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BA Thesis Abstract

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

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

¹ Frank O'Hara, “Personism: A Manifesto” in *The collected poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. by Donald Allen, introduction by John Ashbery (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 498.

tradition and define it against its contemporary “-isms,” schools and movements, such as Modernism, Post-modernism, the Beat movement, and the confessional poets.