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## 'What We Love, Not Are'

By [Edward Mendelson](#)

### *Selected Poems*

by Frank O'Hara, edited by Mark Ford  
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Frank O'Hara was the most sociable of poets, always happy to read aloud at parties, always praising friends or lovers or anyone else who got his attention, almost always portraying his inner life as if it existed only so that it could savor his outer one. O'Hara loved writers, artists, poems, paintings, bars, cafés, food, sex, film stars, buildings, and much else, and he seemed to toss them all into the mixed salads of his poetry with the same indifference to form and logic, the same domesticated surrealism, that characterized much of the American avant-garde of the period. Almost everyone who remembers O'Hara from his heady days in bohemian New York in the 1950s and 1960s remembers him as the liveliest guest at any party in Greenwich Village or the Hamptons where the artistic and literary avant-garde gathered to celebrate itself.

But O'Hara was trying to find something different from what most of the other party guests were looking for, something far more sober, lonely, and serious. The best of the hundreds of poems that he wrote from around the age of twenty-three, in 1949, until his death at forty, in 1966, after a Jeep accident on a Fire Island beach, were private conversations with individual readers, too quiet to be heard in a crowded room. O'Hara wrote a seriously joking prose piece, "Personism: A Manifesto," that pretended to treat his poetic manner as an exciting avant-garde movement "which will undoubtedly have lots of adherents." Thanks to this new movement, "the poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages." For a while, O'Hara also enjoyed writing showy, extravagant party pieces—long poems filled with miscellaneous names, places, and events—but his career began and ended with his shorter, deeper, more finely crafted lyrics, and the word "love" occurs more often in his shorter poems than in his longer ones.

Few who enjoyed O'Hara's presence in the avant-garde scene seem to have noticed that his jokes, gossip, and wild associative leaps tended to culminate in sermons about the ultimate value of one-to-one relations. "The only truth is face to face," he wrote in "Ode: Salute to the French Negro Poets," a poem partly about the prejudicial falsehoods that blur individual faces. The closing couplet reads:

*the only truth is face to face, the poem whose words become your mouth  
and dying in black and white we fight for what we love, not are*

For O'Hara a poem was truthful when it was personal, not in the self-regarding "confessional" style of Robert Lowell's poems, which O'Hara called "just plain bad," but in the way in which one person attends to another. What was worth fighting for was "what we love," not identity, essence, principles, blackness, whiteness, or anything else we might think we are.

O'Hara made his living as a curator at the Museum of Modern Art and as a reviewer for art magazines. The artworks he most admired were pictures of individual persons painted with the uniquely personal

brushstrokes of painters such as Willem de Kooning and Larry Rivers. He disliked the flat, impersonal, mechanical images silkscreened by Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. But he was too generous-minded to persist in his distaste for Warhol, and eventually wrote of one of his portraits that it was "not sarcastic," as he had expected, but "moving and beautiful."

## 1.

O'Hara rushed into print with reviews and essays about the painters he admired, but he resisted most opportunities to publish his poems. Aside from a few pamphlets printed by art galleries in tiny editions, he allowed only two collections to appear in his lifetime, *Meditations in an Emergency* (1957) and *Lunch Poems* (1964). Both had to be dragged out of him by their publishers; the second required six years of persuasion by Lawrence Ferlinghetti before O'Hara supplied the contents.

All posthumous editions of O'Hara's work, including Mark Ford's sensitively chosen and intelligently introduced *Selected Poems*, are compiled mostly from poems that O'Hara never hoped to publish. Donald Allen, the energetic anthologist of the avant-garde who had helped get *Lunch Poems* into print, put everything he could find into the thick *Collected Poems* that appeared in 1971, five years after O'Hara's death; a revised edition appeared in 1995. Allen also published a few further volumes of poems that had eluded him in 1971, and edited a *Selected Poems* in 1974.

Mark Ford's selection presents a different O'Hara from the one portrayed by Donald Allen's 1974 volume. The differences begin on the front covers. The older book displays Larry Rivers's nude portrait of O'Hara, with the genitals in brighter light and sharper focus than the face. The newer book displays a friend's photograph of O'Hara's face in profile, its expression contemplative and alert. Ford's selection makes it possible to see more clearly how inward O'Hara's poetry was at its best, and his version of O'Hara is more celebratory than Allen's, less eager to shock. Among O'Hara's longer poems, both Allen and Ford include the later "Ode to Michael Goldberg ('s Birth and Other Births)" and "Biotherm (for Bill Berkson)," which have much to say about hope, liberty, wine, and dessert. But Allen includes, and Ford omits, the early long poems "Hatred" and "Easter," which have much to say about excrement and pain.

The best books about O'Hara are Marjorie Perloff's critical study, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters* (1977, revised 1998), and Brad Gooch's biography, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (1993). Both have titles that locate O'Hara in a group or a scene—in much the same way that the nude portrait on the old *Selected Poems* locates him in a sexual category—although both books are sensitive to the privacy and inwardness of O'Hara's best work. Gooch repeatedly observes that O'Hara wrote most fluently when he was alone, and that the densely populated world of his most public poems was his defense against an emptiness that both tempted and terrified him.

O'Hara is explicit about this temptation, and about the failure of his usual defenses against it, in a poem called "Anxiety":

*I'm having a real day of it.  
There was  
something I had to do. But what?  
There are no alternatives, just  
the one something.  
I have a drink,  
it doesn't help—far from it!*

A few lines later he wishes he could become "really dark, richly dark, like/being drunk," but even that

would be second-best to the suicidal relief that a total dissolution into emptiness could bring:

*the impossible  
pure light, to be as if above a vast  
prairie, rushing and pausing over  
the tiny golden heads in deep grass.*

Among O'Hara's contemporaries, few poets seem less like him than the repressed, unsociable, provincial English librarian Philip Larkin. But O'Hara's "Anxiety" has the same tone, mood, and plot of Larkin's "High Windows," in which all comforts seem impossible, and Larkin's anxiety issues finally in

*the thought of high windows:  
The sun-comprehending glass,  
And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows  
Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.*

When O'Hara compared himself with writers and artists among his friends, he insisted that he was attempting less than they did, and tried to suppress his sense that he was achieving more. In one typically self-denigrating letter he wrote: "Where Kenneth [Koch] and Jimmy [James Schuyler] produce art, for instance, I often feel I just produce the by-product of exhibitionism." In the same letter, however, he pointed toward a deeper motive than exhibitionism: "Sometimes I think that writing a poem is such a moral crisis I get completely sick of the whole situation." O'Hara was too modest to admit that he believed his friends' desire to "produce art"—to confront an aesthetic crisis instead of a moral one—was their limitation.

Even his most comic and arbitrary-sounding poems tend to be essays on moral crises. The point of the comedy was not to dismiss the issues, but to disclaim any importance for himself in comparison with the issues. O'Hara's characteristic tone in his love poetry was that of unrequited passion, as in an early poem, "Poetry," where his desire to be forever with his art is indistinguishable from his desire to be forever with a person:

*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 own time.*

And in one of his last poems, "Cantata," the closing lines about his orange cat are equally about someone human:

*...he looks like my best friend my constant lover  
hopelessly loyal tawny and apt and whom I hopelessly love*

**W**.H. Auden famously warned O'Hara against the arbitrary, surrealistic shifts of tone and subject in the poems that he and his friend John Ashbery were writing in the 1950s:

I think you (and John, too, for that matter) must watch what is always the great danger with

any "surrealistic" style, namely of confusing authentic non-logical relations which arouse wonder with accidental ones which arouse mere surprise and in the end fatigue.

Auden had not detected the almost opposite motivations behind the "non-logical relations" in O'Hara's and Ashbery's poetry. Ashbery's work, O'Hara said, "is full of dreams and a kind of moral excellence and kind sentiments," while his own "is full of objects for their own sake" that he treats with "ironically intimate observation." But Ashbery's dreamlike sentiments link together whatever happens to be in his mind while he is writing a poem, while O'Hara's "objects for their own sake" are linked together by his sense that, as in Dante's Paradise, everything that has profound value in itself is obscurely but profoundly connected to everything that has similar value.

In fact, in O'Hara's best poems, the relations that Auden called non-logical had a logic of their own. O'Hara was a lapsed Roman Catholic who detached himself cleanly and almost guiltlessly from his religious past. He lost all interest in Catholic theology and morals, but retained an aesthetic sensibility in which saints, shrines, relics, and rituals from wildly different centuries and cultures exist in a single harmonious texture of mutual adoration and love. The abrupt leaps from one object or person to another may look like the arbitrary leaps in Ashbery's poetry, but they have a logic founded in a Catholic sensibility that persisted after O'Hara discarded Catholicism.

When O'Hara links together a film star, a ballerina, a poet, and a half-dozen friends, he is being less surrealistic than Dantesque. In Canto II of the *Inferno*, when Virgil tells Dante they will voyage together through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, Dante asks why someone as unheroic as he should be chosen. But heroism is irrelevant; what matters is that others care about Dante. Virgil explains that Mary (from first-century Nazareth) asked Lucia (from third-century Syracuse) to ask Beatrice (from thirteenth-century Florence) to ask Virgil (from first-century BC Rome) to come to his aid. They all exist for each other and for Dante, in more or less the same way that the friends, singers, and actors in O'Hara's poems exist for him and for each other.

O'Hara's most memorable poems are his elegies—"To My Dead Father," "To an Actor Who Died," "Thinking of James Dean," "The Day Lady Died"—and memorial poems such as "Ode on Causality," titled in an early draft "Ode at the Grave of Jackson Pollock." Modern elegies tend to be unconvincing because the poet so clearly disbelieves in the immortality that an elegy traditionally claims for its subject. But O'Hara's elegies succeed because long after he discarded any religious belief in immortality, he retained the aesthetic sensibility that took it seriously. His best-known poem, "Lana Turner Has Collapsed!" (the tabloid headline that prompted the poem), is no less an elegy because its subject remained alive. The snowstorm in its opening lines is the sign of nature's grief. And its closing line offers the same collective praise—"Who would not sing for Lycidas?"—and evokes the same resurrection and ascent—"So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high"—that marks the climax of all great elegies:

*oh Lana Turner we love you get up*

O'Hara's friends were dismayed by the camp sentimentality of his lesser elegies for James Dean, but these too recalled the fellowship of saints that presided over his childhood:

*This is  
James Dean, Carole Lombard. I hope  
you will be good to him up there.*<sup>[1]</sup>

In "Biotherm (for Bill Berkson)," O'Hara honored the "poète américain/ lyrique et profond, Wallace Stevens," the source of Ashbery's aesthetic, the great poet who made connections among things because they were all present in his own imagination. But O'Hara wanted more than Stevens could give him. "I

don't get any love from Wallace Stevens no I don't," he continued in the same poem, and then imagined Stevens isolated even in a crowd as he

*strolled on  
an ordinary evening alone  
with a lot of people*

Politics, for most of O'Hara's avant-garde friends, was at best a target for dismissive satire, but O'Hara took politics seriously as a means to achieve social justice. Amiri Baraka recalled that he "had a real feeling for the human element in politics." As Brad Gooch reports in his biography, O'Hara got his news from the *Daily Worker* when he was young, and later puzzled his New York friends by taking the trouble to campaign for liberal candidates. (He also puzzled his fellow guests at artistic house parties in the Hamptons by spending hours on the beach playing with his hosts' children, whom everyone else ignored.)

## 2.

O'Hara was born in 1926 to observant Roman Catholic parents from small-town Massachusetts who never told him he had been conceived three months before they married. He hated his Catholic schools but brought away from them his special sensitivity to rhetoric and language. "To the Film Industry in Crisis" is a hagiography of film stars written in vaguely hexameter verse that opens, like Horace's *Carmina* I.7, by listing the things he is not going to sing about:

*Not you, lean quarterlies and swarthy periodicals  
with your studious incursions toward the pomposity of ants,  
nor you, experimental theatre in which Emotive Fruition  
is wedding Poetic Insight perpetually, nor you,  
promenading Grand Opera, obvious as an ear (though you  
are close to my heart), but you, Motion Picture Industry,  
it's you I love!*

Marjorie Perloff and others have catalogued O'Hara's debts to the avant-garde of early-twentieth-century Europe, but O'Hara's avant-garde credentials tend to obscure his uniqueness. Everyone in the midcentury American avant-garde knew how to copy Parisian experiments made forty years earlier, and the results were usually trivial and derivative. What made O'Hara's avant-garde-sounding poems different, and almost always rescued them from triviality and pretentiousness, was the classical and formal sensibility with which he held together all his avant-garde effects. In the same way, O'Hara was happy to imitate William Carlos Williams's long lines broken into three or four steps extending across the page, or Charles Olson's phrases scattered on an open "field," but his tone and language remained unmistakably his own.

After three years in the Pacific as a sonar operator for the navy during World War II, O'Hara went to Harvard on the GI Bill, found his personal voice as a poet, and discovered the excitement of working among an avant-garde coterie of poets, playwrights, and musicians. Until his Harvard years he expected to have a career as a concert pianist, and much of his verse has the kind of metrical dexterity found only among poets with a strong musical sense. "October" is an early display of the subtle variations he could make on a trimeter line:

*If I turn down my sheets  
children start screaming through*

*the windows. My glasses  
are broken on the coffee table.  
And at night a truce  
with Iran or Korea seems certain  
while I am beaten to death  
by a thug in a back bedroom.*

"Cohasset" (not in Ford's selection) is a later instance of his control over meter, as in the spondees that end the lines about stasis, followed by the trochee and dactyl in the closing lines about change:

*the huge rocks  
are like twin beds  
and the cove tide  
is a rug slipping  
out from under us*

Even when he is most intent on saying something about personal relations, his verse seems motivated partly by his love of language and form. "Aus einem April" is a variation on Rilke's poem with the same title. The shape of O'Hara's poem on the page is an exact match for the irregular shape of Rilke's poem, and O'Hara's opening line, "We dust the walls," is a joke rendering of Rilke's opening line, "*Wieder duftet der Wald* [the forest is fragrant again]," as it might look to an English-speaker who knew no German. [\[2\]](#) But the overall argument of O'Hara's poem seems to be that Rilke was interested only in the aesthetic sensations he got from a budding tree while O'Hara sees it as a sign of sympathy and feeling:

*Haven't you ever fallen down at  
Christmas  
and didn't it move everyone  
who saw you?  
isn't that what the tree  
means? the pure pleasure  
of making weep those whom you cannot move by your flights!*

O'Hara tended to write two kinds of poem: short poems of about twenty to forty lines, with beginnings, middles, and ends, and longer poems that continued until he stopped. The shorter poems tend to be reticent, psychologically acute love poems about the shifting inequalities of love:

*out and out meanness, too, lets love breathe  
you don't have to fight off getting in too deep  
you can always get out if you're not too scared*

*an ounce of prevention's  
enough to poison the heart  
don't think of others  
until you have thought of yourself, are true*

*all of these things, if you feel them  
will be graced by a certain reluctance  
and turn into gold*

*if felt by me, will be smilingly deflected  
by your mysterious concern*

("Poem: Hate is only one of many responses")

The longer poems tend to be performance pieces, in which O'Hara writes as a poetic one-man band, shifting rapidly among his roles as party-goer, art critic, movie fan, amateur chef, balletomane, raconteur, sexual adventurer, European traveler, always rushing someplace else, quick to shed his past, "capitalizing on a few memories/from childhood by forgetting them." O'Hara's most frequent and most ostentatiously avant-garde effects occur in these longer poems:

*whither Lumumba whither oh whither Gauguin  
I have often tried to say goodbye to strange fantoms I  
read about in the newspapers and have always succeeded  
though the ones at "home" are dependent on Dependable  
Laboratory and Sales Company on Pulaski Street strange*

("For the Chinese New Year & for Bill Berkson")

In a talk he gave to a gathering of artists, O'Hara justified this style of poetry as a liberation of language:

Poetry which liberates certain forces in language, permits them to emerge upon the void of silence, not poetry which seeks merely to express most effectively or most beautifully or most musically some preconceived idea or perception.

For O'Hara this was an untypically conventional burst of avant-garde apologetics. He generally cared more about the liberation of human beings than of artistic media, and he knew perfectly well that no poetry worth reading "seeks merely" to express a preconceived idea. What O'Hara did in his longer poems under the banner of language liberation extended the techniques of earlier poets such as Milton and Blake, who were equally willful in using names and images with resonant meanings for the poets themselves, meanings at which a reader could marvel without fully comprehending them:

*Besides what the grim wolf with privy paw  
Daily devours apace, and nothing said;  
But that two-handed engine at the door  
Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more.*

(Milton, "Lycidas")

*For Golgonooza cannot be seen till having pass'd the Polypus  
It is viewed on all sides round by a Four-fold Vision.*

(Blake, "Milton")

O'Hara's obvious pleasure in writing these longer poems is mixed with a sense of strain at keeping the kaleidoscopic spectacle moving over hundreds of lines of verse. Public performance, no matter how much of his time he spent doing it, was not his natural medium—as he seems to have suggested in "Meditations in an Emergency":

*It is easy to be beautiful; it is difficult to appear so.*

### 3.

One crucial difference between O'Hara and his great predecessors was that they wrote their most

willfully arbitrary verse in response to their own private visions, while O'Hara seems to have written the willfully arbitrary verse of his longer poems partly to entertain his avant-garde circle of friends. Verse written to entertain a public—Byron's *Don Juan*, for example—can be very great poetry, but it succeeds only when its inner logic is shared by the poet and the audience.

A comic motif in Brad Gooch's biography of O'Hara is the eagerness with which members of the New York avant-garde endured the pretentious tedium of so many performances, readings, and exhibitions, so that they could feel (as one participant remembered) "proud to have been part of what we all thought was a deeply avant-garde production." When O'Hara wrote to entertain his avant-garde circle, he was not so much sharing with them an inner artistic logic as giving them the means to congratulate themselves for being avant-garde.

He joked in public about their conviction that anything avant-garde was inherently praiseworthy. When two of his friends decided to get married, he wrote a poem that praised them for doing something excellent—which must surely be avant-garde because whatever is avant-garde is also excellent:

*It's so  
original, hydrogenic, anthropomorphic, fiscal, post-anti-esthetic, bland, unpicturesque  
and WilliamCarlosWilliamsian!  
it's definitely not 19th Century, it's not even Partisan Review, it's new, it must be  
vanguard!*

("Poem Read at Joan Mitchell's")

Avant-gardes claim to create the art of the future. But the "art of the future" generally proves wrong about the real future of art in the same way that the "city of the future" on display at a world's fair proves wrong about the future of cities. O'Hara's praise of some experimental poems by John Ashbery has a sharp double edge: "I might have known as I sink into the mush of love you would be foraging ahead into the 21st century."

Baudelaire dismissed the avant-garde as a "military metaphor"; until the mid-nineteenth century the word meant only the front ranks of an army. The avant-garde idea was suitable only to those "who can only think collectively" ("*qui ne peuvent penser qu'en société*"), not to those for whom, like O'Hara at his best, the only truth is face to face. An avant-garde coterie always prefers a revolution in language and technique to a revelation of thought and feeling. O'Hara recognized this preference as a sign of insecurity, a failure of nerve:

*it is the great period of Italian art when everyone imitates Picasso  
afraid to mean anything*

Membership in a coterie, school, or group produces different effects on major and minor writers. For minor writers, a group provides a repertory of styles and themes and gives them confidence to work at the height of their powers. They return the favor by compiling group anthologies and writing manifestos, but when the group disintegrates, they may have nothing more to say. For major writers, a group tends to provide themes and publicity in the first few years of their career, when they are already looking elsewhere, and their mature work has nothing in common with the later work of the rest of the group. The members left behind, now famous mostly because they had once been associated with the major writer, mutter resentfully that he betrayed them.

O'Hara was a major writer who tried to convince himself he was a minor one. His best work either ignored or teased the coterie he partied with, but as he grew older he found it easier to fight off



loneliness by immersing himself in an always-welcoming group than by opening himself to the risks of any intimacy that might relieve it. <sup>[3]</sup> In the last years of his life, his closest friends found it difficult to break through the wall of young acolytes that closed around him at bars and parties, deepening his unhappiness. Their youth and beauty promised him long-awaited satisfactions, while their emotional and intellectual inequality made satisfaction impossible. Liquor masked the resulting frustration and pain. The more time O'Hara spent barhopping with his coterie, the fewer poems he wrote, and the more convinced he became that he had nothing more to say.

The last poem he wrote, four months before he died, proves that he was mistaken. "Little Elegy for Antonio Machado"—the twentieth-century Spanish poet whose early avant-garde affinities and later political and moral passions were not unlike O'Hara's—is not little at all, but compressed, dark, and magnificent, with a depth and directness that fulfill the promise of O'Hara's earlier lyrics. He devised for it a regular form that looks like a Horatian stanza that someone broke and put together again without quite restoring the original. The poem is another of O'Hara's elegies in which both mourner and mourned are glorified by their recognition of the darknesses they share and the light they aspire to:

*your water air and earth  
insist on our joining you  
in recognition of colder prides and less negotiable ambitions*

As the elegy ends, he imagines Machado reviving, like the heroes of other elegies, but also "improving" O'Hara and ourselves in the physically direct way that salt improves a meal:

*improving your soul's expansion  
in the night and developing our own in salt-like praise*

By chance or by luck, the last word of O'Hara's last poem names the action that drove his whole career.

## Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, edited by Donald Allen and with an introduction by John Ashbery (Knopf, 1971; revised, University of California Press, 1995), p. 248.

<sup>[2]</sup> Fifteen years after O'Hara used this joke in one brief line, Celia and Louis Zukofsky extended it through a whole book of renderings from Latin, *Catullus* (1969). O'Hara had a better sense of when the joke becomes tiresome, and he also managed to make his one-liner combine a linguistic joke and a typographical one: in German Fraktur type the *f* in *duftet* looks like a variant form of *s*.

<sup>[3]</sup> Two thoughtful and well-informed books take a far more positive view of O'Hara's connections with his group: Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (Oxford University Press, 2006), and Lytle Shaw, *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (University of Iowa Press, 2006).