Vulgarity has important queer valences as well: O'Hara's poems do celebrate queer sexuality, in ways that would have been considered vulgar, and this refusal to hide one's sexuality, the refusal to cut off sex and sexuality from its integral place in everyday life is certainly life-giving.

In this same section he writes "it does not have to do with personality or intimacy," and it is important to hear the echo that the term personality has, when we think back to the New Critics and his journal. Personality, as used then, was not about the actual person, but about a persona that comes through in the poems. For Lewis, a poem is "no representation of a *man,* a *character,* or a *personality* at all"—it's important to note that a man, or person, is different than a character or a personality, and for Tillyard, personality is a quality that can come through, but through the coherence of the poems when read together (Lewis 5). O'Hara himself talks about the "realization of personality" in his journal, not about a "metaphysical" sense of being, but a sort of realization of an entity that comes to be through the work (*EW* 110). A personality is separate from the person, and like a speaking voice, more a construction in the poem. And in this section, O'Hara is writing what the poems do—this line, tied to abstraction and movements, is about what the reader would experience. Personism is about *persons*—lived, vulgar, non-paradoxical—not *personalities,* and the reader would not experience intimacy. Philosophy, here, can be associated with abstraction in poetry: the transforming of things into

ideas and paradox which the consumer can engage in, either through acquisition (interpretation, mastery) or joinership (identification, association). Art, however, is about particularity and experience that is "not your life," not about showing a personality or intimacy with the consumer.

The next section is the most widely read and cited section of "Personism." Writing that Personism "was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959, a day I was in love with someone (not Roi, by the way, a blond)," which would've been Vincent Warren, "I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person." He continues:

> 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 people instead of two pages. I confess it may be the death of literature as we know it. (*SS* 111)

Personism, he explains, puts the poem between two persons, the poet and the person, and it is important to note that "person," here, is not a reader as his use of person has thus far been attached to historical persons he engaged with.

Many scholars have pointed to this section engaging it to think about how O'Hara is working with lyric personhood. For instance, Marjorie Perloff, in "Frank O'Hara and the Aesthetics of Attention," notes that "the insistence that there is no difference between his poems and his letters or telephone conversation…[has been] taken all too literally," and explains that "O'Hara recognizes that the only mind he can wholly penetrate is his own, but he

sees this need be a loss if he project a lyric 'I' engaged in what looks like live talk." She continues, "the poet does not use the poem as a vehicle to lay bare his soul, to reveal his secret anxieties or provide autobiographical information about his past. We would not know from the poems alone how and why O'Hara fell in love with someone, how he felt about his family, his Irish-Catholic background, and so on" (179). But is this the case? As is clear through my argument so far, I don't agree with her stance on his projecting an "lyric 'I,'" but I also don't agree that we *don't* get that information. Certainly, he is not a confessional poet, and he does not outright tell us things such as how and why he fell in love, as such would destroy love's life-giving vulgarity. Instead, he shows us moments of felt love, like when hiking, he says, in "Variations on Saturday":

> we climbed up
> the steep side of the waterfall
> feeling kissy in the cold
> forest
> when I pull you away
> from the tree to me
> it's not
> just to get up the cliff
> and rejoin the others that's
> A sailor's grasp fingernails
> your lips are so different
> from your palms (377)

Do we know why he is in love? Does he? More importantly: does it matter? In a scene like this, rather than trying to find some transcendent reason, instead he focuses on the beauty of a simple moment: staying behind, stealing a kiss on a hike with others. Perhaps this

representation of this feeling is actually more telling, more authentic, and more moving than counting the ways. This point, I will return to in chapter three, but for now, the importance here is that for me, and I would presume for O'Hara, something is lost when these lines are attributed to a fictional speaker or projected lyric "I" and not a historical person, documenting life.

Other scholars, similar, use these lines to think about lyric personhood. Oren Izenberg, in *Being Numerous,* argues that "O'Hara flouts not just the tradition of the well-made lyric, but the 'alternative' tradition of flouting that tradition" (108). After citing this passage from "Personism," he writes "it occurs to O'Hara that he might call the man he loves on the telephone and he does not do so—that is, he continues to write the poem" which means "we must ourselves reject the account of O'Hara's poetry as fundamentally 'personal' in the sense of being a communicative act directed at a single loved person, and re-open the question of what it means to locate the poem *between* persons" (136-7). Critics tend to get hung up on O'Hara's realization that he could use the telephone. Some, like Izenberg here, insist that the fact that he doesn't use the phone is important and means that poems are different from telephone calls. Others, as Perloff mentions perhaps more straight-forwardly, as meaning his poems are no different than telephone calls. For me, what is key here is the realization comes while writing. He has already started a poem in realizing he could call the person. Izenberg is right in that he doesn't, but that doesn't mean we must reject all association with telephone calls, nor do we have to see poems and telephone calls as the same. Both can be a means that

connects two people, and the example can be just that, an offhand example, not a grander statement.

This leads to accounts, like Seth Perlow, in *The Poem Electric,* who, citing Izenberg writes that O'Hara "does not write poems to friends *as though* calling them on the telephone; he writes poems to friends *instead of* calling them," stating that "Personism, then, is as much a social theory of telephone calls as of poetry," and argues that his "poems of address often come between persons in a negative sense, figuring social life as interrupted by the very technologies that sustain it" (140-1). He continues, pondering "the Personist might replace the question 'How do I feel about Vincent?' with the question 'How do I feel about being social?'" (141-2). Perlow's project is interested in technology and how it interacts with poetry, which we see here. However, he seems to transform Personism into philosophy, which it isn't, and in positing that we could replace a question about a specific person with a metaphysical one completely misses the point. Perlow is an astute reader of O'Hara in some places, but his reading is caught up in lyrical pondering that isn't what O'Hara was doing. He argues at another point that O'Hara's poems "underscore a tension inherent in lyric address," writing that he uses "a technique of high poetic ritual, articulating a 'triangulated' structure through which the poem's audience intercepts a misdirected call that will never reach its ostensible addressee" (152). And, in discussing "Letter to Bunny," he focuses on the line "When anyone reads this but you it begins / to be lost," zeroing in on the word "when" saying "notably the poet does not write that he will be weakened *if* someone other than Bunny reads this but *when*

someone does" and arguing that the poem "interpolates us" and that the poem "seems to anticipate its unknown future readers" (164). This is a fair reading, but to read in such a way is to see the poem as being *about* a reader, rather than thinking about a reader. This is a poem that was unpublished until the posthumous collected poems. It does contemplate a potential reader, but to read it in this way is to read it as always already a public object, and doing so makes it self-conscious, triangulated, rather than something that is between two people.

While I don't deny that O'Hara's poems can become triangulated when a reader comes into the picture, what happens if we disrupt the assumption that poems are always already meant for a reader? In the last chapter, we saw how O'Hara was surrounded by New Critical norms, specifically the construction of the speaking voice, and a method of reading that puts the "moment" of the poem in the moment of reading, which creates poetry that is reader-centered. Between the "intentional fallacy" and the "death of the author" we can see a coalescing of a certain kind of thinking I'd like to refer to as the logic of lyric reading. This logic would see all poetry as now lyric, and the lyric as a communal experience, and as such is formulated on this triangular structure where the reader is indirectly addressed, or "overhears" the poem. The logic continues that because we can't know what an author intended, or what the aims in writing the poem are, those things shouldn't be considered or prioritized. Additionally, because a poem should "work" without those intentions, whatever we see the poem as doing or the way it works (or, conversely, the way it doesn't work or what it doesn't do) is the stuff of criticism. Our associations, interpretations, connections, identifications, and

projects are what we come to see the poem as being or fitting into; and, in publishing and disseminating those views, others may come to see the poem in such a way too. Those in positions of power, which has historically meant those who are straight white men, have shaped our views. We can't get at poets, so we cut poems from them under the logic that the poem was published and therefore public.

I'm not trying to undo centuries of lyric reading, nor am I trying to argue that O'Hara thinks he can. Some elements of this logic are inescapable—for us to talk about these poems requires that they are published, they do become published. Yet, I think it is still worth bracketing off this assumption and recognizing it as just that—an assumption shaped by historical reading practices and critical statements. In doing so, even if we can't put it out of order, we can step back from it, look at its effects, and consider what other possibilities might open up in doing so. Personism is a tool to do this. O'Hara writes, "what can we expect of Personism?" in the last paragraph, commenting "(This is getting good, isn't it?)" Then answers, "Everything, but we won't get it." Echoing the sentiment in the previous paragraph that his movement "may be the death of literature" we can gather that he recognizes, too, that while Personism is a "vital" movement for him, but he also seems to recognize that against a backdrop of lyric logic, it is set up for failure. Personism places the poem between two people, "Lucky Pierre" style, and that is where the poem is "gratified" (*SS* 111). Readers and critics aren't part of this equation, and the publicness is a secondary effect—art is not our life, but we

can know of it; we are not in this back-alley threesome, but we can watch from the sidelines, like a voyeur, but it isn't about us.

Evidence of this appears earlier in "Personism," too. He says that "if someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don't turn around and shout, 'Give it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep," instead "you just go on your nerve." He continues, in an under-cited section, writing:

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

Because there is a logic to the fact that once a poem is published, it is public, there is a sort of futility to saying, "no you can't do that." And though the reader and critic may read in such ways, that doesn't mean that poem needs to accommodate them. When he attempted to be a good, obedient New Critical writer and remove himself, avoiding his intention, it didn't work. With the critic on the forefront of his mind, the assassin, the goading stranger, he was stifled and depressed. But in recognizing that the reception is not why he "fell in love in the first place" he avoids this logic of lyric reading.

As Sarah Ahmed writes, in *What's the Use,* "sometimes to survive restriction we refuse an instruction. Creating our own dwellings becomes necessary given how queerness can be squeezed out of spaces" (201). I propose that we see Personism as an act of and a poetics of

queer defiance. If the instruction is to create poetry that is the language of paradox, that it is public knowledge, that intention is fallacious, that the author is dead, that social specification doesn't matter—then he refuses this instruction to create a persistent personhood. Rather than create poems that allow for ground-clearing, that would accommodate a reader, he occupies the space, refusing to be erased. In that "defiant land," to use the language of "To the Poem," the persons, the events, the objects become "real right thing[s]." For O'Hara, as a queer person in the 1950s and 60s, in a world where his existence was stigmatized, illegal, and dangerous—where his choice was to deny or hide vital parts of himself—this resistance and the very act of documenting his life was radical. "Perhaps the potential to queer use," Ahmed continues, "might reside somewhere between our bodies and our worlds. Queer use might require a certain willingness to be perverse, to deviate from the straight path, the right path" (201). Personism is a method of queer use. It takes the poem and uses it in a way other than what is instructed, it asks us to ignore our instructions for use.

Similarly, then, I propose we take a lesson from it, to read through a lens of Personism which too uses poems queerly, which is my goal in the next chapter. As Ahmed explains, "to queer use can be to linger on the material qualities of that which you are supposed to pass over; it is to *recover* a potential from materials that have been left behind" (208). Not only would such an approach "front up," to use Ahmed's terms, our own desires and the effects we as readers/critics have on texts, it is to challenge assumptions and reading practices in order to open up new possibilities. Rather than dismissing the material qualities the poet might leave

behind, we can attend to them. Rather than dismissing the poet's intention or declaring our reading as the program of the poem, we can acknowledge what is lost but still gesture to what remains.

Chapter Three: "In a Defiant Land"

While there are extremely few uses of Frank O'Hara's work in queer theory texts, there is one work that puts his poetry in pride of place. José Esteban Muñoz, in his much celebrated and important book, *Cruising Utopia,* uses the poem "Having a Coke with You." Modeling his approach which he defines as "a backward glance that enacts a future," Muñoz's utopianism is strongly aligned, as he acknowledges, with Eve Sedgwick's reparative position (4). Thinking with Ernst Bloch, "who considers astonishment to be an important philosophical mode of contemplation" he notes that we can see this "sense of astonishment in the work of Warhol and O'Hara." In O'Hara's "irrepressibly upbeat"-ness he finds manifested "astonished contemplation," using term from Bloch, which helps "one surpass the limitations of an alienating presentness and allows one to see a different time and place," which he terms, using Bloch, a "wish-landscape" which "extend[s] into the territory of futurity" (5). After including the poem as a whole, he writes:

> This poem tells us of a quotidian act, having a Coke with somebody, that signifies a vastest lifeworld of queer relationally, an encrypted sociality, and a utopian potentiality…Though the poem is clearly about the present, it is a present that is now squarely the past and in its queer relationally promises a future. The fun of having a Coke is a mode of exhilaration in which one views a restructured sociality…The utopian function is enacted by a certain surplus in the work that promises a futurity, something that is not quite here. O'Hara first mentions being wowed by a high-art object before he describes being wowed by the lover and whom he shares a Coke. Here, through the queer-aesthete art consumption and queer relationally the writer describes moments imbued with a feeling of forward-dawning futurity (6-7)

Muñoz's project is about utopianism and exists as part of an important conversation about futurity in queer theory, and in O'Hara's poem, coupled with Warhol's Coke art, "he sees the past and the potentiality imbued within an object, the ways it might represent a mode of being and feeling that was then not quite there but nonetheless an opening" (9). He writes himself that his method is reparative, and his reading is successfully so. As Brian Glavey recently critiqued, "Muñoz's discussion is not directed toward a reading of the details of the Coke poem, mobilizing instead a generalizable mood that the poem makes available. Such an approach almost by necessity remains gestural." As Glavey points out, this is "a feature rather than a bug" of reparative reading, and he writes that "there is much about the poem and its context that has to be ignored, in other words, in order to identify it as queerly utopian" (999). Muñoz approaches the text with his signature "backward glance to enact a future" which is one way of using poems, a model that is undoubtedly a form of Eve Sedgwick's reparative reading. Sedgwick's model comes from a place of pleasure and love, as she wrote: "many people doing all kinds of work are able to take pleasure in aspects of their work; but something different happens when the pleasure is not only taken but openly displayed" ("Tendencies" 19). Sedgwick's writing displayed this pleasure, and it affected those who learned from her, who wrote after her, who read with her. "Perhaps the most common description of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work is *enabling,*" explains Heather Love, "reading her work tends to open unexpected conceptual possibilities, ways of thinking, gestures, and tones" ("Truth," 235). Love cites Deborah Brintzman, who describes the "theory kindergarten" we find in

Sedgwick as "a fun fair of experiments, thrilling surprises, mis-recognitions, near-missed encounters, and phantasies that lead, in the strangest directions, our games of 'let's pretend'" (Brintzman 123).

This echoes the appeal and importance of the "reparative reading" that Sedgwick advocates for, in her formative essay, "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading." In that essay, she writes, "the vocabulary for articulating any reader's reparative motive toward a text or a culture has long been so sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary that it's no wonder few critics are willing to describe their acquaintance with such motives." However, she argues, "no less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to the project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantastic, the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks. What we learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from objects of a culture—even a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them." There is much to love here, and much that this argument can enable, and, referencing what Brintzman calls, "'the work of love," Heather Love writes: "Perhaps the whole point of the 'work of love' is that it would dislocate one's habitual relation to cognition and forms of mastery, but I admit to some persistent and not necessarily productive confusion about what the work of love is." She continues, exploring what the reparative looks like in Sedgwick's writing: "Reparation in the essay is on the side of *multiplicity, surprise, rich divergence, consolation, creativity,* and *love.* If reparative reading is better at the level of ethics

and affect...it also looks better at the level of epistemology and knowledge" ("Truth" 237). Having said that, Love argues that it is impossible to *only* work in the reparative, and that Sedgwick herself, in the essay, works from both positions. Arguing that there two positions, the schizoid which animates paranoid reading and the depressive which animates reparative reading, are "inseparable," but isn't that like love? "There is risk in love, including the risk of antagonism, aggression, irritation, contempt, anger—love means trying to destroy the object as well as trying to repair it" ("Truth" 237).

Reading is messy—queer reading, perhaps even more so. Sedgwick starts her essay, "Queer and Now," with "I think everyone who does gay and lesbian studies is haunted by the suicides of adolescents," and quickly moving to a section labeled "promising, smuggling, reading, overreading," focused on the act of reading, so quite literally we come to see reading as a matter of life and death. In the much-quoted line, we see that the hungry queer reader, "like Proust, the reparative reader 'helps himself again and again'; it is not only important but *possible* to find ways of attending to such reparative motives and positionalities." For this reader, reading is an act of self-exploration, as Sedgwick writes in the original beginning to "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading," as it appeared in *Novel Gazing:*

> Yet what seems least settled in any predetermined idea about what makes the queerness of a queer reading. Often these readings begin from or move toward sites of same-sex, interpersonal eroticism—but not necessarily so. It seems to me that an often quiet, but very palpable presiding image here—a kind of *genius loci* for queer reading—is the interpretive absorption of the child or adolescent whose sense of personal queerness may or may not (yet?) have resolved into a sexual specificity of proscribed object choice, aim, site, or identification. Such a child—if she reads at all—is reading for

> important news about herself, without knowing what form the news will take. (*Novel* 2-3)

Sedgwick sets this kind of reading apart from the "complacent adequacy that Jonathan Culler calls 'literary competence.'" For me, the best description of the reparative is what Raquel Gutierrez calls "Radical Narcissism," which in an essay by that name, she describes the process of sitting in a support group for Latina Lesbians, and in listening to others, she found herself thinking about herself, working through her own identity. "The stopping to think was truly a revolutionary act. Revolutionary in the way that a Vitamix is revolutionary—like wow, you don't have to let everything go to waste?" She writes, "I was never suicidal but the slow death of ontological autopilot made it impossible to understand the radical genealogies I emerged from, or rather that made it possible for me to revel in the Chuck E. Cheese ball-room of identity politics...I did so in community. But narcissism's concomitant vanity, ego, and general self-obsession served me...We give each other space, but we give our own selves permission to take what we've been given and have the good sense to demand more" (154)

Sedgwick's project comes from a very specific set of contexts. Writing the introduction to *Reading Sedgwick,* a 2019 collection edited by Lauren Berlant, Ramzi Fawaz astutely distills common threads in Sedgwick's scholarship, while contextualizing the historical moments and the stakes under which she wrote. He writes, of Sedgwick's frequent lists of queer figures and identity positions ("leather folk, Snap! Queens, butch bottoms, divas," to name a few), "Sedgwick's lists are a way to do justice to the dead and counter the culture's genocidal 'desire

that gay people *not be,"* and doing so "is an urgent psychic necessity to keep the specificity of particular friends, lovers, family members, artists, companions, and neighbors vividly alive even past their literal deaths." That is, "[lists] have the potential to revivify the complexity and richness of queer life in the face of the flattening abyss that mainstream culture simply calls 'AIDS deaths'" (17-8). This multiplicity is one of the hallmarks of Sedgwick's work, and with it, there is an urgent importance placed on identification. "It's as though there were transformative political work to be done just by being able to be identified with," writes Sedgwick, in "White Glasses," and Fawaz comments: "'Being able to be identified with' functions for Sedgwick as a potentially political transformative and highly ethical affective orientation to others. It is a description of the very condition for friendship, which requires a bond of trust developed through mutual vulnerability and provides one highly potent basis, for long-term associations across difference...She wanted...to make all identities as such *available for identification*" (*Tendencies*, 261; Fawaz 19). We can see this, too, in her reference, in "Paranoid Reading," to the "New Critical skill of imaginative close reading" which she aligns with weak theory, nonce taxonomy, and repartition ("Paranoid Reading," 145).

This is one version of queer use. It's important to note, however, that when Sedgwick wrote "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," it appeared in *Novel Gazing,* a book that is clearly subtitled "Readings in Fiction." When we approach a novel, for example, we recognize a few generic characteristics: we will find a story that involves either fictional people and places, or people and places that may resemble but also diverge from our world. Poetry,

however, is different, with a complex history of reading practices and politics that shape how we read it. While reparative reading is often seen as against method, I argue that some of the reading practices it uses, because they have become so ingrained as invisible norms, go unchecked, and then have unintended and unrecognized results. As Heather Love writes, in "How the Other Half Thinks," in the edited collection, *Imagining Queer Method*: "to see one's practices as beyond method and utterly undisciplined is a failure to recon with queer scholar's position in the university; it fails to recognize the violence of *all* scholarly research—even its most insurgent and intimate forms" ("How the Other Half," 30). In her subsequent book *Underdogs*, explaining that even if we don't set out to exploit queer communities in the way some studies have been critiqued for doing, "the conditions of inequality—epistemological and social—that frame research on homosexuality still apply, even when we study our 'own' communities" since, speaking of our place in academia, in universities, "if we are *in,* we are also *of*." She cautions: "this situation may be mitigated but not overcome through extreme self-reflexivity; to deny its reality is to perpetuate a different form of violence" (*Underdogs,* 156) Another way of putting it: recalling Ahmed's parable of the willful child, "you might feel like an arm but act like a rod" (*Willful Subjects* 167).

I can see how Muñoz reads this poem and sees a glimpse of a future, of a queer horizon where sociality and queer love can flourish. We can read the act of having a coke, the secrecy of the lovers smiles as what Muñoz calls a gesture, which "transmit[s] ephemeral knowledge of lost queer histories and possibilities within phobic majoritarian public culture" (67). Using

Elizabeth Bishop's poem "One Art," with its command "(*Write* it!)," Muñoz explains the line as "the command to save the ephemeral thing by committing it to memory, to word, to language" and says that doing so transforms the experience into "residue, as ephemera" and in doing so it "partially (re)lives in its documentation" (71). But he writes, "we cannot simply conserve a person or a performance through documentation, we can perhaps begin to summon up, through the auspices of memory, the acts and gestures that meant so much to us" (71-2). As he reads O'Hara, we can read "Having a Coke with You" as this gesture saved by writing in memory. My aim here, though, is not to disagree but to complicate, because this reading helps to explicate an important dynamic: recalling my discussion of Traub in previous chapters, "when we approach earlier texts as objects of our desire...what happens to the lives of past historical agents under the influence of its gravitational pull?" And, when "we think primarily *in relation to ourselves* [it] risks subordinating [those earlier texts] under the planetary influence of our own identifications and desires" (135). In reading reparative, we might feel like an arm, but if we don't acknowledge where our reading practices come from, or what our reading practices do, we may act like a rod.

When we see "Having a Coke with You" as queerly utopian, as a gesture captured and relived in our memory, we begin to miss what I believe makes it such an important poem: it's present-ness and the way it presents a resilient and defiant queer love by historical persons who had agency in their lives. If we think about the poem as being about a future, we lose sight of lines like:

> it is hard to believe that when I'm with you that there can be anything as still
> as solemn as unpleasantly definitive as statuary when right in from of it
> in the warm New York 4 o'clock light we are drifting back and forth
> between each other (*CP* 360)

O'Hara isn't writing about or for a better future: he's documenting and celebrating the love he feels in his present. We can feel utopian energy—I get a tremendous swell of feeling from this poem—but it is important to understand those desires and feelings as our own. If we see O'Hara as a queer person writing for a future because his present its a "prison house," we diminish his autonomy and capacity for joy in his present. If we do, isn't that just another form of ground-clearing, whether or not we intend it as so?

I'm not trying to argue against Muñoz or against reparative reading, but rather to offer up a way that Personism can complicate queer approaches to poetry—to show that the reading practices and critical norms O'Hara pushed against have been wildly normatizing but also wildly successful and in some ways remain unchecked in queer studies. Muñoz echoes Sedgwick in writing that "queerness is rarely complemented by evidence, or at least by traditional understandings of the term" and "to accept loss is to accept the way in which one's queerness will always render one lost to a world of heterosexual imperatives, codes, and laws. To accept loss is to accept queerness…To accept the way in which one is lost is to be also found and not found in a particularly queer fashion" (65, 71). But I can't help but question what happens when this comes in contact with O'Hara's Personism. As I said before, Personism in some ways was perhaps always destined to fail against the logic of lyric reading, but he did it

anyway. He knew intention and the New Critical ethos led to certain reading practices and abstracting modes of understanding, but the reception wasn't the point. I see this as an act of poetic defiance, like one of the last lines in "Meditations in An Emergency" when he writes, "you don't want me to go where you go, so I go where you don't want me to" (198).

Reading through the lens of Personism and understanding the project that O'Hara sketched out is not to foreclose the possibility of reparative reading or of seeing utopianism—after all, the reception is not the point, for him—but it reminds us that those desires remain ours and about our moment and experience. I argue, though, that as queer readers, we have a responsibility and an ethical duty, too, to see his act of queer defiance in the past and hold space for it. By recognizing this relative autonomy, we are able to restore a contingency needed in the act of defiance—to defy is to defy something. I believe doing so, on our part, is another way of repair and another way of loving a text or figure in the past. Muñoz writes, "for queers, the gesture and its aftermath, the ephemeral trace, matter more than many traditional modes of evidencing lives and politics" thus creating "vast storehouse of queer history and futurity" (81). We must not only acknowledge O'Hara's documentation, but we must also acknowledge *how* he documented it. We can see "having a coke" as a gesture, documented into residue and stored for a future. But by attuning ourselves to the present-ness of the text, by putting the poem back between two persons, Lucky Pierre style, we can see something more than our reading practices would normally allow. Instead of an object left for us, we can see a poem that

stands against the reading practices that would erase it. Rather than accepting loss in a "world of heterosexual imperatives, codes, and laws," I argue O'Hara pushes back in defiance.

Accepting loss may be one way to be queer, but *not* accepting loss—and not in a pragmatic way that would assimilate—is too. We can never fully set aside our desires, but we can ask what happens when we read in a way that is not about us. What happens when we put the poem back between two persons, Lucky Pierre style?

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O'Hara's greatest love poems were written about and to Vincent Warren, a relationship that many have portrayed as somewhat one-sided and doomed. O'Hara met Vincent Warren in the summer of 1959, and within the first few pages of chapter on their love, in Brad Gooch's biography, *City Poet,* he sets us up with what to expect from the romance, pointing out that "Vincent Warren was not exactly O'Hara's type...[he] did not fit within the genre of straight male painters whom O'Hara had been addicted" and he continues, signaling tragedy: "Its fatal flaw was that O'Hara was thirty-three and Warren was twenty and unable to respond fully to O'Hara's overtures" (331). He then quotes Warren in saying:

> "The whole tragedy about Frank and me, and it's obvious in the poems, is that he loved me and I didn't know how to love at that age," says Warren. "It scared me how to he loved me. He gave the poems to me and I could never know what to say. They were obviously very beautiful. Even then you could see how beautiful they were to read. But it scared me because I knew I didn't love him as much as that." (331)

Their relationship is framed as a tragedy in which O'Hara loved and Vincent didn't—which has worked its way into many accounts and articles, drawing upon sexual indiscretions that lead to a sexually transmitted infection, and O'Hara's frustration with Vincent's constant absence due to his dance career. This is similarly shaped by *Love Poems (Tentative Title),* the slim volume that collected and published (in a small run) many of the Vincent Warren poems for the Tibor de Nagy Gallery. As Joe LeSueur explains, John Bernard Myers who edited the collection and encouraged its publication took a folder of O'Hara's poems and it was him who decided which poems went in arranging them "in an order showing, in John's words, 'the beginning of a new love, its middle period of floundering, the collapse of the affair with its attendant sadness and regret'" (230).

However, there is much lost when this romance is distilled into such mythology with such a tidy plot. As LeSueur continues, *Love Poems (Tentative Title)* was "an artificial arrangement that had nothing to do with the order in which the poems were written" noting that the publication and arrangement by John Bernard Myers was allowed because "Frank was indifferent to the fate of his poem, about what happened to them once they were written" (230). And, though Warren is mostly cast as unloving and disinterested, that story is only partial too. Vincent Warren's copy of "Poem (Light clarity avocado salad)" which O'Hara had sent to him, was addressed in O'Hara's writing: "Dear Vincent - here's one you've seen but I thought you might like it for your 'book.' Love, Frank." Though the story we get, admittedly from Warren himself, is that he didn't know how to handle the poems or their intensity, we

can see that they still meant a great deal to him, keeping his own little book of love poems. On a photocopy sent to Donald Allen, in an unpublished statement, Warren wrote that he had lost his copy of "Poem V (F) W" explaining the worries he had about his family learning of his sexuality—but he goes further than that, giving us more insight into their relationship. He writes: "I was afraid that my mother would find out that I was homosexual. That's the reason that when John published *Love Poems (Tentative Title)* that Frank dedicated it 'to you' instead of using my name." This is where the story usually stops—focusing on Warren's discomfort. However, he continues, talking about a later changing his mind, "we had talked about that and I told Frank that if the poems were published again he should use my name whenever he used it originally and that he didn't have to substitute 'you' to save my feelings—all of my feelings were his anyway—and he could do what he wanted with them and I would have been happy because he <u>had</u> done something with them—probably the greatest thing that will ever happen to me is Frank." To me, it is so vitally important to include because it can remind us that these poems are love poems that connect two persons—each with flaws, anxieties, and prohibitions, but also with complexity and love. Rather than one more example of tragic queers, we can see a love that, while it no doubt had its difficult and constraints, was persistent. Moreover, the tragic love story we are given, doesn't quite end how it is implied to: as Warren explains, "In the spring of 1966 Frank and I came together again…We had one beautiful weekend at Patsy Southgate's on Long Island in June." He explains that he was going to end his work in

Montreal and return to New York, and O'Hara was planning to come for his last performance in August. However, before they could do so, in July, O'Hara died.

What happens when we restore these love poems as between two people who *did* love? To consider this, I want to turn to a passage from Thomas Meyer, in his insightful 1978 review of *Early Writing* and *Poems Retrieved* (that spends just as much time on all the other works), titled "Glistening Torsos, Sandwiches, and Coca-Cola." In it, he writes, that "until we are convinced by encountering not a single but several successful instances of anything new, contrary, and unfamiliar," the works can seem to just contain material that is "adolescent, their exuberance and excitement made embarrassing by what appears a lack of emotional maturity. Too many 'Oh's' and 'Ah's,' 'Gee's' and 'Whee's,' and more than a fair share of exclamation points" (86). But he notes that upon further thought and assessment, seeing what is actually there and not just what we are used to or expect, what we can actually find is that: "O'Hara was far more interested in dealing with emotional honesty than with emotions per se. The qualities of emotion he wrote about, and from, are the hardest to admit: breathlessness, excitement, anticipation, and expectation" (86). He continues, providing examples:

> To be open and honest about them is almost a form of intimacy; these feelings usually find expression within the privacy of adult relationships, the pet names and shared pidgins. I don't mean we automatically cringe whenever we see someone unable to contain his coltishness, just even in our New American Poetry, this isn't what we expect in a poem. Poems can be about anything, well almost anything; a phrase like "It's heaven!" Still raises an eyebrow or two, making one question, if not the sincerity, then the intention. Though "*It's heaven!"* Occurs twice in O'Hara's "At the Old Place," and as camp and silly as that poem is, not one note of cynicism creeps in.

> Dancing the Lindy with Button, or being wrapped in Ashe's arms that night at the gay bar was heaven, absolute heaven. (86-7)

Keeping this description in mind, I want to introduce a term coined from Lacanian psychoanalysis: *extimité,* or extimacy. It is a shorthand neologism that draws attention to the complexities and problems with thinking about the interior and exterior as separate. Laconian scholar Jacques-Alain Miller, explains that "'extimacy' is a term used by Lacan to designate the problematic manner of the real in the symbolic" because "the exterior is present in the interior" (75-6). Extimacy is not simply the opposite of intimacy—but is in fact an integral component that points to the way that what we think is deepest and most interior is related to the exterior. Miller says, "the extimacy of the subject is the Other" and continues to quote Lacan in saying, "'this other [which extimacy refers to] to whom I am more attached than to myself, since, at the heart of my assent to my identity to myself, it is he who stirs me" (76-7).

To come at it another way: if we think of intimacy as the most interior, and intimacy of others as the dream of crossing the boundary of self and other, then extimacy is what makes that dream impossible. That is, extimacy is the recognition of the role the other plays in that which we find most intimate, such as realizing that a person we love dearly, a love that we see as integral to our being, depends upon another person, an Other, who we can never fully know or control. In her introduction to *Intimacy,* an edited collection based on a special edition of *Critical Inquiry,* Lauren Berlant describes intimacy through an example: "'I didn't think it would turn out this way' is the secret epitaph of intimacy. To intimate is to communicate with

the sparest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has a quality of eloquence and brevity. But intimacy involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out a particular way" (1). To me, what Berlant is describing here is beyond intimacy—the quality that leads to this secret epitaph is not intimacy itself, but the role that the external, the Other plays in it. Extimacy reminds of this role, this other. Extimacy is what makes us vulnerable in vulnerability—the understanding that we need Other, that we are shaped by them.

In queer theory, Tavia Nyong'o deploys the term in "Brown Punk," quoting Kalup Linzy's song "Dirty Trade," which describes a "'grudge fuck,'" saying "the world made him mad / that's why I stay glad / I need it when I feel sad." Nyong'o is pointing to a felt quality here, in what he refers to as a masochistic relationship, in which the anger of the grudge fuck produces a feeling and a connection. Though not the romantic connection we might associate with love, the trade's anger, distilled from the world and directed at Linzy stirs a feeling not in its existence but in its directedness—extimacy, we could say, is the feeling of recognizing directedness. As Nyong'o writes, "the perpetual folding of outsides into insides and insides into outsides, produces a sexual ecstasy not through the dissolution of self and other, public and private but through their continuous exchange" (81). If intimacy is the dream or feeling of dissolving self and other, public and private, then extimacy is the feeling that comes when we sense or touch those boundaries. Often, this can be uncomfortable, anxiety producing, and distressing—but there is a quality to extimacy that is linked so closely with queerness. As

Nyong'o continues, he talks about how waiting is central in Linzy's work and describes waiting as queer. "So, what's queer about waiting?" He asks, "There is certainly something familiar about it to queers whether it is waiting for sex, love, reciprocity, freedom, justice or any of the goods without which ordinary existence feels that much more precarious" (82). For queers, who are already left out of institutions, who already experience boundaries where those who inhabit the world more normatively might feel more at home, this recognition of contingency and separation is a fact of life.

I bring this term in because what Meyer is describing, what he calls emotional honesty and associates with "breathlessness, excitement, anticipation, and expectation," I would call extimate emotions: they all have a quality of contingency on others. Take, for example, anticipation—by definition it is a feeling that comes from waiting interaction with someone or something. Excitement has a quality of exteriority, an exterior or future thing. It's easy to see where these feelings could lead Muñoz to feelings of utopianism, as they are present in them, but whereas Muñoz is interested in the future part of that utopian or optimistic feeling, I want us to focus on the experience of it in its present—that is, shifting away from what could be or what will and instead to the experience of anticipating. Part of what makes this so palpable in O'Hara's poems, and part of what sets his documentation of these emotions apart from others is that through Personism, by putting the poems between people, these emotions become not just scripts that a fictive character speaks, or that we put on as masks, but feelings of real, vulnerable historical agents. Yes, we may know how the story ends and how time comes to

pass—we know the fate of O'Hara and Warren in *our moment,* which may be the moment of reading—but in *the moment of the poem*, this was still unknown. To recognize this is to recognize the "relative autonomy," to quote Traub, of past historical agents. It is that relative autonomy, I argue, that makes these feelings so moving and also such a vital part of queer history. Rather than just lamenting absences, recovering tragic figures, or seeing stories told, O'Hara documented the felt experience of queer love in the midcentury.

We can see this in O'Hara's Poem "Present," a poem from January of 1960, during the most intense time of his relationship Vincent Warren, though it wasn't published in *Love Poems (Tentative Title)* since it appeared in *The Nation*:

> The stranded gulch
> below Grand Central
> the gentle purr of cab tires in snow
> and hidden stars
> tears on the windshield
> torn inexorably away in whining motion
> and the dark thoughts which surround neon
> in Union Square I see you for a moment
> red green yellow searchlights cutting through
> falling flakes, head bent to the wind
> wet and frowning, melancholy, trying
> I know perfectly well where you walk to
> and that we'll meet in even greater darkness
> later and will be warm
> so our cross
> of paths will not be just muddy footprints
> in the morning
> not like celestial bodies'
> yearly passes, nothing pushes us away
> from each other
> even now I can lean

forward across the square and see
your surprised grey look become greener
as I wipe the city's moisture from
your face
                and you shake the snow
off onto my shoulder, light as a breath
where the quarrels and vices of
estranged companions weighed so bitterly
and accidentally
                before, I saw you on
the floor of my life walking slowly
that time in summer rain stranger and
nearer
                to become a way of feeling
that is not painful casual or diffuse
and seems to explore some peculiar insight
of the heavens for its favorite bodies
in the mixed-up air

This poem is dripping with extimacy, through emotions like anticipation, dreaminess, and the very way that O'Hara is affected. Though we start in a somber place, in the rain with the drops on the windshield falling like "tears," he sees Warren from a distance, a casual glimpse of his face in a crowd. This sparks a state of reverie in which he recognizes all of the possibility in the moment—the many futures that it could contain: he knows that distant now, they will meet later, but also that he could run across the square and surprise his love, wiping rain from his face. The poem also acknowledges a past, speaking of a "before" Warren entered his life, drawing up the echoes of quarreling ex-lovers that weighed, like snow, heavy on his shoulder, only to be brushed off by Warren.

However, this poem, though it thinks about possibility in the future and the weight of the past, is about a present, as the title tells us. This is important, because if we look at this poem from our position in the future, and read it within the story of a relationship, we do know that the lovers will eventually meet and this relationship will continue on—but that misses the point. The point is that, as a poem about and between two persons, what makes this poem so beautiful is the fragility that comes with this level of emotional honesty. Instead of actually moving time forward in the poem and taking us to their later meeting, this poem stops in a moment of fluctuating possibility. By not showing a future, and by not reading one into it, the charge of this poem is excitement and anticipation—excitement that propels him to consider just running forward and meeting his lover, though he chooses not to. We could say that all emotions come from affects or being affected, but the differentiation that I'm trying to make here, in calling these extimate emotions, is that in a normal scene of joy or hurt or sadness, we are stirred by someone or something, and that feeling occurs—we might say that, temporally speaking, the emotion comes from and after the affect, and the effect is part of the feeling, but we could also say that the feeling is more than that affect—it is what it stirs in us, the emotion lives beyond that moment. With these extimate emotions, like excitement and anticipation, I see them as not transcending the affect, but being wholly about it—they are frozen in relation to the other, which gives them an anxiety and uncertainty—not necessarily in a bad way—that comes from recognizing the importance of the other to ourselves. Describing the lovers as "celestial bodies," emphasizes this separation—recognizing that their

paths and the footprints left behind *could* mean nothing, and that is where the beauty comes from. The scenario is a feeling that "is not painful casual or diffuse" despite the uncertainty.

It might be useful to think of this poem in the context of Sara Ahmed's work on happiness. Noting that the root of happiness, "hap," implies a sense of possibility—to be happy is to have good "hap," or to have good fortune, Ahmed notes throughout her book that happiness is often seen as an end state or something achieved that wards off unwanted emotions or events. However, in seeing happiness in this way, to "turn happiness into an expectation, is thus to annul its sense of possibility." Instead, "happiness might not simply provide a sense of possibility; it is a sense of possibility" (*Promise,* 220). This is what makes this poem's happiness feel so important and visceral: instead of a scripted plot, a narrative as if from a play, between two fictive characters, we are talking about two persons for which any number of events or separations could occur and prevent a future. You don't know what their experience of each other is—in fact, you have no understanding of Warren's—but you know it was felt and felt deeply. It is not your life, though you can know it. This is not a poem, like "How Do I Love Thee?" which stabilizes love into something that is a permanent state, existing after death. The poem presents emotional honesty—the recognition that O'Hara *cares* and *wants* the future, but by staying in the present, by not promising one, we can get a glimpse of what it feels like to want, to feel the contingency of an Other.

"Having a Coke with You" does similar things with temporality: it is about a present—having a coke with Warren, telling him about the trip to Europe O'Hara had just returned

from. Though Europe certainly was fun and full of wonderful experiences, the charge of this poem is excitement--the joyful experience here is not telling Warren *about Europe,* it's *telling* him. The lines, longer than many O'Hara poems, especially those beginning with "partly" help contribute to this excitement by forcing breath, adding a breathless quality to the excitement, mirroring the experience of wanting to tell someone something you've been waiting for. If we think back to Personism, this poem is an example of capturing love's "life-giving vulgarity" and not "being distracted" into feeling about the person—we do get the line "partly because of my love for you" but it is just as quickly turned, in the same line saying, "partly because of your love for yoghurt" (*CP* 360). While describing the scene, he moves into the section that I quoted above, referencing the "secrecy of our smiles" which many critics have noted, pointing to what Muñoz calls "a vast lifeworld of queer relationally" (6). He gestures toward a future, commenting about *Polish Rider* in the Frick, saying "thank heavens you haven't gone yet so we can go together the first time" (*CP* 360). He then winds down, ending the poem with the lines:

> and what good does all the research of the Impressionists do them
> when they never got the right person to stand near the tree when the sun sank
> or for that matter Marino Marini when he didn't pick the rider as carefully
> as the horse
> it seems they were all cheated of some marvelous experience
> which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I'm telling you about it (*CP* 360)

While I agree with Muñoz that we can feel "something that is not quite here" and a "forward-dawning futurity," my point is that we have to recognize those are our feelings stirred by the work. In this poem, the past (the trip to Europe), the future (going to the Frick), and the poem

itself (the art object) are all secondary, and we might even say unimportant. The important act, which will not "go wasted," is "telling you about it," the present.

Perhaps it is because of the opacity of that present that we don't have access to that can stir those feelings of the "not quite here," but I don't see this as a present that is a "prison house." Though I know my argument may seem pedantic in the scope of his work, I find it important to do so because so few folks have really attended to O'Hara in queer theory that this instance is so important. Muñoz acknowledges the poem's present-ness, but moves us away from it, saying "though the poem is clearly about a present, it is a present that is now squarely in the past and in its queer relationally promises a future" (6). One of the points I have been working to make, here, is that the poem *doesn't* promise a future. Similarly, it doesn't reject a future a la Lee Edelman. The poem instead is about the present-ness of a moment of possibility—the breathless excitement of telling a lover all about his journeys, recognizing that the only thing that he *knows* he has is the now, the sharing, which will not go wasted on him. This doesn't preclude a future—the possibility is what allows us to see a future, in that I agree with Muñoz, but it is the very fact that the future *isn't* promised that makes the act of telling so important. This is a lesson O'Hara learned when Bunny Lang died, having not made up after a falling out before her death, regretting it for the rest of his life. We could also, perhaps think of this as the way that he came to deal with the worry that, as he writes in "Letter to Bunny," "when anyone reads this but you it begins / to be lost. My voice sucked into a thousand / ears and I don't know if I'm weakened" (*CP* 23). Instead of focusing

on reception, he focuses on the moment—instead of wondering about the thousand ears, the anyone but you, he focuses on the you. This is Personism, not a naive ignorance of the publicness of poems, but a defiance in making them about that publicness. In that way, these poems act, as O'Hara wrote on the copy he sent to Warren: "This is sort of like a letter, isn't it?"

We can see this too, in "Poem ('a la reserche d'Gertrude Stein')," one of his most direct love poems, which *appears* to drift into "feeling about the person." It begins "When I am feeling depressed and anxious sullen / all you have to do is take your clothes off / and all is wiped away revealing life's tenderness." The poem goes into the feelings that "life is strong" enough to "defeat all its enemies" when they are together, noting the beauty of Warren's body, "the faint line of hair dividing your torso" which "give my mind rest and emotions their release." It ends, after this release, "into the infinite air where since once we are / we always will be in this life come what may" (*CP* 349). The reason I say this "appears" to drift into that "feeling about the person," the kind of transcendence I argue he is working against, is because while it does that, the inscription on Warren's draft, to me, changes that. O'Hara writes, "this comes from Gertrude saying a thing continues to exist in the time of its happening even though other things happen before or later—? Oh well, love, Frank."

Thinking about this brings new meaning to the last lines, in which he doesn't say they will always be in love, or that their love will transcend life—but "since *once* we are" then "we always will be in *this* life" (emphasis mine). The thing, the love, can exist in a time of its

happening, in the poem, despite its temporality. In this way the poem acts as a space safe from the world—a space of preservation. If we clear the ground, strip these poems of their persons, then they become hollow, museum-like preservations. Perhaps this is why, in "Poem (Some days I feel)," O'Hara writes that "some days I feel that I exude a find dust," noting that "it's because and excavations has / reached the inner chamber of my heart / and rustled the paper bearing your name." He ends, "I don't like that stranger sneezing over our love" (*CP* 366).

Not only are these extimate feelings very *queer,* as Nyong'o points out in relation to waiting, but the contingency which they register and the push-pull we see with the desire for publicness and yet still the necessity for discretion records lived queer experience in the midcentury. In the poem, "Homosexuality," written in 1954 but not published until 1970, we can see the defiant energy affirmation. Donald Allen notes that one of the drafts of this poem references James Ensor's painting "Self-Portrait with Masks" as an inspiration. He beings, writing "So we are taking off our masks, are we, and keeping / our mouths shut? As if we'd been pierced by a glance!" Like the side-eyeing, unmasked painter in the middle of the portrait, glaring, this poem begins with defiance. "The song of an old cow is not more full of judgment / than the vapors which escape one's soul when one is sick," he continues (*CP* 181). We can almost imagine the poet having a coke with a lover while the "old cow" glares and comments, only to receive this sharply turned glare, as he writes:

> so I pull the shadows around me like a puff
> and crinkle my eyes as if at the most exquisite moment

of a very long opera, and then we are off!
without reproach and without hope that our delicate feet

will touch the earth again, let alone "very soon.'
It is the law of my own voice I shall investigate. (*CP* 182).

Of course, this poem goes on to celebrate queer life, referencing cruising and queer night life in a way that is unlike other most poems we had seen before this—two years before "Howl" and fifteen before Stonewall. This poem is not Personistic, in that it is not addressed to another person, but it does display the defiance that was the root of Personism. That is, he refuses to let others' judgement stop the celebration of queerness, instead choosing to "investigate" the "law of my own voice," affirming his identity and the experience of queerness.

As noted earlier, Vincent Warren's family did not know of his sexuality, so there was tension in the degree of publicness that their relationship could have. Joe LeSueur wrote about this in the section on "The Vincent Poems," in *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O'Hara.* LeSueur tells of Warren's worries that his mother would come across the poems, and says "while Frank wouldn't have been judgmental, he would surely have rolled his eyes in consternation" over the fear (226). As LeSueur notes, O'Hara's relationship with his own mother was volatile. LeSueur says, "he treated his mother evenhandedly," noting her alcoholism which he says, "endangered the welfare of [Frank's] younger sister" and "eschewed the sentimentality that attaches itself to the concept of motherhood, perhaps to the point of being unreasonably hard on the poor woman" (227). For a dinner celebrating the marriage of

his sister, O'Hara insisted that LeSueur, his roommate, accompany him, which LeSueur is "convinced" was an "instinctively...an opportunity to remind people, in this instance his family and Maureen's new in-laws, that he was gay and he didn't want anyone to forget it...it was the sort of thing Frank was always doing, and I'm sure it was a conscious part of his modus vivendi, of the way he lived his life as a homosexual" (227). LeSueur then explains that O'Hara was against what he terms "the gay ghetto principle," that straights were to be excluded form queer spaces, often finding himself in spaces with many straight people, and yet it was important "to hammer home to straight people the clear, unmistakable message that he was an uncontrite, arrogant queer who was not about to sing *miserere* or fall on his knees for anyone" much less his mother (227).

Eventually, though not in time it would seem, Warren's worry would subside, as we can see in his letter to Donald Allen cited earlier. But throughout their relationship, the poems written to and about Warren toyed with this publicness, defiantly pushing right up to the edge of what was acceptable in their relationship, and perhaps publicly. The first poem "inspired" by Warren, according to LeSueur's account, is "You are Gorgeous and I'm Coming," an acrostic poem published in Donald Allen's 1960 anthology, *New America Poetry.* The first letters of each line spell out Vincent Warren, in a brazenly public display, though the poem simultaneously shows caution in its skill to *not* be seen as an acrostic—without knowing it is such, few readers, if any, would see the name spelled out without being told to look for it; after all, who would expect a poet like O'Hara to work with a form like the acrostic? Similarly,

O'Hara used Vincent Warren's initials in the poem "Poem V (F) W," and referred to him throughout many poems as "St. Paul," using his middle name, or phrases such as the line about "I have just jumped out of a bed full of V-days," in "Steps," or referring to events, such as "Flag Day," which was Warren's birthday. Or, often, these poems would be addressed to a "you," of which O'Hara wrote, on the copy of "To You" which he gave to Warren, "Vincent, The you is you, as you may know, Love F" (O'Hara, "To You").

Throughout the poems, there is a bravery and an unabashed affirmation of his life as a gay man that shows a model of what it is like to live without constant fear. It's undeniable that as a white man and professional in the art world, O'Hara embodied a great deal more privilege than some other queer people, and this certainly allowed for some of these feelings of safety. But this affirmation was still undeniably dangerous at the turn of 1960, still feeling the threat of government "oversight" which sought to expose queer individuals in government agencies, and with all gay bars in New York being closed in the winter of 1959 through the next year due to anti-gay laws. What we see in the poems is a documentation of queer love that though shaped by mid-century homophobia, is not *about* that homophobia or feelings of despair, but love.

We see "love's life-giving vulgarity" and the joy that can come with the extimacy of loving and feeling loved often, like the end of the poem "Steps," which finishes:

> 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)

Or, when newly in love with Vincent, in "Personal Poem" he writes "I wonder if one person out of the 8,000,000 is / thinking of me," deciding "back to work happy at the thought possibly so." Or, in "Song," where he repeats the refrain "I was thinking of you," after describing his journey walking the street, seeing his lover's face in places where it wasn't. And yet, these extimate emotions are not all happy—there is a great deal of anxiety associated which can be pleasurable, but we can also see O'Hara register a darker side. In the poem "Ballad," which comes right after "Song," he begins:

Yes it is sickening that we come
that we go that we dissembling live
that we leave that there is anywhere in the world someone like us
it is that we are always like a that never that
why we it is me
why is it that I am always separated from the one I love it is because of
some final thing, that is what makes you a that, that I don't do
though everyone denies it that loves you
that makes you a that too (*CP* 368)

This poem isn't addressed specifically to someone but does have an experience of thinking about someone. The first lines express frustration with artifice and with the opacity of others who "dissembling" live. He questions the authenticity of interactions and emotions, but we can also read this poem's first line sexually, as is implied by the line breaking where it does, addressing frustration with the post-coital moment when a lover leaves once the dead is done, confusing him to what his actual feelings are. In this moment when the moment is over, he is

left feeling like a "that," an object in a past moment. It's ironic that the poet who declared that he was "needed by things," should be so frustrated at a lover who, too, is needed elsewhere. What we see here is that the extimacy of caring for an Other brings much joy when in close proximity, but when apart can cause discomfort.

He continues, thinking about things that recall "Letter to Bunny," and his contemplation about things lost, talking about a palm he potted and placed in the window, saying it was "disgusted" "by being transplanted, she feels that she's been outraged and she has / by well-wisher me, she well wishes that I leave her alone and my self alone" but he can't, noting that he still is "tampering" and can't help it. We might think of this in the way Sara Ahmed writes about care, in *The Promise of Happiness,* saying "there is nothing more vulnerable than caring for someone; it means not only giving your energy to that which is not you but also caring for that which is beyond or outside your control. Caring is anxious—to be full of care, to be careful, is to take care of those things by becoming anxious about their future, where the future is embodied in the fragility of an object whose presence matters" (186) This points to why our reading practices matter: for O'Hara to care through the poems and to document the experience of caring, we must read in "a defiant land," as he writes in "To the Poem," and let the people and objects in these poems be "real right thing[s]." What makes the caring is the fragility and the temporality—as he referenced with Stein's quote—the object or relation within its contingency, not in our future moment. As "Ballad ends," he talks about the night they share in the future, saying "nothing happened / and we both were simply that,"

closing "and we loved each other so / and it was unusual" (*CP* 368). In an endless time of events, love makes things unusual, even though nothing grand happens; we could say that these poems document nothing really—normal events in a life, the lovers simply a "that" in the past, and if we read the poems as vacant, ground cleared for us to put on a voice and situation to identify with, they are just "that." But that is what Personism asks us not to do: it asks us to keep the contingency in the poems.

Let's take, for example, another poem, "An Airplane Whistle." This poem, in the Vincent era, is short and largely forgettable:

> The rose, the lily, and the dove got withered
> in your sunlight or in the soot, maybe, of New York
> and ceased to be lovable as odd sounds are lovable
> say blowing on a little airplane's slot
> which is the color of the back of your knee
> a particular sound, fine, light and slightly hoarse (*CP* 361)

When read with no context, this poem may seem a bit melancholy, with the rose, lily, and dove, three very often symbolic items losing their meaning. This is how Brad Gooch, in his biography, reads it noting that this poem was "another response to the ominousness of the depression he was feeling" in light of learning he had "contracted a venereal disease." While this reading might be fair, its missing information that I find important. For example, as Donald Allen notes in *Collected Poems*, it at one time ended with the lines:

> which is why I love you
> but not roses, lilies, doves or love itself
> except in you
> your mind, your limbs, your hair, your love

This doesn't fit the tragic narrative that Gooch tells of O'Hara and Warren's tragic love affair, nor does it fit the tone of his biography which seems influenced by AIDS-era caution, casting O'Hara in a somewhat tragic light. We can see why O'Hara might delete these lines, as they do drift into "feeling about the person" and seem a bit too overt, but these lines did exist and can point toward the feeling of the poem, like a key, helping us to see something else. As Warren writes to Donald Allen, on his copy of this poem, "the airplane whistle was a Cracker Jack prize I gave him—he always carried little things in his pockets, remember "Personal Poem"?...I gave him the prize every Cracker Jack box I had. There must have been several—I wonder if he discarded each one as he received the new one, but I know he liked having them." These exemplary symbolic objects—the rose, lily, and dove—are rejected by O'Hara, shown to be meaningless—which is not surprising, given what I have written about paradox—eclipsed by an airplane whistle that reminds him of his love because of its gifting. While certainly roses can be given and come to be associated with love, O'Hara points out, in the deleted section, that those things don't matter except in their relationally—even love isn't affirmed *except* in its embodiment through Warren.

One of the consequences of Personism is that not only does the poem become about extimate feelings of being in relation to and contingent on others, if we read these poems in such a way, we recognize that these poems too *are not our life.* One of poetry's many uses, which we could say is its primary use, especially today, is as an object that the reader connects to and feels with. Take, for example, the prominence of projects like *Poetry Unbound,* a

podcast from On Being Studios which simply is a poet reading and explaining poems. Part of the promotion is posting single lines to social media, in a way that is so ubiquitous with poetry's role today: quotes on an Instagram post that make us feel or help us communicate a feeling we had by hoping that our sharing of the poem or line will hit another in the same way. Indeed, with social media's prominence, some critics have proclaimed, like Micah Mattix in *The Atlantic,* that O'Hara's poems were "21st century poetry written in 1964" calling them a "collection of broadcasts…like today's Twitter and Facebook feeds." To read in such a way is to completely miss the point. Mattix writes that "O'Hara expresses himself in the same way modern Americans do" and that he is working to "overcome the absurdity and loneliness of modern life by addressing an audience of anonymous others." *Lunch Poems* "like Facebook posts or tweets—shares saves and creates the poet's experience…he addresses others in order to combat a sense of loneliness," Mattix writes, before explaining "Personism" as "O'Hara writes that his poems are like telephone calls because they are addressed to someone else," but "the difference is that the address in the poem is indirect" (Mattix).

What Mattix gets wrong here is that these poems do not come from loneliness or a sense of ennui with the modern world's absurdity: there may be poems *about* loneliness or these feelings, but they aren't about overcoming anything. These poems—thinking along with O'Hara's art writing—we can see as coming from "populated caverns of the self," a life not only populated by the person living it but all he interacts with; loneliness is but just one of the feelings that O'Hara documents. But this misreading is prevalent—once O'Hara's book,

Meditations in an Emergency, was used in the television series *Mad Men,* the narrative about his poems began to solidify. The main character reads the poem "Mayakovsky," which is a poem about not feeling like oneself but then shaking out of the feeling and continuing on. Interestingly, one of the sections started out as a poem of its own, documenting the experience of helping a friend move, as I discussed in the previous chapter. Perhaps we can say that what helps him to feel like himself is interacting with others. In fact, of the 4 sections of the poem, of the many poems in the book, the character Don Draper, representative of hetero-masculinity in the 1960s reads just the last section, which cuts off all context. His exaggeratedly serious tone doesn't fit the poem, casting it as a solemn poem about disconnection, loneliness, and confusion faced by the troubles of the world.

Returning to Glavey, in "Having a Coke with You is Even More Fun than Ideology Critique" he writes that "it would seem a major testament to O'Hara's popularity," this "usefulness of his poems as a means of narrating various crises of heterosexual masculinity." He argues that "in this regard, it is worth noting that the love poet conjured in the Coke poem is not self-evidently—or rather, not exclusively—queer," noting that "the language remains nonspecific enough to allow multiple forms of identification," and "shares with many love poems the core paradox of relatability, the way that its second-person address conjures the luminous particularly of an individual lover and yet also seems to liquidate that particularly when it gives way to the identifications of its readers." He continues, that "its lyric abstraction mediates between the particular and the universal" which "threatens to render its queerness so

diffuse that it loses all meaning." For Glavey, this "is not to say O'Hara's popularity diminishes the power of his candor about his sexuality, but merely to suggest that this status potentially obscures the radical disruptive elements of his poetics in favor of a universalizing vision of love that is more easily appropriated for use in the normative and even heterosexual contexts" (1003).

It's perhaps needless to say, but I fervently disagree. What Glavey doesn't account for—even though he acknowledges O'Hara's positioning in relation to the New Critics—is the effect of reading practices. In reading the poem through a lens that would make it about the reader's identification, the specificity of the poem becomes meaningless enough that it recedes, leaving only the feeling that the reader can identify with—in this case, it may be true that the feeling of love is relatable. But that only can occur if we ignore O'Hara's project, if we insist upon applying New Critical reading practices and the logic of lyric reading without recognizing their histories or how they affect non-majoritarian individuals. If we find poetic abstraction and universality in the poem, it is because we are approaching it from a position that *would always find it there* because it *always already presumes it to be there.*

The poem offers plenty of specificity about the lover, and any degree of understanding its context aids in this specificity. But what is interesting is it seems that unless the poem is absolutely explicit in marking itself as a poem about queer love, perhaps needing to go so far as to have the "I" of the poem clearly state his gender, and clearly gender his lover, the poem is read as ambiguous and universal. But isn't this problematic? Thinking with Monique Wittig,

who points to the way women are marked as other and men are universal, isn't this saying that queer love must in some way "properly" marked to be legible? This is in part why I believe our recognition of this poetic history and the way it has shaped our reading practices is so important. Without knowing how heterosexism has shaped us—how heterosexism inherent in our reading practices has shaped us—we can't see how we might enact the same violence. Or, at best, we might miss the resilient queerness it obscures. Perhaps what is most queer about the poem is the way in which it doesn't hide queerness, but also refuses to give the type of evidence a straight reader might require. This is perhaps what makes these poems so deceptively difficult. Thinking with Muñoz, when he says that "queerness is rarely complemented by evidence," perhaps that is what is so difficult—O'Hara's documentation of his life and love creates evidence and insists upon affirming in the face of critical practices that would erase him. But, too, it refuses to document in a way that the straight world might like. Like LeSueur explaining O'Hara's desire to exist in spaces that were not only queer, but also to insist upon his queerness being legible in those spaces, the poems too show a similar defiance: they refuse a separatism we might see as, in ways, activist, but also the inclusion that we might consider of pragmatism. The poems resist acquisition and joinership. They create—or at least hope to—a "defiant land," where the person can be a "real right thing."

Straight readers will continue to find points of identification, and straight men may continue to be explained in literary texts using O'Hara's poems. Readers will continue to see the poems, which Helen Vendler likened to "the offhand remark, the fleeting notation of a

landscape, the Christmas or birthday verse, the impromptu souvenir of a party," like "Polaroid pictures, pulling them out of his camera and throwing them into a desk drawer sixty seconds later" to tweets and instagram posts. But I believe that as queer readers one of the ways we can show our love as readers is to listen to the text and to listen to the historical persons behind them. What the social media comparison belies is that a social media post is *about* publicness—the publicness is the purpose, not an effect. What Personism tells us is that these poems *are not* about publicness—they are about contingency between two people, though recognizing that publication brings in others. These others are external, the poem is not their life, and they are not part of the Lucky Pierre satisfaction of the poem, whereas with social media, they are central. These poems are not about us, though we can know them—and that is a gift. We can love them, identify with them, use them how we wish—but we must also remember that that use is not what the poem is about. The "work of love," we are reminded in Heather Love's discussion of Sedgwick, is to "dislocate one's habitual relation to cognition and forms of mastery" ("Truth," 236). In recognizing what O'Hara's work is not about, we can then begin to see what it is about. O'Hara's poems are about him, a historical person, a queer man living defiantly in mid-century New York—not you.

Conclusion: Reorientation

Shortly before three a.m. on July 24th, 1966, O'Hara was hit by a jeep cruising through the sand on Fire Island, as he waited with Joan Mitchell for the repair of their taxi's tire (Gooch). The next day he died at the age of 40. Eulogized by many, his friend Morton Feldman describes his memory as an "all-pervasive presence that seems to grow larger and larger as he moves away in time" (*Homage* 12). Though O'Hara had published three books and two chapbooks, as well as individual poems in periodicals, most of the poems had never been published. As John Ashbery remarks, many of his poems were "put away in drawers and cartons and [he] half forgot them," though he did keep copies of many, others "survived only in letters" or in copies sent to friends, while some poems "Franks friends remembered having seen had simply disappeared" (*CP* vii). In doing so, Allen edited *The Collected Poems,* which Ashbery remarks "that [the book] should turn out to be a volume of the present dimensions will surprise those who knew him and would have surprised Frank even more" (*CP* vii). After its publication, Allen edited more collections: *Early Writing,* which contains mostly college-era writing and his journal; *Standing Still and Walking in New York,* which contains prose; and *Poems Retrieved,* which contains poems found later or that Allen originally thought were not complete enough or desired to be published. Later, *Art Chronicles* would be published containing all his art writing, as weak as *Amorous Nightmares of Delay* which compiled selected plays. This is hardly exhaustive though, as many short stories, essays, and a partial draft of a novel called *Fourth of July.*

In looking at his work as a whole, friend Bill Berkson commented that "the reader is confronted by a language with its own laws of continuity, not necessarily this to which he has been accustomed" (*Homage* 164). Meanwhile, "I have known Frank O'Hara's work for about twenty years, and I had read a great many of the poems before. One reaction I had to [*The Collected Poems],* though, was astonishment," Kenneth Koch remarks, "All those 'moments,' all the momentary enthusiasms and despairs which I had been moved by when I first read them, when they were here altogether made something I had never imagined. It is not all one great poem, but something in some ways better: a collection of created moments that illuminate a whole life" (*Homage* 208). On October 29th, 1948, O'Hara wrote about his hopes for his works, in his journal, saying "simply to live doesn't justify existence, for life is mere gesture on the surface of the earth, and death a return to that from which we had never been wholly separated; but oh to leave a trace, no matter how faint, of that brief gesture! For someone, some day, may find it beautiful!" At this time, still in college and under the influence of New Criticism, O'Hara was likely talking about leaving a work that stood as a thing of its own, free of intention or aspects of his life. As his life went on, as I have traced, these ideas changed, and what he left is more than a faint trace, but a resilient personhood that we can find beauty in.

In part, we can find beauty in the figure that we find there—the life lived—but in part we can also find beauty in the resistance he created in the poems. As Sara Ahmed puts simply, in *What's the Use?* "perhaps instructions are only necessary because they can be refused...if use

instructions are made because they can be refused, use instructions are made even more forcefully when they are refused" (*Use* 203-4). In other words, "*deviation is made hard"* (*Use* 205, emphasis hers). In our day, many conventions of reading—the bracketing off of intention, the attribution of an "I" to a fictional, dramatic speaker, the assumption that the poem is public language, and its moment is the moment of *our* reading it—have become standard and often unquestioned—even unquestionable—as logic. But my goal has been to show that these ideas were argued and constructed, which points to a time in which the instructions were being formed and argued to be truths—which points to the fact that they weren't in fact truths. Over time the instructions became more forceful, more impossible to be refused as logic, which made deviation hard. As Ahmed reminds, "to leave a straight path is to encounter things that are in the way" (205). Within the logic of lyric reading, to desire recognition and publicness is to also give up your rights, to consent to the ground clearing that would make the poem available for use. O'Hara shows an act of disobedience, a word Ahmed defines as "willed refusal to obey an instruction." In this willfulness, the poems become "objects that refuse to provide containers," objects that are "not empty enough to be filled by human will" (Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* 200). What O'Hara does in insisting on the poem being between two persons, in rejecting negative capability and what he sees as poetic abstraction can be seen as "a refusal to exercise the terms that lead to one's own erasure, or to use Audra Simpson's powerful words, 'a refusal to disappear'" (Ahmed, *Use* 207).

Ahmed's term "queer use" is about using objects in ways other than they were intended. For example, she uses the image of a post box that is used as a bird's nest. Queer use is about refusing instructions and not necessarily taking the straight path. Much of reparative reading is about queer use of texts—Sedgwick's reading child, looking for information about herself, extracting meaning from texts to survive in a homophobic world is queer use. To look at a text, like a work by Henry James, and find queer desire is queer use. In the time of Sedgwick's writing and since, in the wake of the AIDS crisis and its tremendous wave of loss and death and in the way that this crisis shaped intimate actions--not just sex, but touch, embrace, stigmatized by a lack of understanding and willed ignorance—penetrability is radical. Bodies touching bodies, bodies reaching out across time, the penetrability of selves is radical. John Emil Vincent, in *Queer Lyrics,* points to this in his argument that queer reading, taking John Ashbery's poem "Or, in My Throat," a poem about writing poetry, requires such penetration, saying "only someone willing to image the speaker felting another man can read the title as an utterance about where a sex partner might ejaculate" (xix).

In using the story of the willful child, who's willfulness continued into death, her arms sticking up from the grave only to be beaten back by rods, Ahmed makes a useful metaphor for the ways in which the world acts as a rod pushing back on queerness. But Ahmed complicates this, reminding us that even if we "might feel like an arm" we can still "act like a rod" (*Willful Subjects* 167). She explains that at times in our activist work, we have to "lose confidence in ourselves, letting ourselves recognize how we too can be the problem," something "that is hard

if we have a lifetime of being a problem" (*Willful Subjects* 170). My point is that in some ways our readings—our queer readings which are often reparative, which are often radical and open tremendous possibility—can act as rods if we don't recognize the extent in which our desires, to think with Traub, exerts gravity on the text and shapes it. Queerness is nothing if not contingent, always tethered to norms and histories. The penetrability and identification that may be radical now can obscure that in a time where homosexuality was illegal and dangerous, where the instruction for survival was to hide and allow oneself to be erased, refusing to disappear was also radical and *dependent* upon resisting this penetrability. What we might think of as our queer use—which indeed is such when applied to most texts—can actually eliminate the opportunity for O'Hara's queer use of poems by clearing the ground he sought to occupy and using the poems that he puts out of order for penetrative reading. We might feel like arms, but we might act like rods. As I mentioned in my introduction, O'Hara is missing from a large number of studies, and those that study him tend to avoid engaging with sexuality in any substantive way. Instead, my goal has been to think with O'Hara about how his work can pose complications for even approaches that are decidedly queer.

In "Having a Coke with You is Even More Fun than Ideology Critique," Brian Glavey engages with many of the same moments and texts as I have in this project, and I agree with many of his assertions, such as his claim that "for O'Hara, the value of the art object is constituted by the social relationships that go into its creation" but he continues, "and sustain its reception" (1009). I don't disagree with this last part per se, as O'Hara was a lover of art, but

this statement is what I find problematic in this piece. While his piece does acknowledge that O'Hara's poems are about his relationships, he casts the way that we identify and talk about his poems as a parallel relationship—the poems become both about the relationship that produced them and our relationships to them, as he often hangs on O'Hara's use of "you," sees the poems as being ambiguous (which I would find to be overhead), and seeing "intersubjectivity" as a "queer relatability that reverberates through O'Hara's poems" (1009). I can see this intersubjectivity in the relationships, in the way the poem is between two persons, though I don't actually find that dynamic very interesting; but Glavey implicitly triangulates these poems still, saying "the soul is yourself in others," quoting O'Hara's quoting of Pasternak in his essay on *Doctor Zhivago* (1009). For Glavey's use of this quote in the end of his essay echoes his earlier use of it where he writes that O'Hara quotes it "approvingly," and that "art is important because it offers a relational space for intersubjectivity" (1005). However, it is important to note that after quoting this, in his *Zhivago* essay, O'Hara attributes it as being influenced by Mayakovsky, saying "'because poetry as I understand it flows through history and in collaboration with real life." But "Makaovsky made a fatal error," he writes, "he succumbed to a belief in self-created rhetoric of his own dynamic function in society. The society need him and benefited from this rhetoric...[but this] ended in suicide when their usefulness in this function came to an end" (504). "Poetry does not collaborate with society," he says, "but with life" (504). I point to this because, if we are to read O'Hara's own poetry in connection to this (which I'm skeptical to do so, he did draw clear lines of connection between

his poetry and painting, but those lines don't exist with Pasternak), he actually *doesn't* approve of the soul quote. Indeed, poetry has a social function in its collaboration with life, but he provides a tragic view of when it comes in contact with society or those outside that direct life—it ends in death, its usefulness fickle and prone to end when tied to society at large. Thinking of "Letter to Bunny," and "love's life-giving vulgarity," I would go so far as to say O'Hara's poems are unconcerned and even uninterested in the soul; they are document a person in life, in a present—not the transcendent image of one in others.

Terrell Scott Herring's essay, "Frank O'Hara's Open Closet," one of the few other works that considers sexuality in O'Hara's poems, sets out to "argue that O'Hara does not simply discard the New Critical creed of public poetry: instead, he completely revises it" to create the "personal poem as fantasmatic object" which "as a utopian fantasy...strives to connect private citizens through the medium of public print" (416). I agree with Herring that, "O'Hara reinterpreted the dominant literary codes of his day, effectively appropriating the mechanisms of mass media intent on silencing queer voices...to recast Wimsatt and Beardsley, what was external became embedded in his works as a linguistic fact" (425). However, he sees O'Hara's Personism as advocating for the poem as "a quasi-intimate object whose connecting of impersonal individuals parallels the operations of this mass public sphere" and "the poem, 'Lucky Pierre style,' obligingly provides a body for the disembodied poet and reader to identify with...one body, in short, is replaced by another" (419). He restates this later in, somewhat less problematical but also contradictorily, in saying "Personism confirms that individuals may be

open, but they are certainly not violated…[he] significantly retailed, rather than rejected, a postwar poetics of impersonality" (426). If, as Virginia Jackson plainly writes that "the twentieth century critical fiction of the lyric speaker…located the poem's conversation in a fictive space in which you and I can share intimacies and priorities without having to share personal information," what Herring is trying to say is that O'Hara complicates this by adding personal information but still remaining impersonal (293). What I am pointing out in both of these approaches is that despite their acknowledging some of the ways O'Hara asserts a personhood, both insist upon the poem still being a conversation where the "you" and "I" as poet and speaker are engaged. Quite literally, this is true: we are readers, we read the poems. O'Hara never denied this. But, for Personism to work, we have to reimagine the poetic scenario to be one that is not centered on our reading. What we do with the poems—how we relate to them, our connections—are secondary.

We can return to O'Hara's art writing, thinking about the description of abstract expressionist work, of abstraction in painting which he associated with his own writing in Personism, and that I have found generative to associate with his own poetry: "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" (6). O'Hara's work refuses to vacate the cavern and allow us to inhabit it, and in that way they are inhospitable, "uncomfortable." Through triangulation of address and in imagining a place for ourselves in the world of the poem is a

way that readers overcome the discomfort O'Hara asserts here. This is easy enough to do, if we read, as Jonathan Culler implores in his conclusion of *Theory of the Lyric,* in a way that holds true that "the duration of a reading is the lyric event, which one should keep in view, perhaps especially in academic study of poetry," or, if we believe as Susan Stewart, that the poet's work is "to make something where and when before there was nothing" (Culler 353, Stewart 2).

O'Hara Personism offers us a queer vision of poetry in the 20th century in providing a model for poetry that doesn't *work.* What I mean by this, is that if we think about Wimsatt and Beardsley's view of poetry as pudding or machine, demanding that it work as the quality it is judged by, and if working means poetry makes something from nothing, creating an experience for the reader, a moment that lasts in the duration of their reading, then Personism is about poetry that doesn't work. Like Sara Ahmed's example of the bathroom, which when in use and locked displays an "occupied" sign, this poetry, this cave, too, displays an "occupied" sign, making it out of use for us to inhabit (*Use* 30-1). To "get the most out of" poetry, we must follow the instructions (*Use* 48). When we encounter the occupied poem, we experience friction, "things rubbing up against each other" which is "the resistance the surface of an object when moving over another." The more we follow the instructions, and the more we see a dramatic, fictive speaker, a poem without intention, something coming from nothing, an object that exists for and in the duration of our reading, the more we travel on that path, "the flatter and smoother the surface becomes" (Ahmed, *Use* 49). "When anyone reads this but you it begins / to be lost. My voice sucked into a thousand / ears and I don't know whether I

am weakened" (*CP* 23). That smooth surface allows for strange events, like *Mad Men's* Don Draper, figure of all things midcentury hetero-masculinity to read O'Hara's poem in the show, to use it as a means to communicate himself.

Instead of following the instructions when faced with this friction, and instead of smoothing over the edges or clearing the ground so that we can be comfortable in the poem, we can recognize that it is not our life, that is populated and occupied. This may be uncomfortable, because to recognize it as another's is to recognize opacity and the impasse that exists from the "irreducible, intransigent quality of any given other's experience, including experiences lodged in the past" (136). As much as I have used archival information and biographical information to recover some contexts and facts about poems, it is also important to recognize the many times in which we can't do such. The times and dates inside the poems are past; some of the proper names that are included are known, but others not, and perhaps untraceable. The discomfort of the poem is our discomfort in recognizing that though we may know information exists—the words in the poem came from somewhere and mean something—sometimes we will never know that information and that can be experienced as a loss. Sometimes our reading practices deny that opacity by insisting the poem is about our moment of reading, which places the reader as arbiter of meaning. But what if instead, we took up what Ahmed calls "a willful politics" which "might involve a refusal to cover over what is missing, a refusal to aspire to be whole" (*Willful Subjects* 184). "Queer use can be offered as an ethics of finitude," Ahmed explains, "loving what does not and will not last" (*Use* 226). A

queer use of poems is one that might see them as not about our reading, one that views them as out of order, occupied, uninhabitable, uncomfortable. It sees them as not our life, though we can know them.

There are many ways to read O'Hara. My goal has not been to police reading, but to think with and through O'Hara, taking seriously the ways he queers ideas of poetry in his time, pointing to the implications those have for us as readers in our time. We so often take for granted that we know what reading is and looks like and assume we know what poems are and what they do. But as readers, especially as queer readers, I believe we have an ethical imperative to consider the power structures that shape those reading practices, as well as a duty to see the ways queer individuals in history pushed back. As Audre Lorde so famously wrote, "*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.* They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (112). If we fail to acknowledge where our reading practices come from, there's a lot we can miss.

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