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“Everything is in the poems”: Frank O’Hara in Personism

„Všechno je v těch básních”: Frank O’Hara v Personismu

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V Praze dne 7.8. 2024

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Abstract

Frank O'Hara was a prominent figure in the 1950s New York City art scene and the New York School. While he was both a writer and an art critic, he has rarely pondered his own poetry in theory; O'Hara only published two short essays concerning his poetry and method in his lifetime: "Statement for The New American poetry" and "Personism: A Manifesto." The latter is a witty, self-conscious proclamation introducing a non-existent literary movement, mainly invented to mock the academic prescriptivism of the many preceding "-isms". Despite being written to ridicule, "Personism" also gives insight into O'Hara's creative method and defines the aspects of his style that ultimately make him stand out in the American literary tradition. His poems are intimate and immediate, flippant, and full of real, specific moments and objects. They are rooted in O'Hara's New York City, its time, and its people; they seem to be "between two persons instead of two pages."¹

This thesis aims to define Personism in terms of its stylistic tendencies as well as in its historical and literary context. Personist poems will be analyzed and contrasted with O'Hara's theoretical work to determine to what extent and by what means Personism is used in practice. Further, this thesis will explore Personism in the context of American literary tradition and define it against its contemporary "-isms," schools and movements, such as Modernism, Post-modernism, the Beat movement, and the confessional poets.

Key words: "Personism: A Manifesto", Poetics, Modernism, Postmodernism, the Cold War era, Creative method, New York City, The New York School of Poetry, The New American Poetry

¹ Frank O'Hara, "Personism: A Manifesto" in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. by Donald Allen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 498.

Abstrakt

Frank O'Hara byl významnou postavou newyorské umělecké scény 50. let a newyorské školy poezie. Ačkoli byl zároveň spisovatelem i kritikem umění, zřídka se zamýšlel teoreticky nad vlastní poezií; za celý život publikoval pouze dva krátké eseje o své poezii a metodě: „Prohlášení pro Novou americkou poezii“ a „Personismus: Manifest“. Ten druhý je vtipným, sebereflexivním prohlášením představujícím neexistující literární hnutí, převážně vytvořeným k zesměšnění akademického preskriptivismu mnoha předcházejících „-ismů“. Navzdory tomu, že byl napsán s úmyslem zesměšňovat, „Personismus“ také poskytuje vhled do O'Harovy tvůrčí metody a definuje aspekty jeho stylu, které ho nakonec odlišují v americké literární tradici. Jeho básně jsou intimní a bezprostřední, hravé a plné skutečných, konkrétních okamžiků a objektů. Jsou zakořeněny v O'Harově New Yorku, jeho době a lidech; zdá se, že jsou „mezi dvěma lidmi místo dvou stránek“.

Tato práce si klade za cíl definovat personismus z hlediska jeho stylistických tendencí i historického a literárního kontextu. Personistické básně budou analyzovány a konfrontovány s O'Harovou teoretickou prací, aby se určilo, do jaké míry a jakými prostředky je personismus v praxi využíván. Dále tato práce prozkoumá personismus v kontextu americké literární tradice a vymezí ho vůči současným „-ismům“, školám a směrům, jako je modernismus, postmodernismus, beat generation a konfesionalní poezie.

Klíčová slova: „Personismus: Manifest“, Poetika, Modernismus, Postmodernismus, období Studené války, Tvůrčí techniky, New York City, Newyorská škola poezie, Nová Americká Poezie

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1. Introduction: “Personism” as a Statement on Poetics in Context

Turbulent situations inspire turbulent art. The post-war years in the United States were marked by unrest; the Cold War, the polarity between the East and the West, between communism and capitalism, the militant, paranoid McCarthyism, the Civil Rights Movement, and so many more forces were at play in the first two decades after the Second World War, pulling and pushing the country to and fro between extremes. The poetry of the time was as bipolar as the world that informed it; there were the “anthology wars”² between “academic formalists”³ and “oppositional experimentalists”⁴ and there was Robert Lowell who, in his National Book Award speech, famously stated that two poetries were at a competition, a raw and a cooked.⁵ “The cooked,” he stated, “marvelously expert, often seems laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by a graduate seminar,”⁶ which describes poets like Donald Hall, Louis Simpson, or Elizabeth Bishop. “The raw,” on the other hand, “huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience are dished up for midnight listeners.”⁷ This poetry evokes Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and other non-academic poets who did not subscribe to the rigidity of New Criticism. Among such poets defying the formal and thematic restrictions, in addition to the Beats, also the Confessionalists, the Black Mountain Poets, and the New York School of Poetry. However, neither the Beats nor the Black Mountain Poets were unprogrammatic; while they did not accede to the restrictions of New Criticism, they created their own constraints to lay on their work.

² Mark Silverberg, *The New York School Poets and the Neo-Avant-Garde, Between Radical Art and Radical Chic* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2016): 38.

³ Silverberg, *The New York School Poets*, 38.

⁴ Silverberg, *The New York School Poets*, 38.

⁵ Robert Lowell, “Robert Lowell Accepts the 1960 National Book Awards in Poetry for Life Studies,” *National Book Foundation*, accessed August 2, 2024, <https://www.nationalbook.org/robert-lowells-accepts-the-1960-national-book-awards-in-poetry-for-life-studies/>.

⁶ Lowell, “Accepts the 1960 National Book Awards.”

⁷ Lowell, “Accepts the 1960 National Book Awards.”

Possibly the most influential at the time was Charles Olson's "Projective Verse," with which O'Hara was familiar⁸ and which condemns the meter and traditional form but enforces his idea of energy transference from the poet to the reader via the open form and using breath exercises.⁹ While Olson essentially argues for similar poetics as O'Hara, "anti-academic, anti-intellectual, anti-traditional; pro-spontaneity,"¹⁰ the idea of O'Hara restricting his breathing for spontaneity is a paradoxical one. Especially if one considers the "macho seriousness"¹¹ with which Olson approaches his manifesto:

Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of essential use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings.¹²

It is ironic to argue for freedom from the restrictive form and content of the past while simultaneously substituting them for different kinds of restrictions of the present. It seems to be the nature of anti-mainstream or anti-establishment manifestos to contradict themselves. A paradoxical nature is, to an extent, also own to Frank O'Hara's manifesto, but in a way that opposes the overt prescriptivism of post-war manifestos.

O'Hara is presently regarded as a figure of The New York School of Poetry; however, the group, rather than marking its genesis by a collective manifesto or naming themselves, adopted its name in 1961 from the director of Tibor de Nagy Gallery, John Bernard Myers, to link them with the prominent New York School painters.¹³ Despite its misleading name, O'Hara's "Personism: A Manifesto" was never a program for the New York School of Poetry or

⁸ Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet among Painters* (University of Chicago Press, 1997): 203n47.

⁹ Cuddon, J. A. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013): 81.

¹⁰ Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 81.

¹¹ Silverberg, *The New York School of Poets*, 47.

¹² Charles Olson, "Projective Verse" in *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997): 239.

¹³ David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde, The Making of the New York School of Poets* (New York City: Anchor Books, 1999): 20.

anybody else. It does not rely on direct, unforgiving diction and exclusion of others, does not weigh itself down with pretentious self-seriousness, and does not assume the authority to seriously proclaim its way of writing superior to others as many manifestos do.¹⁴ It does, however, provoke, with brass and flippancy, and mock the academic prescriptivism of the “cooked”¹⁵ poetry and the heavy-handed seriousness of the different, but nonetheless restricting, prescriptivism of the “raw”¹⁶ poetry. However, it does not pursue any agenda other than the one of tongue-in-cheek indifference, about which John Ashbery wrote:

O’Hara’s poetry has no program and therefore cannot be joined. It does not advocate sex and dope as a panacea for the ills of modern society; it does not speak against the war in Viet Nam or in favor of civil rights; it does not paint gothic vignettes of the post-Atomic Age: in a word, it does not attack the establishment. It merely ignores its right to exist, and is thus a source of annoyance for partisans of every stripe.¹⁷

“Personism,” then, is a mock manifesto, but also an implicit statement on O’Hara’s poetics. This is where “Personism” shares the paradoxical nature with similar post-war manifestos: it rejects their restrictive ideas on the use of literary techniques, it is in itself an anti-poetic manifesto, except it has its own poetics too. “Personism” does not explicitly ask of its imaginary adherents for any specific approaches to poetry; it is defined chiefly by what it rejects: restrictions formal and those posed by the understanding of the imagined reader. What the manifesto cannot reject are the techniques it uses for the creation of itself: techniques achieving O’Hara’s staple flippancy, immediacy, wit, humor, materiality, and proximity with the reader. As such, “Personism,” as a poem, outlines the nature of Personism as a personal

¹⁴ Silverberg, *The New York School of Poets*, 35.

¹⁵ Lowell, “Accepts the 1960 National Book Awards.”

¹⁶ Lowell, “Accepts the 1960 National Book Awards.”

¹⁷ John Ashbery, “Frank O’Hara’s Question,” in *Book Week* (25 September 1966): 6. Cited by Marjorie Perloff in *Poet Among Painters*, 12.

movement and reflects and explains O'Hara's poetics of simultaneous indifference and proximity to the reader and literary convention on itself.

2. Analyzing “Personism: A Manifesto”: Method and Aims

Despite the lack of traditional poetic form, this chapter aims to analyze “Personism: A Manifesto” as a prose poem, as opposed to a prose piece, to further the understanding of O’Hara’s stylistic tools and techniques used to write the poem and hence the techniques forming O’Hara’s poetics. The techniques employed in “Personism” are also relevant for a vast scope of his poetry, which could be described as Personist and the extent of which is described in the later chapters. In addition to close reading, the analysis is amended using a historical, cultural, and biographical lens. O’Hara’s poetry is deeply rooted in his subjective experience and the time and space in which it was written. As will be shown, excepting such dimensions does not hinder the reading of O’Hara’s poems but should not be omitted from the analysis of the manifesto, as it can uncover layers of refreshing irony and further the political stance on post-war manifestos as a concept. The vast cultural and historical background of “Personism” inspires a wide use of allusions to specific people and places with wit, immediacy, and humor. Moreover, these techniques are as much tied to O’Hara as a poet as to O’Hara as the speaker of the prose poem, which forms the illusion of the inseparability of the figure of the author and the speaker. Hence, paratextual information has to be considered.

This thesis aims to characterize the poetics of Personism, this chapter, therefore, describes the literary techniques of allusion and intertextuality, irony and tone, and their connection to the message of “Personism” first. Secondly, it explores the influence of the time and era that impacted O’Hara’s writing, the continuous influence of literary modernism, and the properties of the slowly self-defining postmodernism. Lastly, this section will focus on the poem’s form or the lack thereof.

The techniques outlined in this chapter will be revisited and further explored in the following sections as they will be contrasted with a selection of other poems by Frank O’Hara to trace the development of his poetry in the context of personism as a creative method.

2.1. The Allusions' Guide to Anti-Manifesto

“Everything is in the poems,”¹⁸ writes Frank O’Hara and immediately renders all attempts to analyze his work pointless. By the first sentence, the manifesto discredits itself and distinguishes itself and its author from that part of academic literary culture that requires an explanation of a poem or attempts to provide it. In the anti-establishment, counter-cultural moods of the 1950s and ‘60s, this looks like “a word on Academies”;¹⁹ a rejection of the growing mainstream style of Robert Lowell and others. Similar nudges against poetry as an institution are typical for O’Hara,²⁰ though they are rarely directed against a fellow poet.²¹ But surprisingly, this nudge also includes his friend,²² Allen Ginsberg, the leading figure of the Beat movement:

Everything is in the poems, but at the risk of sounding like the poor wealthy man’s Allen Ginsberg I will write to you because I just heard that one of my fellow poets thinks that a poem of mine that can’t be got at one reading is because I was confused too.²³

Given Ginsberg’s position in the New York City art scene and his friendship with O’Hara, his name is unlikely to appear in such a derogatory context. “Personism” was also intended for Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry*,²⁴ where it would appear side by side with Ginsberg’s “Notes for ‘Howl’ and Other Poems.” What would lead O’Hara to mention Ginsberg in such provocative fashion?

As *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* suggests, the reference to Ginsberg is a response to his article “Abstraction in Poetry,” published in the third volume of

¹⁸ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

¹⁹ Allen Ginsberg, “Notes for ‘Howl’ and Other Poems” in *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960*, ed. Donald M. Allen, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999): 417.

²⁰ Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 18.

²¹ Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 13.

²² Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 14.

²³ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

²⁴ Silverberg, *The New York School of Poets*, 47.

It Is, A Magazine for Abstract Art,²⁵ which was one of the many small, relatively short-lived²⁶ literary magazines with low circulation published in New York City at the time. In the article, Ginsberg claims that O'Hara's poetry is in some respects similar to abstract paintings,²⁷ but a regular reader would hardly have read the article.²⁸ Therefore, if the first line of "Personism" alludes to "Abstraction in Poetry," a reader unfamiliar with the 1950s New York City literary scene could potentially read it in two ways: either as an appreciative response to Ginsberg's analysis of his work, i.e., the speaker risks sounding like Allen Ginsberg because he is essentially repeating his thoughts, or as a cheeky correction of Ginsberg's assumptions. The latter becomes evident later in the prose poem, where the speaker explicitly addresses Ginsberg's article. He cheekily calls the topic of "Abstraction in poetry" intriguing and immediately presents an opinion that is in stark opposition to Ginsberg's:

I think it [abstraction in poetry] appears mostly in the minute particulars where decision is necessary. Abstraction (in poetry, not painting) involves personal removal by the poet. [...] 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.²⁹

Referencing Ginsberg at the beginning and then as a transition to introducing Personism as a movement would serve as a kind of cohesive device at best. The reference to Ginsberg at the beginning of the poem more likely alludes to his 1959 essay "Notes for 'Howl' and Other Poems" in which he explains his creative method, his famous use of "Hebraic-Melvillian bardic

²⁵ Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, Robert O'Clair, *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003): 1072.

²⁶ Philip Pavia, "The Club, It Is: A Conversation with Philip Pavia," interview by Phong Bui, *Brooklyn Rail*, February 2001, brooklynrail.org/2001/02/art/the-club-it-is-a-conversation-with-philip-pavia.

²⁷ Ramazani et al., *The Norton Anthology*, 1072.

²⁸ Even with the vastness of Internet databases, given the small number of printed issues of the magazine, I was only able to access Allen Ginsberg's article "Abstraction in Poetry" in *It Is: A Magazine for Abstract Art* 3 (Winter-Spring 1959): 73-75, thanks to the kind help of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

²⁹ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498. Edits in brackets by Karolína Turynová.

breath”³⁰ and the events surrounding the writing of his poems. Considering the reference as a cheeky allusion to this self-important theorizing and needless explaining of one’s own creative method would fit in the pattern of O’Hara’s mocking of manifestos. “Notes for ‘Howl’ and Other Poems” epitomizes everything O’Hara mocks. This makes it a more probable reference than “Abstraction in Poetry” which was suggested by *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, whose editors were most likely following the suit of Marjorie Perloff in *Frank O’Hara, Poet Among Painters*.³¹ Moreover, there are several parallels between O’Hara’s “Personism” and Ginsberg’s “Notes for ‘Howl’ and Other Poems” that suggest

For example, much like Ginsberg, O’Hara also comments on the formal properties of his poetry in “Personism.” However, he does so with a tone that seems to parody Ginsberg’s boldness and confidence and exaggerates it, ultimately making it a pastiche: “I don’t even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve.”³² O’Hara even allegorizes formal techniques as redundant: “If someone’s chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don’t turn around and shout, ‘Give up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep.’”³³ Ginsberg dedicates a vast portion of “Notes” to explaining bop prosody, words that keep the beat, and lines as breath units. O’Hara calls this “measure and other technical apparatus”³⁴ common sense and ironically compares it to actual clothing size: “If you’re going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want go to bed with you.”³⁵

Nevertheless, everything written in O’Hara’s “Personism,” and Ginsberg’s “Notes” is in the poems too. This is O’Hara’s main point: when he is writing “at the risk of sounding like the

³⁰ Ginsberg, “Notes for ‘Howl’ and Other Poems,” 415.

³¹ Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 25.

³² O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

³³ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

³⁴ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

³⁵ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

poor wealthy man's Allen Ginsberg,"³⁶ he is writing at the risk of sounding like a broken record, repeating the contents of his works but this time in abstract language.

An argument can be raised against considering "Personism: A Manifesto" as influenced by and reacting to Ginsberg's "Notes." Ginsberg's essay was first printed in *Evergreen Review* 3.10, which was published in December 1959. O'Hara wrote "Personism," on the third of September 1959, so it could not have been influenced by a text that had not been yet published. But "Notes for 'Howl' and Other Poems" also appeared as a liner note on the vinyl recording of "*Howl*" and *Other Poems*³⁷ under the name "Notes Written on Finally Recording 'Howl'" which was released in San Francisco in 1959 on a date further unspecified. O'Hara might have had access to this recording in New York and read the essay there, but he might have also obtained it from Ginsberg himself. "Notes for 'Howl' and Other Poems" are dated as written on Independence Day, 1959. If we can trust both authors in dating their own works accurately, then Ginsberg's "Notes" would precede "Personism," allowing O'Hara to come across them since the two poets have known each other since 1957,³⁸ both lived in East Village at the same time³⁹ and were good friends.⁴⁰ Most importantly, both O'Hara and Ginsberg wrote about their poetics for their friend Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry*. Ginsberg's essay was published there under the title "Notes for 'Howl' and Other Poems"⁴¹ and it is the same version that had been published as a liner note on the back of the recording released by Fantasy Records in 1959. Ginsberg's essay would have aptly appeared side by side with "Personism," which was initially intended for this anthology but was turned down as "too frivolous."⁴² Decoding the reference to

³⁶ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

³⁷ Paul Hoover, *Postmodern American Poetry: a Norton Anthology* (New York: Norton, 1994): 635.

³⁸ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, xv.

³⁹ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, xv.

⁴⁰ Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 14.

⁴¹ Ginsberg, "Notes for 'Howl' and Other Poems," 414-18.

⁴² Ramazani et al., *The Norton Anthology*, 1072.

Ginsberg as an allusion to this essay, rather than to the article published in *It Is, A Magazine for Abstract Art*, underlines O'Hara's notorious cheek and brass and significantly aids his argument that writing prose about poetry and explaining one's creative method and poetics is futile, pretentious and overdone.

Mentioning Vachel Lindsay in the following paragraph has the same parodying effect:

"Now, come on. I don't believe in god, so I don't have to make elaborately sounded structures. I hate Vachel Lindsay always have..."⁴³ Lindsay's poetry was primarily centered around the sound qualities of individual words and the rhythm in which they could be sung, so by dismissing Lindsay's "elaborate structures,"⁴⁴ O'Hara also dismisses forced forms in poetry. But Lindsay also wrote pamphlets in which he described his poetics, and which were intended to be read before his performances.⁴⁵ Using a strong word like "hate" to describe O'Hara's relationship to Lindsay, who had such polarly opposite opinions on poetry and presented them so vehemently, seems less camped up when read in context. About literary criticism, O'Hara has written in an unsent letter to the Patterson Society:

I don't want to make up a lot of prose about something that is perfectly clear in the poems. If you cover someone with earth and grass grows, you don't know what they looked like anymore. Critical prose makes too much grass grow, and I don't want to help hide my own poems, much less kill them.⁴⁶

Given his attitudes, O'Hara writing a literary manifesto and explaining his own creative method would be ironic, just like all the "raw"⁴⁷ poetry manifestoes are. Moreover, overtly poeticizing in an anti-poetics text would make O'Hara a hypocrite; unless, of course, the text was conceived as a response to another poet: "I will write to you because I just heard that one of

⁴³ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

⁴⁴ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

⁴⁵ Caroline Gelmi, "Vachel Lindsay and the Primitive Singing of the New Poetry" in *Journal of Modern Literature*, 45, no. 2 (Winter 2022): 99, Gale Literature Resource Center, dx.doi.org/10.2979/jmodelite.45.2.07.

⁴⁶ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 510.

⁴⁷ Lowell, "Accepts the 1960 National Book Awards."

my fellow poets thinks that a poem of mine that can't be got at one reading is because I was confused too."⁴⁸ The deliberate choice of disordered word order mimetically adds to O'Hara's perceived confusion and cheekily to the anonymous poet's argument. O'Hara's flexible syntax makes unclear how much the adverbial "too" encompasses due to its free position in the sentence, but it undoubtedly refers to Ginsberg. Perhaps this is where O'Hara implicitly references "Abstraction in Poetry." In the article, Ginsberg described O'Hara's "Second Avenue" as a "long meaningless poem,"⁴⁹ which not only shows that he, indeed, did not get it "at one reading,"⁵⁰ probably due to the surreal elements characteristic of his early poetry,⁵¹ but it is also a very blunt commentary to make about another poet's work. "The result, I guess, they [O'Hara and Kenneth Koch] learned how to write,"⁵² Ginsberg states blatantly. Such commentary would undoubtedly deserve a like response, and that is exactly what one can see in "Personism" and this passive-aggressive allusion. The mentioning of the fellow poet⁵³ also justifies writing the manifesto and criticizing manifestoes simultaneously without making O'Hara/the speaker seem hypocritical. Another justification for the genesis of the text is the fact that it has been requested of him by Donald Allen for his anthology, however, this detail is paratextual.

O'Hara's cynicism about theorizing about his own work is present throughout the whole of "Personism" and implicitly pointed out in other allusions, e.g., the allusion to John Keats: "There's nothing metaphysical about it. Unless, of course, you flatter yourself into thinking that what you're experiencing is 'yearning.'"⁵⁴ This cheeky comment implicitly references the cliché

⁴⁸ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

⁴⁹ Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 25.

⁵⁰ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

⁵¹ Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 63.

⁵² Ginsberg, "Abstraction in Poetry," 75. Edits in brackets by Karolína Turynová.

⁵³ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

⁵⁴ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

way of defending a poet's unpretentiousness and lack of ego and appeals to authenticity and disregard of the potential audience.⁵⁵ What O'Hara suggests is that sharing poetry and opinions on poetry is essentially a matter of one's ego and self-importance. Unless, of course, as he ironically notes, they are like John Keats, and they "feel assured [they] should write for the mere yearning and fondness [they] have for the beautiful, even if [their] night's labors should be burnt every morning and no eye shine upon them."⁵⁶

2.2. Allusions and the Redundancy of Readership

This brings in the question of the perceived audience of "Personism." O'Hara does not seem to have the comfort of the reader in mind, as can be seen in the very personal allusions, which would be utterly indecipherable to a larger audience. In one aspect, this can be understood as an unfortunate quality of Confessional poetry, but O'Hara's work could hardly fall into the same category as, for example, Lowell and Plath, the key Confessional poets of the period.⁵⁷ The thick web of allusions may even function as a pastiche of Eliot's "The Waste Land," which is also decipherable only after a rigorous study of the poet's notes and inspirations. Eliot's "Notes on 'The Waste Land'" are, of course, precisely the kind of text "Personism" would parody. But possibly, O'Hara's disregard for the reader is authentic and underlines the spontaneous nature of Personism. He rants:

But how can you really care if anybody gets it, or gets what it means, or if it improves them. [...] Too many poets act like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat, and potatoes with drippings (tears). [...] Nobody should experience anything they don't need to, if they don't need poetry bully for them...⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Louis Untermeyer, *The Pursuit of Poetry: A Guide to Its Understanding and Appreciation with an Explanation of Its Forms and a Dictionary of Poetic Terms* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969): 107.

⁵⁶ Untermeyer, *The Pursuit of Poetry*, 107. Edits in brackets by Karolína Turynová.

⁵⁷ Jenifer Ashton, *A Cambridge Companion to American Poetry Since 1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 31.

⁵⁸ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

Other uses of allusions in the text usually serve one of the following purposes: first, they help imitate and mock academic register. This would be the case of cleverly inserting a reference to Apollinaire's poem "La Chanson du Mal Aimé,"⁵⁹ in the second paragraph: "...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!'"⁶⁰ The sudden change of language and rhythm, in addition to the abrupt insertion of interpunctuation, hinders the natural flow of the sentence and helps create the spontaneous flow of the poem. Moreover, the title of Apollinaire's poem can be loosely translated as "A Song of the Poorly Loved," so not only does the reference aid O'Hara's mocking tone and shape the rhythm, but it also completes an educated reader's idea of an unhappy relationship. It is ironic, because Apollinaire's poem is quite serious in tone and subject matter, while O'Hara's cadence and *sauze* leave no space for such grave sentiments.

The same is true in O'Hara's response to Ginsberg's article. In his parody of academic prose, he slips into abstract language. He refers to authorities in poetry, such as Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, W. C. Williams, Keats, and Mallarmé, and mentions cliché terms in literary criticism, such as Keats' negative capability and Bremond's *La Poésie Pure*. He also obliquely alludes to Giorgio de Chirico and his painting "Nostalgia of the Infinite," which has been in possession of the Museum of Modern Art in New York at least since 1949,⁶¹ and where O'Hara worked in the years 1952-53 and then from 1955 until his death in 1966.⁶²

For instance, the decision involved in the choice between "the nostalgia of the infinite" and "the nostalgia for the infinite" defines an attitude towards the degree

⁵⁹ Ramazani et al., *The Norton Anthology*, 1072.

⁶⁰ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

⁶¹ The painting is on a photograph from 1949 of the exhibition "Twentieth Century Italian Art." The photograph is published on the MOMA website; Soichi Sunami, "Twentieth Century Italian Art: Installation view, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, June 28, 1949–September 18, 1949," Photograph (Photographic Archive, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York), accessed August 2, 2024, https://www.moma.org/collection/works/78738?installation_image_index=4.

⁶² O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, xiv.

of abstraction. The nostalgia of the infinite representing the greater degree of abstraction, removal, and negative capability (as in Keats and Mallarmé).⁶³

While “Nostalgia of the Infinite” is a relatively known painting, it is unlikely that even an educated reader outside of O’Hara’s immediate circle of painters would identify the allusion to it. It is just O’Hara “being smart” and thus again mocking conceited academic texts. But using obscure references such as this, creates a greater distance between the author and the reader. The “abstract removal” does not necessarily mean only the author’s distance from the work but also the distance of the reader from the text and the author. The addressee turns from a friend or an eavesdropper on a private conversation to a student and the amicable speaker to a pedantic, name-dropping know-it-all; thus, an emotional distance is created. This tone and register shift again in the following paragraph. The speaker mocks the pedantic attitudes of some of his fellow artists, for example, by overstating, irony and mentioning prominent figures of French art:

In all modesty, I confess that it may be the death of literature as we know it. While I have certain regrets, I am still glad I got there before Alain Robbe-Grillet did. Poetry is quicker and surer than prose, it is only just that poetry finish literature off. For a time people thought that Artaud was going to accomplish this, but actually, for all their magnificence, his polemical writings are not more outside literature than Bear Mountain is outside New York State. His relation is no more astounding than Dubuffet’s to painting.⁶⁴

For example, by mentioning Alain Robbe-Grillet, O’Hara alludes to the “nouveau roman.” The movement rejected traditional conventions of the novel and instead focused on “things; an individual version and vision of things; a systematized and analytical record of objects.”⁶⁵ However, Robbe-Grillet’s approach was not new to the literary world, which is what O’Hara cheekily hints at by noting that he managed to invent Personism before Robbe-Grillet did. Allusions to Antonin Artaud and Jean Dubuffet aim to do the same as the allusion to Grillet:

⁶³ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

⁶⁴ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 499.

⁶⁵ Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 476.

implicitly mocking the pretentiousness and futility of literary manifestoes and their unsuccessful attempts to push the boundaries of literature and other media. These allusions are especially audacious when they appear in the same paragraph as “Lucky Pierre,” a slang term for the man in the middle of a threesome. It is wonderfully playfully outrageous, sassy, and campy.

Other allusions in the paragraph help to achieve spontaneity and create intimacy between the author and the reader. This would be the case of mentioning the poet LeRoi Jones, later known as Amiri Baraka, and the mysterious “blond,” likely Vincent Warren, with whom O’Hara fell in love in 1959.⁶⁶ Readers from outside of New York City who did not read *Yugen, Floating Bear*, or like magazines may not have heard about Jones, but their friendship is evident from O’Hara’s tone and using his nickname in the parenthesis: “It was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959, a day in which I was in love with someone (not Roi, by the way, a blond).”⁶⁷ Similarly, readers from outside of the New York City art scene gossip would not know about Warren or O’Hara’s sexuality. Fortunately, the casual and nonchalant tone and word choice that O’Hara uses in reference to his friends and lovers are often very telling of their relationship, and thus the readers do not feel excluded. In fact, the number of personal allusions has the opposite effect: such allusions help achieve the feeling of spontaneity and immediacy and create a link between the author and the reader. They presuppose the reader already knows these people, or at least, is invited to pretend to know them. Through such instances, O’Hara invites the reader into the poem as a participant rather than a passive listener or a coy student. In turn, this makes the speaker a companion rather than a stern authorial figure, a teacher, or a moral capacity. It also makes the poem feel present, as an immediate reaction to reality. The same principle also applies to the allusions to his poetry, as will be discussed later.

⁶⁶ Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 148.

⁶⁷ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 499.

2.3. Form or Lack Thereof

O'Hara's work occupies the fuzzy era in which modernism presses further, and postmodernism starts progressively and vaguely defining itself. To support the realness and immediacy of his poem, O'Hara uses metatextuality, a tool used by modernists and postmodernists alike, to make a statement about his poetics. He also uses allegories and fast-paced film-like transitions between fragmented ideas and scenes, which are, in turn, tools used mainly in the hard-to-define post-modern works.

The latter can be found within the first paragraph. O'Hara uses short allegories and metaphors to support his points but transitions between them in a way comparable to a film cut. The reader's inner eye must switch between various imagined scenarios and emotions: At the beginning of the text, a mysterious poet does not understand O'Hara's poem at first reading. This would likely irritate O'Hara, and it does, as can be deduced from the cheeky tone. The following sentences are about O'Hara's opinion on formal properties of poetry, but the reader is immediately transported into another imagined space: "I don't believe in god, so I don't have to make elaborately sounded structures."⁶⁸ Structure, acoustics, and belief may initiate the scheme of a traditional church or a cathedral, thus placing the abstract language into an imagined space and tying them to a specific image. The reader is pulled back to O'Hara's monologue by his declaration: "You just go on your nerve," and then pushed into another scenario, where the reader assumes the role of a "track star for Mineola Prep"⁶⁹ fleeing away a potential robber or a murderer. It seems to work like a modernist play with various perspectives, but elevated and fragmented beyond repair; the pieces of imagined realities are not tied together by a complex narrative, as we can see in modern or post-modern literature; instead, they are arguments

⁶⁸ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

⁶⁹ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

supporting a singular thought. The whole prose poem follows this blueprint, constantly circling back to itself and O'Hara's tongue-in-cheek, camped-up tone.

O'Hara makes no use of some modernist tendencies, i.e., heavy symbolism. He avoids the seriousness of great grave modern topics like love, sensuality, or disillusionment with the state of the contemporary world. The self-importance and pathos of, for example, T. S. Eliot have no place in "Personism" as a poem, nor Personism as a movement. Like Pound, O'Hara seems to want to "make it new"⁷⁰ but chooses a polarly different approach, that is, making it as simple as possible, like calling a friend on the phone.

According to Perloff, the choice of a telephone call as the link between the speaker/poet and the suggested addressee of the poem is "taken all too seriously" by most reviewers.⁷¹ However, it is helpful to note the nature of a telephone call beyond the campy surface into which it has been written. A phone call is more direct and instantaneous than writing an old-fashioned letter and receiving the poem on paper, but it is also much more ephemeral and immediate, much like O'Hara's poetry. It is also much less romantic than a letter, simply because it is more practical. The distance between the poet and the addressee is preserved via the telephone cable, unlike if the two people met face to face. According to Redell Olsen, this might "blur the distinctions between art and life"⁷² which seems to be precisely what "Personism" aims to achieve. "Personism has nothing to do with philosophy, it's all art,"⁷³ O'Hara euphorically declares in the manifesto. And he is right, in some ways: O'Hara only ever describes his movement explicitly, rather he does so in the fashion in which James Schuyler describes the

⁷⁰ Ezra Pound. *Make It New* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934).

⁷¹ Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 26.

⁷² Redell Olsen, "Kites and Poses: Attitudinal Interfaces in Frank O'Hara and Grace Hartigan" in *Frank O'Hara Now* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010): 189.

⁷³ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 499.

1950s New York poetry and painting: “It’s not that, It’s not that, It’s not that...”⁷⁴ Yet, “Personism” seems to fit into its own definition of a Personist poem through its lack of traditional poetic form, bluntness, immediacy, conversational tone, humor, tongue-in-cheek references, and camped-up commentaries. It is lively, upbeat, quick, and spontaneous. It is personal, but not confessional as it simply does not confess anything. It is not a poem overloaded by pathos and symbolism despite dealing with complex, “lofty”⁷⁵ topics, like the nature of poetry and love. “It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it.”⁷⁶ Through very implicit metatextuality, the poem aims at becoming its own subject. Most techniques that could be considered “Personist” by “Personism” are never overtly prescribed but immediately used in the poem. Rather than describing Personism, “Personism” is simply being Personist. The poem then loops on itself because “everything is in the poems”⁷⁷, and in the same way, Personism is in “Personism.” The manifesto reacting to Ginsberg’s critique of “Second Avenue” in this context is genius because O’Hara says about the poem, “I hope the poem to be the subject, not just about it,”⁷⁸ the same way “Personism” is Personist, not just about Personism.

2.4. Friendship and Immersivity

Since O’Hara’s tragic death in 1966,⁷⁹ the manifesto has been inherently bound to be pressed between two pages instead of two people.⁸⁰ But O’Hara did his best to make “Personism” as much an immersive experience as possible. He managed to write a manifesto to

⁷⁴ James Schuyler, “Poet and Painter Overture” in *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960*, 418.

⁷⁵ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 499.

⁷⁶ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 499.

⁷⁷ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

⁷⁸ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 495.

⁷⁹ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, xvi.

⁸⁰ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 499.

mock manifestoes that implicitly condemns itself (“everything is in the poems”). It subsequently meta-textually confirms itself through having the form of a prose poem written exactly according to the rules stated by itself; Personism is a non-existent mock movement that explicitly outlines no rules, gives no advice, yet stands on specific key techniques. The text is a wonderful example of O’Hara’s cheekiness and bravado, but also his thorough knowledge of literature, literary criticism, and the depths of his contemporary New York City art scene. O’Hara’s spontaneous way of writing, camped-up tone, witty humor, and a plethora of allusions with various effects help co-create the inviting experience that is “Personism.” Much like O’Hara’s hero, Jackson Pollock stepped into his paintings, O’Hara stepped into his poems and invited the reader along. The casual talk, colloquialisms, and oblique or inappropriate references make the prose poem read like a dialogue, rather than the dead form of a dramatic monologue. It reads more like a phone call from a good friend. And if Frank O’Hara can summon the illusion of friendship from a piece of paper, it is no surprise that more than 60 of O’Hara’s “best friends” turned up at his funeral in 1966.⁸¹

⁸¹ Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, 173.

3. Chapter II: Techniques of Proximity

The previous chapter considered Frank O'Hara's "Personism: A Manifesto" in terms of the style and attitude that Personism, as a poetic movement and a manifesto, asks of its adherents. The stylistic techniques demanded are purposefully the same techniques O'Hara used to write "Personism" as a poem, and they were analyzed regarding their effect and purpose. The following chapters will focus on applying the poetics outlined in "Personism: A Manifesto" on a larger scope of O'Hara's work.

This chapter will focus specifically on the techniques that emphasize the biographical details and create a sense of camaraderie with the reader, including allusions to people and settings, wit, and immediacy. These tools highlight O'Hara's life experiences, specific images, moments, and people he knew in New York City, creating an illusion of the inseparability of the author and the speaker. These techniques map New York City and its people through the poet's eyes, creating a sense of intimacy within his poems. Thus, they will be jointly described as "techniques of proximity."

This chapter addresses the following questions: Firstly, to what extent are the techniques of proximity in "Personism" specific to Personism both as a poem and as a concept? And secondly, to what extent are they unique within the context of O'Hara's earlier and later work? Answering these questions will help form a more comprehensive understanding of the evolution of O'Hara's work and its culmination in Personism.

The scope of analysis is broadened because, besides "Personism," other O'Hara's poems must be considered. The poems chosen for study were selected according to the following criteria: Firstly, the poems should represent the evolution of O'Hara's style throughout his life; therefore, they were chosen to be evenly spread throughout his career and published works. Secondly, they should adequately reflect his general style; hence, the pieces were primarily selected from influential anthologies such as *The New American Poetry and Postmodern*

American Poetry: A Norton Anthology, and O'Hara's own published poetry collections, including *A City Winter and Other Poems*, *Meditations in an Emergency*, *Odes*, *Love Poems*, and *Lunch Poems*.

3.1. O'Hara as "Early Mondrian": Early Use of Techniques of Proximity

O'Hara's poem published in *A City Winter*, "Early Mondrian," describes the development of the early work of the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian through the transformation of imagery, shifting tone, and the typical O'Harian wit. The title is, of course, a metonymy; thus, the poem concerns the development of Mondrian's visual art rather than of Mondrian as a person. O'Hara conveys this both formally and through the content of the poem. The imagery verges on the melodramatic, especially compared to O'Hara's "Personism." The first stanza seems to take itself unexpectedly seriously; it is filled with words and analogies overloaded with dark and somber symbolism: "The flower, the corpse in silhouette / its skeleton caught on a red drop / of yellow teaching ivory tusks..."⁸² To start a poem with natural imagery and tired symbolism seems out of character for the O'Hara, whose speaker is so deeply rooted in the urbane landscape that he, according to his own words, can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless he knows there's a subway handy.⁸³

However, while such imagery is not typical for O'Hara, the atmosphere aroused by the description of beauty and death in nature is very fitting for Mondrian's earliest naturalist work.⁸⁴ Noteworthy are, for example, Mondrian's solitary worker in the dead wood in his painting "Amsterdam Skyline Viewed from the West" and his dramatically colorful "Red Amaryllis with Blue Background." However, Mondrian's figurative paintings gradually developed into pure

⁸² O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 37.

⁸³ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 197.

⁸⁴ Michael Salcman, "Piet Mondrian's (1872–1944) 'Composition A, 1920': On the Road to Perfection," in *World Neurosurgery*, Vol. 81, 3–4, (2014): 447–450, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wneu.2014.01.014>.

abstraction, and O'Hara's imagery reflects this transformation. It is self-evident when contrasting the first and the last lines: "The flower, the corpse in silhouette / its skeleton caught on a red drop / of yellow teaching ivory tusks..."⁸⁵ and: "...before us from the foam appears / the clear architecture / of the nerves, whinnying and glistening / in the fresh sun. Clean and silent."⁸⁶ The choice of words and imagery alludes to the transition from the melodramatic, frantic Romanticism and the nonetheless self-serious high Modernism to their collapse and subversion in O'Hara's contemporaries' poetry.

This progression is surprising yet flows naturally; it is the element of surprise and a certain lofty exaggeration that is so typical for O'Hara and is present even in such early accounts of his poetry. This is especially visible in the last stanza: "The flower, / long since washed into Proteus' / car, so classically! is dead. And / before us from the foam appears / the clear architecture..." Through strikingly contrasting the rest of the poem, these couple lines function as a break from the drama and seriousness. O'Hara startles his readers through his surprising imagery and unpredictable twists and cuts, but also formally, i.e., via the dramatic use of interpunction. The sudden change of tone is ironic in its context; it raises an air of absurdity and thus gives the poem additional wit and humor. In the last verse, O'Hara skims over the clichés of Greek Mythology to innovate them with a shocking commentary that both mocks the academic fixation on Greek mythology⁸⁷ and downplays the earlier self-importance of the poem. The last stanza also uncovers the poem's consciousness of itself as a piece of literature, which is quite typical for O'Hara and is also present in Personism.

Ultimately, the poem describes Mondrian's earlier work with a gravity that is later undermined by the shift in tone towards the end of the poem. The poem sees Mondrian's

⁸⁵ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 37.

⁸⁶ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 38.

⁸⁷ i.e., Proteus and the divine beauty emerging from foam, like the Greek goddess Aphrodite.

progression towards abstract art in his later years as a progression towards perfection and better, fresher art, as suggested by the allusion to Aphrodite. The poem's attitude is fluid and shifts with every line, making it exciting, ironic, and sometimes even self-deprecating. But while the poem possesses the same wit, unexpectedness, and irony as O'Hara's later work, it lacks the techniques of proximity, the specific places, times, people, and events. Most importantly, it misses O'Hara's charismatic speaker – his satirical "I."

While "Early Mondrian" is atypical, poems like "The Pastoral Dialogue," "The Lover," or "The Young Christ" from *A City Winter and Other Poems* are thematically and stylistically closer to "Personism." In those poems, too, one can see O'Hara's wit, hilarious hyperbole, and a mock-lofty attitude. However, the imagery of those poems is often somber and unsettling, alluding to uneasy feelings and futile endings, which is an approach very different from his later work. In other poems, there is a pressing sense of passing time and fear of a rapidly approaching dark future. In "The Argonauts," the crucified Christ looks hopelessly "into the rose window of / the future and looks away."⁸⁸ The idiom "in the nick of time" is present in at least two pieces from the collection, "A Mexican Guitar" being one of them. This poem ends with one of the girls, Violet, crying: "All that evening eating peanut paste and onions / we chattered, sad, of films and the film industry / and how ballet is dying. And our feet ached. Violet / burst into tears first, she is always in the nick of time."⁸⁹

The emotional reaction, of course, may be seen as absolutely comedic; the indirect dialogue in the poem does not relate to anything too serious, and the idiom "in the nick of time" gives it an ironic twist. Even then, there is a profound sense of tragedy in somebody's emotions

⁸⁸ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 45.

⁸⁹ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 71.

being wasted on such an intellectual triviality. The last line arouses a sense of aimlessness and naivety in the youth, which inevitably slip away with time.

Most of O'Hara's early poems contain this relentlessly flowing time and a sense of impermanence. This awareness of transience and impending endings propels the enduring urgency for immediacy and material realness in O'Hara's poetry; [it is the directive force putting the techniques of proximity into practice](#)- in O'Hara's early works, as seen in "Early Mondrian" and *A City Winter and Other Poems*. O'Hara's early poems are heavy on allusions to friends and contemporary artists (i.e., Violet), complimented with tone and imagery that clearly expresses the speaker's relationship to them and thus gives the poem speed and immediacy; however, their usage is more characteristic for O'Hara's later work, i.e., "Personism" and *Love and Lunch Poems*. Neither the humor nor flippancy, so prominent in "Personism" and functioning as a technique of proximity, are present so strongly in these early works. However, O'Hara avoids the heavy-handed romantic-like pathos of the deeper, more symbolically loaded references by putting them in the context of his witticisms and ironic twists.

3.2. Specificity and Abstraction: Proximity via Undemocratic Allusions

The transformation of Mondrian's art described in "Early Mondrian" paradoxically parallels O'Hara's artistic journey toward abstraction; Mondrian's paintings become more abstract with the loss of specific images, whereas O'Hara's poems become more abstract as the imagery increases in specificity. It is in the later works, i.e., poems written around and after the publishing of *Meditations in an Emergency* in 1957, that allusions become the most powerful tool for achieving poet-reader proximity. It is not the quantity of allusions, and neither is it relevant to what and to whom these allusions are referring; it is about their abstract quality and elusiveness in the eyes of a reader.

In visual art, the absence of specificity leads to abstraction, as one can see with the late Mondrian gradually abandoning realistic and figurative painting in favor of his iconic geometric

patterns. But abstraction in poetry, as the manifesto shows, differs from abstraction in art: “Abstraction (in poetry, not painting) involves personal removal by the poet.”⁹⁰ Abstraction in poetry allows the reader to interpret the poem more freely by removing “social specification.”⁹¹ According to Sullivan, abstraction in visual art, if opposed to abstraction in poetry, excludes the perceiver from the creative process, like in Jackson Pollock’s painting.⁹² Contrary to both, a Personist abstraction may mean a poem so specific that a reader has no way to relate to it, to interpret it, and to infer its meaning. A Personist poem could have been a phone call, and a phone call does not ask for an eavesdropper, nor is it made with a reader in mind; it puts the poem “squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style.”⁹³ Completely disregarding the reader’s opinion and presence is essentially what the manifesto’s “death of literature as we know it”⁹⁴ means. And that is precisely what O’Hara does with his use of allusions to Bunny Lang, Jane Freilicher, Larry Rivers, Kenneth Koch, and other “coterie” figures – coterie figures because none of them were, nor are, commonly present in the popular consciousness.

A reader outside of the East Village/Tibor de Nagy gallery coterie might not associate the actual personalities of Jane Freilicher and Violet “Bunny” Lang with O’Hara’s characters. The reoccurring presence of coterie figures is a token of abstraction of specificity, that is present throughout most of O’Hara’s poetry and is a necessary tool for Personist writing. In *A City Winter*, for example, the poems “A Mexican Guitar” or “Jane Awake,” which were later reprinted in *Meditations in an Emergency*,⁹⁵ draw inspiration from the author’s friendships. There is a plethora of published and unpublished “Jane” and “Bunny” poems from O’Hara’s

⁹⁰ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

⁹¹ Ryan D. Sullivan, “Not you: Frank O’Hara and the poetics of ‘Personism’” in *Textual Practice* 34, no. 3: 422, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2018.1508064>.

⁹² Sullivan, “Not you,” 223.

⁹³ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 499.

⁹⁴ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 499.

⁹⁵ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 526.

earlier years: “Chez Jane,” “Interior (With Jane),” “Jane Bathing,” “A Terrestrial Cuckoo,” “V. R. Lang,” “A Letter to Bunny” and more. The characteristic presence of the duo wanes in O’Hara’s later collections, *Odes*, *Lunch Poems*, and *Love Poems*. In some cases, Bunny and Jane are substituted with other figures, like Vincent Warren, to whom many of the pieces in *Love Poems* are dedicated. However, their presence in O’Hara’s poetry is by far the strongest as a token of abstraction.

O’Hara made his stance against readership and accessibility quite evident in “Personism,” and then again, in the “Statement for The New American Poetry,” where he declares: “I don’t think of fame or posterity [...], nor do I care about clarifying experiences for anyone or bettering (other than accidentally) anyone’s state or social relation.”⁹⁶ This self-presentation of O’Hara as an artist unconcerned with his audience, doing art for the sake of art and being very nonchalantly genius about it, is very attractive. However, one may argue that a poet who publishes or presents his work inherently invites his readers into his poems and, hence, must be in some way or another concerned with them. This is, of course, true for O’Hara, too: he does not forget the reader but tries to purposefully ignore them. His allusions to his friends, people of East Village, places, and situations are so personal and time and place-specific that they become obscure and undemocratic to everyone outside this coterie, but to make matters worse, it is not only the time-specificity, some of O’Hara’s allusions are timeless, or, at least, less ephemeral, i.e., those to James Dean,⁹⁷ Billy Holiday,⁹⁸ or Hester Thrale,⁹⁹ whose 18th-century diary is a niche work for everyone, who is not an avid student of Samuel Johnson. Yet, O’Hara does not footnote, comment, or explain anything to an unknowing reader, therefore

⁹⁶ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 500.

⁹⁷ Frank O’Hara, “For James Dean” in *Meditations in an Emergency* (New York: Grove Press, 1969): 41.

⁹⁸ Frank O’Hara, “The Day Lady Died” in *Lunch Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1964): 25.

⁹⁹ O’Hara, “Meditations in an Emergency” in *Meditations in an Emergency*, 38.

leaving the piece “verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry.”¹⁰⁰

How then can be allusion described as one of O’Hara’s key tools for achieving proximity with the reader when thus far, it seems to alienate the reader rather than bring them closer to the poet’s experience? How can O’Hara’s style be marked with levity, humor, and camaraderie with his readership and audience when all he seems to do is discriminate against them and distract them from understanding his experience via intangible, abstract namedropping?

O’Hara’s poems are not as enigmatic as he presents them, at least not due to their reliance on allusions and name-dropping. For example, not recognizing Jane and Bunny as Freilicher and Lang does not necessarily hinder the reading of his poems; it just alters the reader’s experience of them. For example, in “A Terrestrial Cuckoo,” one needs not have read Jane Freilicher’s biography to understand that she is the speaker’s friend and a painter; the poem explains this quite quickly, for example, through instances like these: “I’d give a lempira or two / to have it all slapped onto / a canvas’ says Jane.”¹⁰¹ The casual language suggests a relaxed context, and the content shows an interest in visual art. The reader is forced to pretend they know Jane is a painter and a friend on a personal level and, therefore, to step into the role of a participant in the poem. Jane and Bunny as people and Jane and Bunny as characters fulfill the same role in O’Hara’s poems, and that is the role of good friends and muses. The speaker’s love and care for those characters is present in the tone, word choice, and witticisms, in addition to being very real for O’Hara himself. This makes his work more accessible to a larger audience while also remaining personal and creating an intimate relationship with the reader. This illusion

¹⁰⁰ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

¹⁰¹ O’Hara, “A Terrestrial Cuckoo” in *Meditations in an Emergency*, 24.

is what makes O'Hara's Personist poetry so appealing to readers and what makes Personism so inviting; it makes the reader present.

If one suspends their disbelief and takes part in O'Hara's poems as one of O'Hara's own, reading his poetry becomes like reading a postcard from a friend – or like receiving a phone call. Authentic, present, and sometimes keenly nostalgic. Biographical knowledge of O'Hara's close friends is perhaps an exciting addition to one's reading, but it is not essential; O'Hara's allusions to his inner circle, his idols, his friends, and their art are suddenly not intimidating but inviting. As David Herd writes: "It is a pleasure of O'Hara's poems that they name names, and that when, as is often the case, the name is of a writer or artist, one feels, not as in Eliot that one ought to have grappled with them already, but rather that it would be fun to try."¹⁰² The allusions are what makes O'Hara's speaker and O'Hara as a poet tied together and what keeps the reader pulled in and present in the poem, either as the flattered addressee or an eavesdropper at one of O'Hara's favorite New York nooks and hideouts.

To summarize, abstraction in O'Hara's poetry then lies in the specificity of naming people, places, and experiences instead of using universal imagery. While this may seem undemocratic and was, as much as one can believe a writer's statement on their own poetics, deliberately written to be so, O'Hara's use of obscure allusions is one of the key devices to actually bring the reader closer to the happenings of the poem, bring them up to speed with the speaker's diction and immediacy and make the reader a part of the poem, rather than serving it to them as something alien to be grappled with. The idea of disregarding the reader's comfort or understanding outlined in "Personism" is here put to practice and, to an extent, has been utilized throughout most of O'Hara's poetry. However, it fully culminates in *Lunch Poems*, which does

¹⁰² Stephen Fredman. *A Concise Companion to Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005) 51.

not include a poem without a further unspecified reference to one of O'Hara's personal friends, acquaintances, or to an otherwise private notion, be it an experience and a place.

3.3. New York City: Mimetic Intimacy and Immediacy

Spatial detail is equally important for O'Hara's later poems as his namedropping. The attention to the urbane and its utilization in O'Hara's poetry is one of his signature techniques. Still, this fixation on the buzzing, life-filled landscapes of the Big Apple has only become prominent in his later poetry collections. *A City Winter and Other Poems*, despite its name, does not outline New York as precisely as the later collections; it also paradoxically includes a poem titled "A Pastoral Dialogue," an exceptionally lewd, giddy, and ironic poem in which the setting is in stark contrast to O'Hara's typical urban settings. In the poem that gives name to O'Hara's second collection, "Meditations in an Emergency," the speaker claims: "I have never clogged myself with the praises of pastoral life nor with nostalgia for an innocent past of perverted acts in pastures."¹⁰³ Obviously, in the collection *Meditations in an Emergency*, the tendency towards urban setting becomes stronger; perhaps the most frequently cited lines about O'Hara's relationship to the urbane are from this poetry collection: "I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally regret life."¹⁰⁴

O'Hara's link to the city grew gradually only throughout his published work; in *A City Winter* and *Meditations in an Emergency*, New York is just a slightly prioritized setting of the poems, and its presence is not that distinctive. The importance of the city as a setting and "a continuous source of interesting and engaging details"¹⁰⁵ culminates in *Lunch Poems*

¹⁰³ O'Hara, "Meditations in an Emergency" in *Meditations in an Emergency*, 38.

¹⁰⁴ O'Hara, "Meditations in an Emergency" in *Meditations in an Emergency*, 38.

¹⁰⁵ Charles Altieri, "The Significance of Frank O'Hara," in *The Iowa Review* 4, no. 1 (1973): 93, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20158007>.

deliberately as a stylistic choice; the collection's focus is on poems written with speed and intensity, often based in New York. Many of the poems featured in *Lunch Poems*, such as "Music" and "Step Away from Them," chronologically precede *Meditations in Emergency* but were not chosen for that particular collection; rather, they were published later with more thematically similar works in *Lunch Poems*. Therefore, this transformation of settings across O'Hara's poetry and collections does not necessarily reflect his evolution as a poet but shows the changing focus of his poetry.

New York City forms a thematical unity in *Lunch Poems*, but not necessarily through the visual imagery or the implied external context of their creation, but through their inner speed and tempo, which is so specific for the fast-paced New York City life. It shares the quickness, immediacy, and nonchalance of O'Hara's poetry, the loud bravado and casual speech, as many of the *Lunch Poems* show on their, often conflicted, treatment of the city as a source and reflection of the speaker's or O'Hara's feelings.¹⁰⁶

Susan Holahan claims that his nostalgic version of O'Hara's New York no longer exists or "more likely never existed."¹⁰⁷ But in his poetry, New York is alive and beats with chatter of lost voices. It is dreamy ("Poem 'I watched an armory'"),¹⁰⁸ always covered in a mystical light ("Music"¹⁰⁹, "Poem: Khrushchev is coming"),¹¹⁰ mystical fog ("How to get There"),¹¹¹ buzzing with traffic and casual conversations ("Rhapsody") and dropped names of giants, both people

¹⁰⁶ Susan Holahan in "Frank O'Hara's Poetry" in *American Poetry Since 1960: Some Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Robert Shaw (Cheadle: Carcanet Press, 1973), 109, thinks it important to remind the reader that the speaker of O'Hara's poems "is, of course, Frank O'Hara's creation and not O'Hara himself" which is hard to argue in the context of New Criticism and its concept of intentional fallacy. However, it can be argued, with equal confidence, that based on the use of bibliographical information and details in his poetry, O'Hara, at least in his Personist poems, speaks for himself as well as any created "I".

¹⁰⁷ Holahan, "Frank O'Hara's Poetry," 109.

¹⁰⁸ O'Hara, "Poem" in *Lunch Poems*, 8.

¹⁰⁹ O'Hara, "Music" in *Lunch Poems*, 1-2.

¹¹⁰ O'Hara, "Poem" in *Lunch Poems*, 28.

¹¹¹ O'Hara, "How to Get There" in *Lunch Poems*, 44.

and places (“A Little Travel Diary”),¹¹² or it is terribly silent (“Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul”)¹¹³ and hostile (“Song”).¹¹⁴ O’Hara’s New York is not fantastical as Holahan suggests; it is not even idealized, but it is highly subjective. The city is endlessly growing and moving, which allows for moments, like a lunch break, to be terribly short-lived and quickly exchanged for another sensation. In “Song,” the seamless cuts between the thoughts, surreal imagination, and glimpses of New York City show the ephemerality of a moment in busy Manhattan and a busy mind and, hence, showing once again the driving force of O’Hara’s immediacy in writing: the awareness of transience and fleetingness of a moment.

does it just seem dirty
 that’s what you think of in the city
 you don’t refuse to breathe do you
 someone comes along with a very bad character
 he seems attractive. is he really. yes. very
 he’s attractive and his character is bad. is it. Yes

that’s what you think of in the city
 run your fingers along your no-moss mind

that’s not a thought that’s soot¹¹⁵

“Song,” unlike most of the *Lunch Poems*, is not loaded with discernable allusions to specific places or people. However, it shares features with Personism in another way: immediacy and urbanism that always appear together. The language is direct, blunt and conversational, reflecting the fast-paced nature of city life; the first line, unpunctuated, uncapitalized, in medias res, pulls the reader into the violent sensory quality of New York fast and deep. “Song” is a subversive ode to the city; O’Hara’s flippant tone and nonchalant attitude

¹¹² O’Hara, “How to Get There” in *Lunch Poems*, 46.

¹¹³ O’Hara, “Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul” in *Lunch Poems*, 34-35.

¹¹⁴ O’Hara, “Song” in *Lunch Poems*, 24.

¹¹⁵ O’Hara, “Song” in *Lunch Poems*, 24.

to the dirtiness of the city offhandedly comment on the inevitability of living and loving the city despite his flaws and moral ambiguity. New York is both alluring and dangerous for those who do not have enough power to resist it; it inspires carelessness and freedom, as the subtle allusion to the popular proverb “rolling stone gathers no moss” suggests. However, the last line shows that this urban bohemianism does not come without a price; a rolling stone in New York does not gather moss, metaphorically standing for responsibility; it gathers soot as a consequence. The city corrupts and spoils but also possesses irresistible allure; it is as much a physical space as it is a mental one.

This nature of New York informs O’Hara’s poetry and inspires to the creation and utilization of techniques of proximity. The city’s fast pace translates into urgency and directness in his poetry, hence further forcing immediacy in tone and form, mimetically bringing the reader into the chaos and speed of the settings and mental spaces. The presence of New York in O’Hara’s poems is distinctive; it is present in the background of “Personism” as well, e.g., in the offbeat mentions of LeRoi Jones, Ginsberg, and Bear Mountain, and due to its effect on diction, tone, and form, New York should be regarded as one of the techniques of proximity, or rather, one of the propellers of these techniques.

3.4. Speed, Pop-Culture and Iconoclast

“Song” is not a unique representation of this force-giving diction, speed accelerated by experimental punctuation, subversive irony, wit, bravado, flippancy, and levity. It is a great example of what is typical for O’Hara, along with poems like “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday”¹¹⁶ (published in *Lunch Poems*, not in *Meditations in an Emergency*), which starts with a cannonball “Quick!” and a cacophonous sequence of specific objects, colors and sounds, a

¹¹⁶ O’Hara, “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday” in *Lunch Poems*, 7.

sequence so fast and urgent it does not conjure experiences separately but an inescapable collage of childhood, of New York, of wonderfully undramatic subjectivity. The same goes for more recent poems, such as but not limited to “The Day Lady Died,”¹¹⁷ “Having a Coke with You” from 1959 and “Poem: ‘Lana Turner Has Collapsed’” from 1962.¹¹⁸

All of the poems, in addition to being inspired by New York and employing techniques of intimacy, also possess the physical side of urbanism: chaos and a certain physical diction, catch-phrases echoing advertisements and pop culture, unmistakably tied to New York City, as can be inferred from the titles alone and as can also be observed in “Personism,” hence further adding to the specificity and in turn forcing the reader to enter the poem as something he should already be familiar with, something of his own. All these poems have the potential to generalize and, hence, appeal to a wider audience and offer a wider understanding of the speaker’s emotions. Changing simple details, like not writing an elegy specifically about Billie Holiday in “The Day Lady Died,” or removing minute details, like drinking “a soda” or “a beer” as opposed to the iconic Coca-Cola, could easily make O’Hara’s poetry more relatable and approachable in the conventional sense. However, this would come at the cost of their mimetic quality, hence, this potential remains purposefully ignored, creating a staple of O’Hara’s style and forcing the New York City sensory overload on his reader or his audience. The use of imagery that is easy to recall, i.e., a bottle of Coca-Cola, adds to the immediacy of O’Hara’s poetry and comes as uncalled for as the visual and auditory clatter of busy Manhattan streets that summoned these images for O’Hara. This also adds to the speed, immediacy, and intimacy in O’Hara’s poetry and should be regarded as one of the techniques of proximity originating from the influence of New York City.

¹¹⁷ O’Hara, “The Day Lady Died” in *Lunch Poems*, 25-26.

¹¹⁸ O’Hara, “Poem” in *Lunch Poems*, 78.

The previous section showed that allusions to specific coterie figures may create a sense of speaker/poet-reader proximity despite their abstraction. Similar logic can be applied to the namedropping of places in New York City, thus making it a technique of proximity: the speaker invites the reader into the poem as somebody who is no stranger to its contents, characters, and places, hence forcing the reader to adapt to this intimacy and step into the role the poem outlines for them. This works equally well, for example, in “Music,” which opens with a clatter of specific names of specific places in O’Hara’s New York, as it does in some of his earlier collections with specific people, i.e., Violet and Jane in “A Mexican Guitar.”

However, New York has a bigger role to play in O’Hara’s poems. The fast-paced, chaotic push and pull of the multi-faceted city is what inspires the use of techniques of proximity in his later works, as well as the desire to capture the fleeting moments in the rushed movements and transformations of the city. The speed of diction, often accelerated by punctuation or lack thereof, mimics the speed, chaos, unpredictability, and constantly changing, multi-faceted nature of New York City, as is the case in “Song,” “Music,” and other poems. As shown in the transposition of poems from different periods of O’Hara’s life, these stylistic choices are not unique to his later poetry; there was “speed enough”¹¹⁹ in poems written quite early in O’Hara’s artistic career. However, this speed is not always inspired by New York, but also by the poet’s keen awareness of fleeting time and ephemerality of a moment, which inspired his earlier works, i.e., “A Mexican Guitar” or “The Argonauts.” No matter the origin of the rush, this speed and immediacy pull readers in with a ferocious urgency, creating an illusion of their personal experience, arousing a personal investment, and hence forming a strong element of intimacy between the poem and the reader. This immediacy and proximity are also

¹¹⁹ O’Hara, “Sleeping on the Wing” in *Meditations in an Emergency*, 44.

accelerated by sharply defined imagery conjuring specific ideas in the reader's mind, as is the case of "Having a Coke with You."

These techniques create a uniquely close relationship between the poem and its reader, hence being called techniques of proximity. In the wider context of the chronological evolution of O'Hara's poetry, these techniques have been used regularly throughout his career. Therefore, poem-reader or poet-reader proximities are not concepts that O'Hara has employed gradually, as the chronology of his published collections suggests. Rather, these concepts have been present throughout O'Hara's poetry but only came into focus and culmination in his latest *Lunch Poems* and *Love Poems* and brought attention to by "Personism: A Manifesto."

The culminating focus on techniques of proximity is interesting in the context of the manifesto. Given the steady use of the techniques of proximity (allusion, immediacy, wit), the mock manifesto did not mark a change in O'Hara's personal poetry. The techniques used in the prose poem have been employed regularly by the poet in the years preceding the manifesto. Therefore, as a statement on poetics, "Personism" is more accurate than Donald Allen thought when putting together *The New American Poetry: 1945–1960*, for which the text was originally intended, but deemed ineffective in describing a wider scope of O'Hara's poetry.¹²⁰ It is no wonder Allen declined the manifesto; much is said and written about the presence of the poet and intimacy in "Personism," and as much is immediately revoked, when O'Hara writes: "Personism [...] does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it!"¹²¹ And, of course, O'Hara is correct: Personism, in its attempt at proximity to the reader, is not confessionism, a plea for sympathy, or just a fun way to deliver autobiographical information. The personality and intimacy in O'Hara's poems lie in the reader's presence in the dialogue or a conversation,

¹²⁰ Brad Gooch, *City poet: the life and times of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Knopf, 1993): 339.

¹²¹ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 449.

which is achieved through the relaxed, simple language, the careless speed with which the poem moves toward people, objects, and places, and the flippancy, conversational tone and casual humor with which O'Hara introduces them.

The same is true for "Personism: A Manifesto," which is a great example of the techniques of proximity being put into practice and implicitly defined. Therefore, "Personism" does, in fact, reflect a vast scope of O'Hara's work. "Personism" is, rather unexpectedly (given its unserious language, extravagant irony, enigmatic allusions, and out-of-context references to people, places, and experiences from which the reader is often excluded) a serious statement on O'Hara's poetry. Despite this apparent reader-exclusion, "Personism" is likely the most reader-friendly and least obscure manifesto of its time. It forces no heavy-handed, pretentious poeticizing or new, self-important terminology; it is itself, as a prose poem, an effective example and description of O'Hara's poetic style, as the contrast with his poetry shows.

4. Chapter III: Between the -isms, the Journey to Personism

The previous chapter showed how techniques of proximity, techniques suggested by and employed in “Personism: A Manifesto,” work and develop in O’Hara’s poetry across his poetic career. However, to describe the idea of a Personist poem in its entirety, one has to consider its formal side as well as the stylistic one. The selection of poems for the analysis of formal techniques will reach beyond the anthologized works of Frank O’Hara to prove and discuss early experimentation with forms that are otherwise atypical for him and do not align with the ideas outlined in the manifesto. The poems containing O’Hara’s early experimentation (ending approximately in 1951-52)¹²² will be contrasted with his later, more developed personal style. This comparison will show key differences, continuations and inspirations in his work on the formal aspect of his poetry. Attention is also paid to the use of juxtaposition of images and ideas, either through the use of enjambment, diction, lineation, or other techniques, which is a defining aspect of O’Hara’s Personist work. In conclusion, the idea of a Personist poem will have been thoroughly defined and shown using examples from O’Hara’s *Collected Poems*.

In contrast to the focus of this chapter, “Personism” speaks volumes about the redundancy of traditional formal techniques. Specifically, O’Hara states in his typical tongue-in-cheek tone: “I don’t even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve.”¹²³ He also stresses the nature of formal techniques as a hindrance in poetic expression when he says: “if someone’s chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don’t turn around and shout, ‘Give up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep.’”¹²⁴ To the many contemporaries who

¹²² Susan Holahan in “Frank O’Hara’s Poetry,” 114, suggests the period of experimentation in O’Hara’s poetry ended in 1951 with the development of his signature use of syntax. John Ashbery in “Introduction” in *The Collected Poems*, viii, states that the period of O’Hara’s experimentation ended in 1952.

¹²³ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

¹²⁴ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

criticized O'Hara's poetry through a more conventional lens (like Donald Hall¹²⁵ or Robert Lowell,¹²⁶ for example), these lines may read as a feeble excuse for incompetence and disregard for the institution of poetry. However, even in his early work, O'Hara shows a vast knowledge of literary and poetic tradition and his ability to cleverly emulate it into his own voice and for his own agenda. This is especially obvious in his early experimentation in poems like "Oranges: 12 Pastorals" and "Poem: 'At Night Chinamen Jump'."

4.1. Walt Whitman: Behind O'Hara's Mock-Pastoral and Urbanism

In O'Hara's generation, Walt Whitman, famous for his urban pastoral and revolutionary verse, was already a widely recognized poetic figure, and his innovative free verse was no longer unique among 20th-century poets. Nonetheless, the 1950s saw Whitman as an influential figure, frequently cited as an inspiration for the poets of O'Hara's generation, like Allen Ginsberg¹²⁷ and O'Hara himself.¹²⁸ Whitman's influence on O'Hara and his generation is a topic vaster than the scope of this analysis allows, hence, it will focus strictly on the details most relevant to the analysis of specific poems.

One of the first poems published in *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, "Oranges: 12 Pastorals" written in 1949, toys, not with an insignificant layer of irony and irreverence, with the concept of the idealization of the pastoral. The poem is O'Hara's take on Walt Whitman's style, an urban mock-pastoral and a lewd one, rather than romantic, yet, at times, similar in diction. Where Whitman would write his exclamative "Beat! Beat! Drums!"¹²⁹ O'Hara would write a

¹²⁵ John Martin-Joy et al., *Conversations with Donald Hall*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021): 97, ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹²⁶ Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 13.

¹²⁷ Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, 337.

¹²⁸ Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, 26.

¹²⁹ Walt Whitman, "Beat! Beat! Drums!" in *The New Oxford Book Of War Poetry*, edited by Jon Stallworthy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 126.

camped-up: “Everyone! Everywhere! Dance!”¹³⁰ making use of the chant-like rhythm and cadence to create a musical quality for his poem, the same way Whitman did, except with camped-up irony and conversational (perhaps the influence of Williams’ poetry) verse, rather than a bardic one. In “Oranges: 12 Pastorals,” musicality is not always as regular as it is in Whitman’s poetry; some lines are too long to have their rhythm influenced by lineation; in such cases, O’Hara, much like in “Personism,” relies on the inner structure of the sentence or contrasting sentence length to create a flowing, spontaneous rhythm. In the first section of the poem O’Hara relies on alliteration:

Black crows in the burnt mauve grass, as intimate as rotting rice, snot on a white linen field.
Picture to yourselves Tess amidst the thorny hay, her new-born shredded by the ravenos cutter-bar, and there were only probably vague lavender flowers blooming in the next field.¹³¹

The alliteration’s focus changes with the one of the scenes. The first line and the first half of the second line are heavy on plosives and sibilants, giving the diction a more urgent quality, whereas the second half of the second line, as the focus shifts from Tess to a distant lavender field, is more focused on vowels, which are more melodic and soothing. This change in sound reflects the gravity of the changing scene: Tess is, of course, an allusion to Hardy’s *Tess of d’Urbervilles*, a classical work with a famously tragic ending. Tess, with her illegitimate newborn, who is soon to die, standing amid the vast English landscape, having disappointed her family and having her own prospect of love ruined for her, is a tragic scene. Such a scene is intense even in the context of O’Hara’s brass, humor, and irony, and the second half of the second line meditatively releases the tension by removing the focus from the scene of Tess to a

¹³⁰ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 7.

¹³¹ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 5. Emphasis by Karolína Turynová.

more distant place, which is underscored by the use of the melodic vowels. This shift in perspective seems more painting-like than literary; a detail also applicable to Hardy's prose.¹³²

"Oranges: 12 Pastorals" includes contrasting images and juxtapositions, which is something that O'Hara later frequently uses to inject an element of surprise and surrealism into his poetry. But in this early instance of his poetry, the images are not so much evoking dadaism or surrealism, but camped-up metaphors, showing O'Hara's capability to use them well and use them in a fresh, unserious way. These metaphors made new, or at least less conventional, are contrasted via an unadventurous use of punctuation, rather than enjambment that is typical for O'Hara's later poetry:

O pastures dotted with excremental discs, wheeling in interplanetary green, your brown eyes stare down our innocence, the brimstone odor of your stars sneer at out horoscope!¹³³

The sentences, despite their length, are dutifully punctuated at the end of every line, and the individual clauses are divided by a syntactically correct use of commas, which is something O'Hara later abandons in favor of speed, immediacy, and spontaneity in his Personist verse. This can be seen, for example, in "Ave Maria," also a Whitman-inspired poem.

"Ave Maria" written in 1960 and published in *Lunch Poems*, makes use of Whitman's celebratory verse and exclamations and does so even more discernibly. This is evident on the mock-patriotic expletive from the start:

Mothers of America
 let your kids go to the movies!
 get them out of the house so that they don't know what
 you're up to
 it's true that fresh air is good for the body
 but what about the soul¹³⁴

¹³² Penelope Vigar, "The Technique of the Novels," in *The Novels of Thomas Hardy: Illusion and Reality*, (London: The Athlone Press, 1974), 13-56.

¹³³ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 5.

¹³⁴ O'Hara, "Ave Maria" in *Lunch Poems*, 51.

The time difference between writing “Oranges: 12 Pastorals” and “Ave Maria” is more than ten years, and it is strikingly obvious in regard to the form. The musicality in “Ave Maria” is not achieved so much through sound patterning, but by O’Hara’s iconic use of enjambment and run-on sentences. Using the typewriter allowed O’Hara to create regular columns of texts, which becomes advantageous in matching the longer lines with their shorter continuations; jumping from the end of the line back at the beginning of the next line takes more effort than only going back half a line or less. This is what O’Hara does with this particular choice of lineation; the choice of longer and shorter lines and their placement within the line space manages the tempo in which the reader reads the poem. Therefore, “Ave Maria,” while being similar in diction to Whitman’s celebratory patriotic works, is otherwise original in terms of lineation. Nonetheless, it is still appreciative, or at least acknowledging, of its literary history, albeit with a significant level of irony. The two Whitman-inspired poems contrast in terms of form and show O’Hara’s progress as a poet and his openness to forms older and new and his gradual growth towards form focused on enjambment.

4.2. Early Experimentation: Classic O’Hara

One might argue that knowing Whitman in 1950s America and using his most famous techniques in one’s poetry is not exactly impressive or innovative, nor is it telling about the degree of one’s knowledge of the literary tradition. However, O’Hara successfully experimented with other sources and styles, not without a layer of irony. One of his published experiments was “Poem: ‘At Night Chinamen Jump’,” which was written in February of 1950,¹³⁵ but published first in *A City Winter* in 1952, then again in *Meditations in an Emergency* in 1957 and in Allen’s anthology. The poem was originally titled “A Poem in Envy of Catullus”¹³⁶ which explains its

¹³⁵ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 519.

¹³⁶ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 519.

curious form and lewd content. Catullian, according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, very conveniently means related to Catullus’ “lyric poems, which are marked by the facility of language, the perfection of form, and intensely personal subject matter.”¹³⁷ The “intensely personal subject matter” is a rather understated and tame description of Catullus’ sexually explicit poems, like, for example, “Poem 16,” which is claimed, by the translator, Simon Smith, to echo O’Hara:¹³⁸

(Aurelius in the gob) I’ll take on all comers as only
 I know how to fuck (Furius up the ass) the both

of you read my poems backward but can’t read me

so just watch it – you think I’m a bird, don’t you?
 if the real poet should be chaste his poems needen’t be –

then they should rub salt with charm – then,
 and only then, when like a poofy truck driver

not decent, my verses might incite an itch you can’t
 scratch, some action in the grey-haired old fuckers

in need of hip replacements, but you who read my lips
 for a thousand kisses are mistaken about my manhood:

up the ass or in the gob, I’ll take on all comers.¹³⁹

In its directness and shamelessness, the translated poem indeed does echo O’Hara’s tongue-in-cheek, wit and open form. However, O’Hara tends to be much more eloquent in his treatment of sexual themes, albeit controversial in other aspects, like in the “Poem: ‘At Night Chinamen Jump’”:

At night Chinamen jump
 on Asia with a thump

¹³⁷ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “Catullian,” accessed July 20, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Catullian>.

¹³⁸ Gaius Valerius Catullus, “Book One” in *The Books of Catullus*, trans. Simon Smith (London: Carcanet Press, 2018): 18, accessed July 20, 2024, ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹³⁹ Catullus, “Book One” in *The Books of Catullus*, 18.

while in our willful way
 we, in secret, play

 affectionate games and bruise
 our knees like China's shoes.

 The birds push apples through
 grass the moon turns blue,

 these apples roll beneath
 our buttocks like a heath

 full of Chinese thrushes
 flushed from China's bushes.

 As we love at night
 birds sing out of sight,

 Chinese rhythms beat
 through us in our heat,

 the apples and the birds
 move us like soft words,

 we couple in the grace
 of that mysterious race.¹⁴⁰

The "perfection in form"¹⁴¹ could be here regarded as the playful regular rhyme scheme, otherwise alien to O'Hara's later poems. The sexual subtext here is discernable through cheeky suggestions ("we, in secret, play / affectionate games and bruise / our knees like China's shoes", "As we love at night / birds sing out of sight / Chinese rhythms beat / through us in our heat").¹⁴² "The facility of language"¹⁴³ here would be the almost children's story-like word choice, also echoing the American "the birds and the bees" talk: "the apples and the birds / move us like soft words."¹⁴⁴ O'Hara has accomplished to fulfill the general definition of a Catullian poem with

¹⁴⁰ O'Hara, "Poem" in *Meditations in an Emergency*, 6.

¹⁴¹ *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, "Catullian."

¹⁴² O'Hara, "Poem" in *Meditations in an Emergency*, 6.

¹⁴³ *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, "Catullian."

¹⁴⁴ O'Hara, "Poem" in *Meditations in an Emergency*, 6.

humor, camp and sass, proving his knowledge and capability to emulate classical sources. The comparison between O'Hara and Catullus is an interesting one, made even by Allen Ginsberg, but unfortunately outside of the scope of this text.

4.3. Past Meditations in an Emergency: The French Influence

According to Holahan, it is after 1951 that the fragmented syntax that readers now associate with O'Hara emerges from the experimentation.¹⁴⁵ This change in style is not as clearcut as she states; for example, "Poem: 'The Eager Note on my Door...'" written in 1950 already has all it takes to display O'Hara's Personist syntax. As Holahan describes it: "it gives the poet a handle on time."¹⁴⁶ Time is an interesting topic for O'Hara; it has to do with the immediacy and speed, but also helps to introduce yet another influence informing his poetry: the French Avant-Garde influence, which, according to Perloff, is what makes O'Hara different from his contemporary schools and influences¹⁴⁷ and which has been thoroughly explored by Lehman and Silverberg.¹⁴⁸

After his early years of experimentation, enjambment surfaces as the most obvious and the strongest formal device used in O'Hara's poetry. The choice of line breaks, which helps keep the reader engaged, paces the work in connection to its topic and helps deepen the juxtapositions between different ideas and images.

"Poem: The Eager Note on my Door...," is written with very little punctuation and uses the line break to introduce contrasting ideas, images and even timelines helping develop surrealist elements in the poem. The run-on lines and their breaks here function as key tools for

¹⁴⁵ Holahan, "Frank O'Hara's Poetry," 115.

¹⁴⁶ Holahan, "Frank O'Hara's Poetry," 114.

¹⁴⁷ Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 30.

¹⁴⁸ David Lehman and Mark Silverberg both dedicated their work to the study of The New York School. This thesis is indebted to both their books, *The Last Avant-Garde* and *The New York School Poets*, cited in bibliography.

creating a sense of musicality and rhythm within; contrary to “Oranges: 12 Pastorals” and “Poem: ‘At Night Chinamen Jump’,” alliteration and rhyme are no longer a key tool:

The eager note on my door said “Call me,
call when you get in!” so I quickly threw
a few tangerines into my overnight bag,
straightened my eyelids and shoulders, and

headed straight for the door. It was autumn
by the time I got around the corner, oh all
unwilling to be either pertinent or bemused, but
the leaves were brighter than grass on the sidewalk!

Funny, I thought, that the lights are on this late
and the hall door open; still up at this hour, a
champion jai-alai player like himself? Oh fie!
for shame! What a host, so zealous! And he was

there in the hall, flat on a sheet of blood that
ran down the stairs. I did appreciate it. There are few
hosts who so thoroughly prepare to greet a guest
only casually invited, and that several months ago.¹⁴⁹

The poem may point to a narrative, relationships, and context underlying the absurdity of, for example, throwing tangerines and nothing else into an overnight bag. However, these elements are not accessible to O’Hara’s readers; they are merely suggested and then aborted, like the run-on sentences always point to the next line. Ending the lines with cohesive words rushes the reader on to the following line which always evolves even more unexpectedly than the previous one. Here, the enjambment underscores the surreal elements in the poem, and helps to juxtapose the surreal fragments of narratives. A literal reading of the poem is possible but not plausible; O’Hara is not a poet to dramatically wail about an actual tragedy, so the potentially grim ending is subverted by O’Hara’s absurd comment: “I did appreciate it.”¹⁵⁰ O’Hara has adopted the whole progression of the surreal narrative (the doors, autumn, a corpse, ironic

¹⁴⁹ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 14.

¹⁵⁰ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 14.

subversion of tragedy) from Apollinaire's surrealist poem "The Lady" from his major collection *Alcools*, where a "happy little mouse" breaks the catharsis of a perceived tragedy:

Knock-knock He closed his door
Lilies in the garden withered
And who is the corpse they're hauling off

You just knocked on his door
And trot trot
Happy little mouse¹⁵¹

While both poems are written in free verse, the details of their form are not the same:

O'Hara purposefully puts conjunctions last where he wants to hurry the reader, or where he offers an ambiguous reading, for example in the following lines: "What a host, so zealous! And he was / there in the hall, flat on a sheet of blood." Compared to O'Hara, Apollinaire's lineation is tamer and slower, which does not give the poignant end as much emphasis as O'Hara's surreal text.

"Chez Jane" (1952) is another example of O'Hara's use of surrealistic elements and perhaps one of the most pronounced ones. In the poem, the surreal triumphs over the literal, both in terms of the narrative and imagery and it does it so strongly that the poem has been described by Gray as "straight surrealism."¹⁵² However, as can be seen in the later poems, for example, "Ave Maria," these surrealist elements eventually lose their potency and O'Hara focuses on the real (camped up, but real) in *Lunch Poems* and *Love Poems*, which are concerned with two things of equal importance: Love and Lunch. Nonetheless, a level of dream-like imagery and surreal elements persists in his later poetry, as will be shown in, for example, "Having a Coke with You," but it is approximately around 1951 that this shift towards realism takes place.

¹⁵¹ Apollinaire, Guillaume "The Lady" in *Alcools: Poems*, translated by Donald Revell (Middletown: University Press of New England Wesleyan University Press, 1995), 135.

¹⁵² Richard Gray, "Beats, Prophets and Aesthetes: American Poetry since the Second World War" in *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* (London: Longman, 1990): 317.

4.4. Love and Lunch in the Postmodern World

O'Hara's early experimentation does not only show his knowledge of literary context, but also his ability to emulate this tradition into something of his own. Holahan provides further examples of O'Hara's knowledge of his literary context, imminent and distant, such as his study of poets like Ronsard, Heine, Petrarch, Anglo-Saxon charms, Rilke, Coleridge, Eliot, Olson and Stein.¹⁵³ It is, therefore, safe to assume that O'Hara's choice of form then is a deliberate one, one with an agenda and one requiring skill. His poetic form is not as commonplace and effortless as the manifesto tries to persuade its readers.

So, what does it say about form, that it is not saying explicitly? The same method of relying on mimesis or the self-consciousness of the text that has been applied to the techniques of proximity cannot be applied here, since "Personism" is a prose poem and therefore defies all formal techniques by its inherent absence of interpretable breaks in lineation, which is otherwise a powerful tool in O'Hara's work. What little it does show, however, shares features with some of his most iconic later works (either informing or informed by the manifesto), which rely on free verse, irregular stanzas, lines of variable lengths, absence of rhyme scheme, and inconstant and often asyntactic punctuation. The choice of form in what could be deemed as O'Hara's Personist works is not a conventional one, nor one to be simply defined, but it is not arbitrary or uninformed. The regularity of the use of irregular meter, verse length, stanza length, uneven use of lines, fragmentation of syntax, narratives, and imagery is possibly the only regularity in O'Hara's later poetry. While it defies any simple categorization, as movements inherently do,¹⁵⁴ it can be, in connection to some of its other aspects, considered typically postmodern in form, i.e., via the composition of fragmented narratives and collage-like elements, for example, pop-

¹⁵³ Holahan, "Frank O'Hara's Poetry," 114.

¹⁵⁴ Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 552.

culture references, which mimetically represent postmodern life, as well as through using surprising juxtapositions and often illogical connections that allow puns and spark humor which subverts readers' expectations, and hence, pushes the narratives towards the absurd, a staple of postmodern literature.

4.5. Between the -isms

The alignment of the form of Personist poems with the general notion of what postmodern features are, of course, does not mean that Personism is Postmodernism. While the “technical apparatus,”¹⁵⁵ “rhythm, assonance and all that stuff”¹⁵⁶ are employed in O’Hara’s poetry, as well as they are employed in “Personism,” they are not the key concern of O’Hara’s poems. Form does not overshadow content; form develops around the content to support it, for example, in terms of speed and cadence, humor, and puns. As O’Hara states at the very beginning of his manifesto, “everything is in the poems,”¹⁵⁷ not on their formal façade of figures of speech, measured verse, and stylized rhymes. Moreover, O’Hara’s poetry is strongly modernist in content through the use of allusions and intertextual elements, focus on the urban experience and the fragmentary. Personism then stands in between the two aesthetic tendencies; it shares enough affinities with both movements to defy easy categorization into either. Personism, hence, stands alone in the middle of two major aesthetic movements and may stand proudly so, as it has actually accomplished to “make it new.”¹⁵⁸

4.6. “Having a Coke with You”: A Personist Poem

¹⁵⁵ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498

¹⁵⁶ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498

¹⁵⁷ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498. Emphasis by Karolína Turynová.

¹⁵⁸ Pound, *Make it New*.

After outlining what techniques and approaches to creation O'Hara implicitly asks of the imaginary adherents of his mock manifesto, that is, the techniques of proximity, and outlining the key formal features of O'Hara's poetry throughout his career in the context of this mock manifesto, a concrete idea of what an ideal Personist poem could look like emerges. Of course, "Personism: A Manifesto" itself, albeit being a prose poem, is a very good example of a Personist poem with its immediacy and intimacy with the reader, but it is not formally typical for O'Hara's poems; the enjambment, irregular verse with lines hanging over one another with conjunctions, or lack thereof, is absent from the text. However, versed poems, such as "Having a Coke with You", "The Day Lady Died," and, obviously, "Personal Poem," the genesis of which is even noted down in the manifesto,¹⁵⁹ contain all the abovementioned features and fit perfectly the manifesto's explicit and implicit requirements.

"Having a Coke with You" was published in *Love Poems* in 1965, O'Hara's last poetry collection, but it was written in 1960, marking the beginning of one of his most productive periods. Written soon after "Personism," it was written in the same spirit, essentially taking its own advice.

Formally, the poem looks quite regular at first sight, however, it starts from line zero: the whole poem unexpectedly begins before its first line and that by the title. "Having a Coke with You" has the role of a subject of the next six lines and thus syntactically and semantically functions as an essential part of the first quarter of the poem. This makes the number of lines in each stanza uneven. The number of syllables in each line also does not follow any given pattern, completely disregarding poetic convention. Punctuation is entirely omitted in the whole text, and the tempo is decided by the use of enjambment; sometimes for the purposes of repetition, but

¹⁵⁹ Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, 186.

oftentimes, O'Hara leaves the reader hanging on his last word, either an image (Bayonne, Barcelona, yoghurt, birches...) or a phrase that requires its end (as still..., in front of it..., back and forth...), hence forcing the reader to read further for an explanation or a finished idea, just like in "Poem: 'Eager Note on my Door...'" O'Hara, unlike Ginsberg, does not aim for breath-length lines; his poems are not to be shouted from coffee shops. What he aims for is speed, not only to capture the fleeting nature of the moments of his poetry but also to make the reader feel the speed of their own breath or breathlessness. This happens either when the line stretches too long or when it ends unexpectedly before the idea is finished, breaking the reader's expectations of regular diction, pausing, and intonation. This also has to do with the way of performing the poem; O'Hara does not care about the reader's understanding of his intricate allusions, but he does care about their understanding of the beautiful ideas and their sound. In Daniel Kane's intriguing essay bridging post-war poetry and punk, he shows that East Village readings, of which O'Hara was a part, were becoming "increasingly performance-oriented"¹⁶⁰ and reader/spectator inclusive. And according to Patti Smith, a poet and a singer-songwriter, it was O'Hara who started to re-inspire poetry as an act of active, immersive performance rather than a passive dictation: "I mean in the Sixties there was all that happening stuff. Then Frank O'Hara died and it sort of petered out, and then Dylan and Allen revitalized it."¹⁶¹ Unfortunately, this act of O'Hara's poetry as an immersive experience was lost with the poet himself; the few recorded readings do not do it justice as they have been mostly recorded in O'Hara's home and without a wider audience.¹⁶² However, even the recordings show the nonstandard diction and speed with

¹⁶⁰ Fredman, *A Concise Companion*, 194.

¹⁶¹ Victor Bockris, *Beat Punks: New York's Underground Culture from the Beat Generation to the Punk Explosion* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998): 42.

¹⁶² The Frank O'Hara Project, "Videos," at *The Frank O'Hara Project*, accessed August 1, 2024, <https://www.frankohara.org/video/>.

which O'Hara read "Having a Coke with You."¹⁶³ The elements O'Hara stresses are often at the beginning of the line and lose potency in the middle; the unexpected twist at the end marks a change of diction, as the lineation and enjambment suggest in the poem. The most emotionally charged parts, and hence the most semantically important parts, are often hurled in the middle, overshadowed by a surprising turn or an object withdrawing the reader's attention from anything, that could be considered serious. This, of course, echoes "Personism," which also diverts the reader's attention from a statement on poetics by frequent allusions and humorous and witty remarks and has to be read carefully to be "got at one reading."¹⁶⁴ The poem defines its core just like the manifesto defines its poetic principles; instead of saying "I love you," it says "I do not not love you." Personism is not defined so much by what it is, rather, it defines what it is not, and it certainly is not predictable; the formal structure of "Having a Coke with You" subverts traditional poetic convention through the loose use of lineation, rhythm, and other "technical apparatus,"¹⁶⁵ as O'Hara calls it. The omission of punctuation and the use of enjambment create a sense of urgency and fluidity, as the reader is asked to seek completion of the unfinished ideas or pending physical images.

4.6.1. "Having a Coke with You:" Materiality

Regarding the material aspect of the poem, the use of a Coke rather than a more conventional, unbranded beverage in the title is a great example of introducing material objects into poetry. Coke seems to have a more "material" quality than, say, orange juice. Firstly, it is incredibly specific in its branding, bottle, and logo, which have not changed much since the

¹⁶³ Frank O'Hara, "Reading 'Having a Coke with You' from USA: Poetry," *The Frank O'Hara Project*, filmed March 5, 1966, accessed August 2024, <https://www.frankohara.org/video>.

¹⁶⁴ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 598.

¹⁶⁵ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 598.

1920s.¹⁶⁶ Secondly, most of Western societies can probably form a very whole image of a bottle of Coke in their minds with surprising effortlessness. This may be given by the amount of Coca-Cola (commercials) one has consumed over their life, which is not entirely generation-specific; in the 1960s, advertisements were influential enough to make their way into art,¹⁶⁷ they must have made their way into people's minds as well.

Another example of the use of material objects in the poem would be in lines 0-5:

“Having a Coke with You / is even more fun than going to San Sebastian / [...] / partly because of my love for you, partly because of your love for yoghurt”.¹⁶⁸ The detail about the addressee's love for yoghurt comes entirely unanticipated after the speaker's confession of love, making it light and bubbly. However, the yoghurt is not only a displaced object but also an object displaced from another time, situation, or conversation that has made its way into the poem, hence also reflecting the way O'Hara works with time and its fluidity in his poetry: in an unexpected and non-linear fashion typical for modern and postmodern poetry alike. The presence of the yoghurt in this particular context of the poem also alludes to an inside joke or a specific memory shared between the speaker and the addressee, just like the “being sick to my stomach on the Travesera de Gracia in Barcelona.”¹⁶⁹ However, these narrative elements are as quickly aborted as they are introduced. This functions just like the allusions to specific people and places in “Personism,” as a technique of proximity.

4.6.2. “Having a Coke with You:” Techniques of Proximity

¹⁶⁶ Norman L. Dean, *The Man behind the Bottle: The Origin and History of the Classic Contour Coca-Cola Bottle as Told by the Son of Its Creator* (Bloomington: Xlibris Corporation, 2010): 14.

¹⁶⁷ Andy Warhol's famous “Green Coca-Cola Bottles” was made in 1962, only two years after O'Hara wrote “Having a Coke with You.” At least so is claimed by the Coca-Cola Company: Author unknown, “Andy Warhol's Coca-Cola Bottle Painting History,” *Coca-Cola Australia*, accessed May 29, 2022, <https://www.coca-colacompany.com/au/faqs/whats-the-history-behind-andy-warhols-coca-cola-bottle-painting>.

¹⁶⁸ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 360.

¹⁶⁹ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 360.

Just as in “Personism,” in “Having a Coke with You,” O’Hara offhandedly mentions famous paintings and places with no further description or elaboration on the images they are supposed to conjure in the reader’s mind. Much like other allusions in O’Hara’s work, their specificity is not meant to be daunting and exclusive for the reader, but to serve as a carrier for emotion. However, unlike “Personism,” this is a love poem and has one specific addressee, this time Vincent Warren.¹⁷⁰ However, this does not mean the exclusion of the reader from the poem, rather, it positions them as an eavesdropper, perhaps not addressed but nonetheless present. This is also enforced by the use of casual language, humor, and flippancy. Even without ever going to Irún or Hendaye, the allusions and their context trigger a scheme of the exotic, hot, and sunny architectural and historical marvels, which, according to the poem, amount to nothing compared to something as simple as having a coke with somebody the speaker loves. The lack of knowledge of these places, therefore, does not hinder the understanding of the poem. On the other hand, their knowledge furthers the enjoyment of the proximity between the speaker and the reader as it creates a sense of complicity. Furthermore, the use of allusions to places of high culture and history comically elevates the act of having a Coke into a wider aesthetic and cultural context. It is a camped-up declaration of love, a mock-ode almost, perfectly in line with the tone and attitude of “Personism.”

Considering all features outlined in the manifesto, both modernist and postmodernist-leaning, “Having a Coke with You” is a perfect example of a Personist poem. Formally, it has no regard for regular stanzas, does not concern itself with punctuation, relies heavily on enjambment to create a basic, unrestricted structure, and uses repetition to achieve musicality with no regularity. As is typical for O’Hara’s poems, it does include some elements of the

¹⁷⁰ Perloff, *Poet Among Painters*, 80.

dreamy and surreal (“in the warm New York 4 o’clock light we are drifting back and forth / between each other like a tree breathing through its spectacles,”) ¹⁷¹ but they are no longer pervasive and in the central focus of the poem. Rather, “Having a Coke with You” uses unexpected juxtapositions of otherwise concrete images resulting in a rushing, iconoclastic collage of images and feelings. Content-wise, the poem makes use of all techniques of proximity, i.e., allusions to specific places (Irún, New York) and people (Marino Marini), implementing specific objects, mimetic immediacy, wit, humor, and conversational tone, creating an illusion of a relationship between the reader and the poet and hence aligning perfectly with the ideas outlined in “Personism.”

¹⁷¹ O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 360.

5. Conclusion: “Personism”: A Practical Manifesto

As has been shown, O’Hara’s manifesto is not programmatic, nor does it aim to influence others in its favor. It does, however, mock the academic prescriptivism of both the “raw” and the “cooked” poetry of its time and emerges in opposition to both of them. Moreover, “Personism,” rather than advising others, describes O’Hara’s personal poetics which, as has been shown, he uses in practice. “Personism: A Manifesto” outlines O’Hara’s poetics in two ways: Firstly, through rejecting all techniques it does not use itself (any sort of restricted form, emotionally loaded confessionalism, and poeticizing), and secondly through being Personist in itself, that is, obeying its own implicit rules and taking its own advice, such as using allusions to further its point and create proximity between the poet/speaker and the reader, using conversational tone, wit and humor to achieve levity and flippancy, thus making the text approachable, and fragmentation and movie-like transitions to reach immediacy and realness of the text. The inclusion of the reader challenges the idea of a poet as a solitary genius or a prophetic figure and shifts the focus from the subject of the work to the work itself, which, therefore, becomes the subject itself.

While “Personism” presents itself as a mock manifesto, its influence on or by O’Hara’s poetry has significance. As has been shown, O’Hara’s manifesto reflects a large scope of his works, and while the most crystalized Personist works appear around the year 1960, his earlier works share aspects of this later aesthetic statement. It is a statement of indifference to prescribed formal and thematic restrictions, however, it is not based on ignorance, rather on the careful study and emulation of traditional poetic conventions. The manifesto does not proclaim itself to be a serious one, nor does it seek to influence a wider audience and forcibly establish new aesthetics and conventions while militantly excluding other forms of poetry. As O’Hara writes:

Too many poets act like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat, and potatoes with drippings (tears). I don’t give a damn

whether they eat or not. Forced feeding leads to excessive thinness (effete). Nobody should experience anything they don't need to, if they don't need poetry bully for them.¹⁷²

In this way, "Personism" is not so much a manifesto as it is a campy, humorous, and light description of O'Hara's own poetic stance, one, that he was not compelled to write himself in the first place and had to be convinced by Donald Allen to create. It is, nonetheless, the closest to a serious statement on his own poetics O'Hara has ever written, and as so, it reflects just how indifferent the poet was to the reception of his work, to poetry as an institution and to poetic convention. This makes disregard for formal, political, and aesthetic requirements of poetry one of the staples of O'Hara's writing; if the manifesto argues for anything, it is for the freedom of being unserious and spontaneous in poetry and to reject the distance between the poet and the object of his poetry on one hand, and on the other to cross the distance between the poems and their readers via the use of the Techniques of Proximity. O'Hara not only brings the reader into his poetry, but also projects his persona into the speaker of his poems through the use of specific biographical details which force the involvement of the reader through their abstract nature. This is what all O'Hara's Personist poems share: a New York big enough for O'Hara in the role of the speaker and the reader in any role the poem assigns to them. "Personism," therefore, while proclaiming poetics of indifference, shows great attention to the poet/speaker-reader relationship and accomplishes so implicitly without partaking in heavy-handed poeticizing. To use O'Hara's own analogy used in the unsent letter to Paterson Society, he makes "grass grow"¹⁷³ in the shape of himself and without destroying the "life-giving vulgarity"¹⁷⁴ of his love for poetry. After all, everything, including O'Hara himself and his poetics, is in the poems.

¹⁷² O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 498.

¹⁷³ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 510.

¹⁷⁴ O'Hara, *Collected Poems*, 489.

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