

## The Poetics of the Mundane in Frank O'Hara's Selected Poems

شعرية الحياة الدنيوية في قصائد مختارة لفرانك أوهارا

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### Abstract

The act of walking or strolling and exploring urban places of the metropolis is a dominant aspect in the poetry of Frank O'Hara (1926-1966), a prominent American poet and the leading figure of the New York School during the 1950s and 1960s. O'Hara is largely known for his poetic portrayal of the city stroller who enjoys city detouring as a pragmatic and poetic representation of the urban culture, city crowds, and everyday experiences of postmodern America. The paper's purpose is to explore the poetic vision of O'Hara's art of strolling the metropolis not as a mere arbitrary self-isolation or escape from the anxieties of the post-industrialized world. Instead, it argues for the value of flânerie or the leisurely city sauntering as a cultural and artistic act of creating the poetics of the mundane. It is a poetics that detects the value of the quotidian and spatial meaning in the most seemingly

ordinary places of the consumerist and capitalistic American culture. As the figure of the flâneur or stroller is discerned in O'Hara's poetry, the study underlines the significance of his poetic advocacy of perceiving, exploring, and interacting with the dynamic as well as the gruesome and consumerist sides of the urban environment of the metropolis.

**Keywords:** O'Hara, flânerie, flâner, stroller, New York, urban life, consumerist culture, poetics of the mundane

### المستخلص:

يُعد التجول وجوب الأماكن الحضرية واستكشافها في مدينة نيويورك جانباً مهماً في شعر فرانك أوهارا (1926-1966)، وهو شاعر أمريكي بارز وشخصية قيادية في مدرسة نيويورك الشعرية خلال خمسينيات وستينيات القرن الماضي، وقد أشتهر أوهارا إلى حد كبير بتصويره الشعري لجوَاب المدينة الدائم الحركة والذي يستمتع بالتجول في شوارع المدينة، باعتباره تجسيداً شعرياً وعملياً لثقافة المدينة الحضرية وحشودها والتجارب اليومية لأمريكا في فترة ما بعد الحداثة.

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة رؤية أوهارا الشعرية لجوَاب المدينة الحضرية، مجادلاً أن فعل الجوب أو السير في شوارع المدينة هو ليس مجرد اغتراب عشوائي للذات، أو هروب من مخاوف عالم ما بعد الصناعة، بل إنه يجسد فعلاً ثقافياً وفنياً يخلق شعرية الحياة اليومية التي تكتشف قيمة الحياة اليومية ومعنى البعد المكاني في أكثر الأماكن المألوفة. ويبين البحث بان شعرية أوهارا للحياة اليومية التي يجسدها شخصية الجوال هي وسيلة لمجابهة شعور التفكك في ثقافة أمريكا الاستهلاكية والرأسمالية ودعوة شعرية لإدراك واستكشاف ومن ثم التفاعل مع الجانبين الحيوي والمرع للبيئة الحضرية في آن واحد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أوهارا، جوَاب المدن، جوَاب المدينة، شعرية الحياة اليومية، نيويورك، حياة المدينة، الثقافة الاستهلاكية

## The Poetics of the Mundane in Frank O'Hara's Selected Poems

*"One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes. 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."*

### O'Hara – "Meditations in an Emergency"

O'Hara's employment of city walking unmistakably recalls the act of flânerie and the figure of the 'flâneur,' a French noun referring to the 'saunterer' or 'stroller' and the symbolic model of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris. It was first introduced by Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) and made well acknowledged by Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) in the 20th century. The flâneur that O'Hara renders is a New Yorker poet whose random and rhythmic movement and examination of city like are an articulation not only of the American city dwellers or the consumerist urban culture of New York City, the metropolis of the States, but also of the poet's peculiar poetic creativity of reading and rewriting his city.

The urban landscape of the fifteen years O'Hara spent in New York City serves as the catalyst that charges his poetic vision of the flâneur. His

experience of city life as a poet-flâneur and American individual living in the middle of the twentieth century seems similar to Whitman's, yet the former flâneur does not celebrate himself but celebrates the city. While the poet-flâneur O'Hara's poetry portrays and shares some features with the aforementioned sources, it is reintroduced by him in a distinctive mode that makes it quite typical of an American flâneur living in the post-modern period.

In his essay entitled "Stepping Out with Frank O'Hara," David Herd argues that taking a step is an integral part of O'Hara's poetry, suggesting that thinking for O'Hara is a similar process to that of walking: "in thinking he steps, and in stepping he thinks" (71). Practicing writing/reading poetry and walking depended on O'Hara's rhythm to stroll along. This symmetry between walking and poetry is evident in many of his poems. Thus, walking becomes an act of thinking, perceiving, understanding, and blending the poet and the New Yorker flâneur in him at the same time. In this respect, Allen Ginsberg (1954–1997) states:

[O'Hara] integrated purely personal life into the high art of composition, marking the return of all authority back to the person. His style is actually in line with the tradition that begins with Independence and runs through Thoreau and Whitman, here composed in a metropolitan space architecture environment. He taught me to see New York for the first time, by making the giant style of Midtown his intimate cocktail environment. (Gooch, 335)

O'Hara found in strolling and interacting with the cosmopolitan world a way to resist all the traditional and cultural presumptions imposed on the modern individual at the time. It was a time characterized by a sharp sense of distrust surrounding sexual and artistic identity, which determined the poet's social and literary status. O'Hara built a poetic distinctiveness around the discovery

of everyday identity, asserting a counter-social and vanguard lifestyle. His poetry aims at destabilizing the normative and traditional literary and societal expectations of mid-century America by focusing on what the French historian and cultural critic Michael de Certeau's calls "the tactics of the everyday. In them, the former saw the very essence of life, which "holds us intimately, from the inside" (23), O'Hara's interest in the experience of every day signifies his rejection of any conservative organized or institutionalized social and cultural norms that restricted his poetic creativity as well as his unorthodox sexual identity, which was categorized by homosexuality. On the other hand, he saw in the spontaneity of the ordinary that manifests itself in the everyday life a factor that unifies city dwellers into one communal reality.

Michel de Certeau (1925-1986), a French historian and cultural critic, emphasizes the significance and the function of walking by calling it "the rhetoric of walking," stating: "There is a rhetoric of walking. The art of turning phrases finds an equivalent in an art of composing a path" (99). It is the very method for O'Hara to reap meanings and new perspectives out of city walking. Through this act a "space of enunciation" is projected to establish a connection between trolling places and writing as de Certeau puts it:

The walker constitutes, in relation to his position, both a near and a far, a here and a there.... that reinforces the parallelism between linguistic and pedestrian enunciation- we must add that this location (here- there) (necessarily implied by walking and indicative of a present appropriation of space by an "I") also has the function of introducing another in relation to this "I" and of thus establishing a conjunctive and disjunctive articulation of places. (98)

That is to say, city strolling is observed as the stroller's conscious act of locating his own spatial and ontological existence as means to acknowledge and voice the here and there to which his 'I' can either connect or disconnect. The 'other' that de Certeau emphasizes refers to the objects the city walker observes and perceives in space and place.

As a city stroller, O'Hara's flâneur shares several qualities with the Baudelairean flâneur and echoes some of Benjamin's ideas on flânerie. Yet, his own image does differ from theirs, for O'Hara's flâneur is not only an observer and commentator on the modern capitalist society or simply a persona removed from the crowd. In her essay "Let's take a walk: Frank O'Hara the flâneur," Suzannah Evans addresses the same issue, emphasizing that O'Hara's flâneur is more active than that of Baudelaire, and more aware of his consumerism than that of Benjamin (59). That is to say, O'Hara does not suffice in merely recording sounds and events in the city, he rather takes a role in them. If the flâneur, as Benjamin sees him, is a figure that experiences a sense of loss within a consumerist society of deceptive values, O'Hara's flâneur is that artist-stroller who faces loss by interacting and absorbing his culture of consumerism, transforming its commercial aspects into poetic material for his art. Through his casual walks in New York streets that he dedicated to scrutinizing the metropolis, his poetic self comes to find a comfortable shelter in the mundane and amongst city dwellers that fed both his life and poetry.

Behind the formation of his New Yorker flâneur lies O'Hara's leading role in the New York School of downtown Manhattan in the 1950s and 1960s. It was a social circle informally established by the most celebrated poets and artists in New York during the aftermath of World War II, a period that was characterized by a new spirit of the sense of liberty. It emerged to innovate their artistic and literary compositions with a distinctive aesthetic

sensibility and writing style that they shared. The poets of the school were around the same age, had the same artistic orientations, were of mutual inspiration to each other, and linked with varying degrees of friendship.<sup>1</sup> What characterized this circle of coterie or Avant-guard<sup>2</sup> artists was that they were "a microcosm of urban life which has itself replaced Nature by the City" as Lytle Shaw states in *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (4).

The poets and artists of this New York School published their work in the post-World War II era during which literary works transformed from being modern into postmodern. In *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, the American poet Paul Hoover defines postmodernism as "the historical period following World War II. It also suggests an experimental approach to composition as well as a world view that sets itself apart from mainstream culture" (xxv). In poetry, the term "postmodern" is used to describe the poetic movements that abandoned the modernist faith in the genuine value of poetic techniques or pure academic writing.

Accordingly, the New York School artists and poets as postmodernists resisted the New Criticism and Formalist movement of the 1950s, which stressed an intellectual and academic mode of writing poetry, considering the poem a free-standing or self-reliant aesthetic object.<sup>3</sup> They adopted formlessness, untraditional verse, a mixture of language impulses expressed

<sup>1</sup> Amongst the foremost poets of the school were John Ashbery (1927 –2017), Barbara Guest (1920 –2006), James Schuyler (1923–1991), and Kenneth Koch (1925 –2002). To name a few of his most renowned coterie of friends who shared with O'Hara his artistic interests were Willem (1904 –1997) and Elaine de Kooning (1918-1989), Jackson Pollock (1912 –1956), Edwin Denby (1903 –1983), Larry Rivers (1923 –2002), John Cage (1912 –1992), Grace Hartigan (1922 –2008), Jane Freilicher (1924-2014), and Michael Goldberg (1924-2007).

<sup>2</sup> Avant-guard or vanguard is a term that means to lead. During World War II, in New York the Avant-Garde came to be an influx of avant-garde artists who were very radical and innovative. (Britannica, *Post-Modernism*).

<sup>3</sup> The New Critics believed in the crucial role of form to convey meaning, asserting that a poetic work has "nothing to do with exalted feelings of being moved by the spirit ... [It is] a simple piece of craftsmanship, an intelligible or cognitive object" (qtd. in Breslin, 21).

in ordinary conversations, evocative misunderstandings, and everyday events. Doing so, they questioned what is normally considered material for art and the relationship between life and art, adopting into their works various aspects of Abstract Expressionism<sup>4</sup> and French Surrealism<sup>5</sup>, employing typically surrealist juxtapositions which they combined with whimsical observations of daily human behavior and speech. O'Hara's presentation of New York, his metropolis, absorbs its commercial and consumerist reality, yet without an intention to correct or change it. Instead, his poetry displays a poet-flâneur that is immersed in the energy of city life, emphasizing his existence in the now and here, the existence of the self as a valuable entity that is integrated into the experience of the multitude.

As a dynamic leader of the New York School of poetry, O'Hara insisted on reviving the process of writing poetry by making it casual, spontaneous, with abrupt shifts, and disjointedness rather than formal or mechanical. In his mock manifesto "Personism: A Manifesto" (1959)<sup>6</sup>, he voices his notion of composing poetry, saying: "I don't have to make elaborately sounded structures.... I don't even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve" (497). Thus, his poetry is built on a free and unconstrained performance similar to city strolling that does not merely chronicle the visual

<sup>4</sup>Abstract Expressionism is a movement in American painting that began in the late 1940s and became a dominant trend in Western painting during the 1950s. It entails the use of "use degrees of abstraction," depicting "forms unrealistically or, in the end, forms not drawn from the visible world (nonobjective)" (Britannica, *Abstract Expressionism*).

<sup>5</sup> French Surrealism as a movement in visual art between World Wars I and II "as a means of reuniting conscious and unconscious realms of experience so completely that the world of dream and fantasy would be joined to the everyday rational world in "an absolute reality, a surreality" (Britannica, *Surrealism*).

<sup>6</sup> O'Hara wrote "Personism" following a request by editor Donald Allen for his 1957 anthology *The New American Poetry*. Allen asked several contributors to write a statement on poetics, O'Hara chose to call his "Personism: A Manifesto." He has confirmed this mock-movement grew out of a love affair (probably his relationship with Vincent Warren) and it reflects his realization that love poems should not differ in intention, nor effect, from phone calls. For further information see *CP*, p.500.

reality of the city, but the poet-flâneur's experiences and perspectives related to certain aspects of this reality.

Moreover, as random as his city walks, O'Hara's poems demonstrate neither orderly structure nor organic or systemized unity. He is indebted to the Western Abstract Expressionists and Surrealists who emphasize "free, spontaneous, and personal emotional expression.... with a similar intent of expressing the force of the creative unconscious in art" (Britannica, *Abstract Expressionism*). O'Hara's poetry encapsulates the ethos and writing techniques of the school to build a poetic style that is angled to reflect the American capitalist and consumerist culture, its urbanity, mobility, including its pop culture, art, and music.

Observing and rereading the quotidian details of urban spaces, O'Hara uses informal or colloquial language mostly conversational inspired by real conversations he had with his friends. It is an attempt to conjure in the reader feelings of being related to the experience of the flâneur. The poet-flâneur in his poems naturally invites the reader to inhabit the city, conversing with him/her as a beloved one on the phone. This metaphor stands as a crucial part of O'Hara's notion of impersonal art, which is expressed in his "Personism." Writing a poem "is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself)," thus the poem is put "squarely between the poet and the person." Writing poetry, in other words, as O'Hara puts is "between two persons instead of two pages," recalling his realization that composing a poem can be replaced by using the telephone instead (CP, 499). This technique gives his poems a sense of intimacy with the reader<sup>7</sup>, enabling him/her to step into the shoes of the flâneur and the city dweller.

<sup>7</sup> What is significant in O'Hara's manifesto, if it could be classified as one, is the humorous and satirical tone he uses; he addresses the reader saying "look, reading these things may not actually help you read poems, and it probably won't help me write them, but isn't it fun?" (CP,499)

By putting the person addressed at the center of his city poems, O'Hara does not only resist the sense of alienation projected by a commercialized and capitalist America but also challenges the prototype of the urban American public life that seems to view people as undistinguishable or anonymous masses. The lyrical "I" of his poems moves towards the "You," to enter into a direct connection with the society by which the value of the communal dimension is brought to the surface. Thus, every piece of O'Hara's work carries a resemblance to a personal poem, "Personal Poem" (a title he uses for one of his well-known poems), and all of them contain an "I" and "You" that "one person out of the 8,000,000 is / thinking of me" (336)

It is worth saying that O'Hara's manifesto challenges the values of the postwar marketplace, insisting that the meaning of a poem is determined by both the poet and the reader. "This sort of collaboration" according to Rachel Horn "offers poetry as a process, a lived experience rather than a commodity" (2). O'Hara's concept of the poem as the chronicle of a creative act of walking as well as an articulation of the flâneur interaction with the other paves the way to a kind of poetry that is different from anything that had been written before him. His unique form of expression is nourished by all of his intensely felt experiences, those include his lunch hours, time of walks, or time spent with friends and lovers, and or that invested to attend art galleries in New York City. Being preoccupied with the world as he experienced it with all its disorder and chaos, O'Hara repudiates the modernist obsession with poetic harmony and organic form, replacing it with postmodern poetics of groundlessness, formlessness, and populism. He was well aware that his poetry did not follow the mainstream of his time, and he was quite content with that. In a statement that he wrote for *The New American Poetry Anthology*, O'Hara says:

I don't think of fame or posterity, nor do I care about clarifying experiences for anyone or bettering anyone's state or social relation nor am I for any particular technical development in the American language simply because I find it necessary. What is happening to me, goes into my poems. I don't think if my experiences are clarified or made beautiful for myself or anyone else. They are just there in whatever form I can find them. What is clear to me in my work is probably obscure to others and vice-versa. (*CP*, 500)

What makes him distinctive is that O'Hara has, as Timothy Gray puts it, "a style of movement that makes semiotic spaces attractive and shareable" (16). In many of his poems, he pictures New York City as a haven for the young and the restless, those who are too curious and attentive to be satisfied with rural life. "The country is no good for us," he says in his poem "walking:" "there's nothing/ to bump into/ or fall apart glassily/ there's not enough/ poured concrete" (477).

Examining *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* that was edited by Donald Allen with a lengthy introduction by John Ashbury, the reader would be amazed at the number of mundane details of urban life O'Hara was inspired by to write his poetry. Fascinated by his metropolis society, the poet employs the urban pastoral tradition that associates and disassociates at the same time the rural with the modernity of city life. Poems such as "Walking," "A Warm Day for December," and Coca-Cola poems provide a detailed account of the urban scene as the flâneur strolls the streets of New York City. Interestingly, the speaker in those poems is ascended by a sense of order in the middle of no order, as if the streets around him are body organs that function perfectly together of which he is part.

Some of O'Hara's best poems are written in this genre, including "A Step Away from Them," "The Day Lady Died," "Personal Poem," and "A

Step Away From them." Those poems do not only reflect what is thought or felt by the poet but also the process through which those thoughts and feelings become a poem. They show the poet's mode of thinking and writing that is utterly spontaneous. Such a mode of writing came to be criticized by the poetry scholar and critic Marjorie Perloff who describes his poems as "casual, improvisatory, non-metrical, and generally nonstanzaic 'I do this, I do that' pieces, pieces that hardly seemed to qualify as poems at all" (*Poet Among Painters*, xiii). However, the very experiences O'Hara the poet and the flâneur lived and was involved in are deeply rooted in his encounter with the mundane and everyday events, making his walking an act of art. The quality of realism he developed in his poems projected a new genre that O'Hara chose to call 'I do this, I do that' poems. The phrase summarizes the method used when writing Lunch Poems as they follow the poet on his seemingly random strolls through the urban scene of New York City.

Through O'Hara's poetic creation, the random walking rhythms and his spontaneous perceptions of post-modern American urbanity are transformed into distinctive poetic representations of his own time. He generated an aesthetics that unify the written word with the act of walking and the experience of living the city, a matter that would fold the poet-flâneur into the text. Taking a walk during lunch break, shopping, meeting a friend for a meal, going to the movies, taking the subway, or going to the bank may seem superficial activities, but they triggered O'Hara's mind to write poetry on the spot. Thus, his poems include actions like "I walk," "I wait," "I open," "we go eat," "I shake hands," etc. This casual or spontaneous style is the main feature behind his "I do this, I do that" poems that are based on his notion of writing poetry as equivalent to the act of walking.

The flâneur's experiences and observations are ever-changing and seem of a temporal process to resist conformity and encourage artistic

innovation. O'Hara himself is described by Gooch as being constantly "moving onward and upward" (147). The poet-flâneur's movement of thought, emotion, and physical motion is all articulated as breaking points whose random rhythm echoes the unpredictability of the urban spaces he inhabits and strolls. Similar features are found in avant-garde poetry in general and in O'Hara's poetry in particular. Avant Guard poets rejected all forms of fixity and conformity that gave them the feeling of being confined or deprived them of change or modification.

Thus, O'Hara's flâneur is a genuine investment of a non-conformist reality that manifests itself in transience, integrating the tactics of the mundane into art and vice versa. His poems express such a transient self as they create constant movement in the process of self and city perception. O'Hara was among a group of poets who comprised the poetics of everyday life or the mundane by placing himself the protagonist for most of his poems. Yet, as an individual and poet, O'Hara "never allowed his own self to become the subject of the poetry's intention. His poetic self might be, almost always was, the occasion of the individual poems but the poems' focus is rarely on that self as subject matter" (Molesworth, 62). Based on his notion of personal poetry or Personism that runs throughout his poetry, O'Hara's private self is preserved without being placed or located at the center.

In one of his short and less known poems entitled "Today," he addresses the old new question on what could and could not be an appropriate subject matter for poetry. The simple but highly suggestive title of the poem correlates with 'Ars Poetica,' a poetic work by the American poet Archibald MacLeish (1892-1982). It comes from a Latin term that can be translated as "The Art of Poetry," a statement referring to the purpose of writing a poem. Thus, O'Hara begins the first stanza of the poem by

enumerating diverse and simple things taken from everyday life that have little relevance to poetry:

Oh! kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas!  
 You really are beautiful!  
 Pearls, harmonicas, jujubes, aspirins!  
 still makes a poem a surprise!  
 These things are with us every day  
 even on beachheads and biers. They  
 do have meaning. They're strong as rocks (CP, 15)

O'Hara suggests that such mundane and rather non-poetic details that individuals encounter in their urban daily life could make an exuberant subject matter for a poem. It is his method to defy the conventional belief that poetry should deal with paramount issues, universal ideas, lofty themes, etc. Written in a casual tone, filled with references to contemporary mass-produced objects like glittery sequins and aspirins, and striped of rhyme scheme and meter, "Today" articulates O'Hara's stance on the content and form of poetry. At the same time, the employment of the first-person narrator stands as an essential element in his work to outpour his own perspective of city life and establish the poetic self and its connection to the reader. As it has been mentioned before, a poem for O'Hara is almost likely conversing with a friend in a phone call; that is why in many of his poems the speaker sets in motion a direct address to the reader, materializing his impersonal notion of writing poetry.

Based on the importance of poetically chronicling details of the mundane, most of O'Hara's poems sound like a to-do list to the extent that they, in Perloff's words, "hardly seem to qualify as poems at all" (*Poet Among Painters*, xiii). Nevertheless, they reflect the creed underlying his poetics of the quotidian that brings the attention to simple details of everyday

life even the most banal. *Lunch Poems* articulates the poet-flâneur in one of his lunch-hour breaks from his job at the Museum of Modern Art while flâneuring the streets of Manhattan. The lunch hour, one single daily activity, represents for O'Hara a time to observe, ponder on, and put into words his reflections on city life occurrences while having at the same time his favorite meal. It can be a very peculiar time to write poetry, but as Ashbury notes, O'Hara wrote poems "at odd moments – in his office at the Museum of Modern Art, in the street at lunchtime, or even in a room full of people" (*CP*, vii). It was part of his experimental and innovative way of writing with enthusiastic and creative impulse while he is on the move.

His collection of *Lunch Poems* is poetic documentation of the poet's reaction to the urban landscape and its culture. Every day, he would leave his office during the lunch hour break and stroll the streets of Manhattan leisurely. Ashbery writes that for O'Hara: "Lunch is as important as love" (*CP*, xi), meaning that it is crucial and indispensable. Walking is a kind of meditation for O'Hara, which releases him from the practicality of his office work and feeds his soul and poetry. He wrote most of the poems in *Lunch Poems* during his lunch hour flânerie to become the title of the collection. O'Hara says in the blurb to his book:

Often this poet, strolling through the noisy splintered glare of a Manhattan noon, has paused at a sample Olivetti to type up thirty or forty lines of ruminations, or pondering more deeply has withdrawn to a darkened ware- or firehouse to limn his computed misunderstandings of the eternal questions of life, co-existence, and depth, while never forgetting to eat Lunch his favorite meal. (*Lunch Poems*, blurb)

The lunch hour represents for him a time to express his true self, as opposed to the stiff expectations of the workplace. His poems are records of the

immediate experiences he encounters when strolling. In his essay “Circulating: Frank O’Hara,” Herd comments on this technique saying: “Crucially, however, what we are invited to imagine is that the act of composition is continuous with the experience which fuels it” (157). O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems* is mainly fueled by interacting with New York City, and the beauty of life of the metropolis.

In “A Step Away From them,” one of the best ‘I do this, I do that’ poems, O’Hara puts into verse his various activities during a lunch break. The flâneur figure cruises the streets of Manhattan, moving to 53d Street between 5th and 6th Avenue heading toward Times Square. He shares with the reader a cinematic view of the city, which is full of animated mundane details taken. The poem begins with a tone of ease, written in the present tense to document the living moment:

It’s my lunch hour, so I go  
 for a walk among the hum-colored  
 cabs. First, down the sidewalk  
 where laborers feed their dirty  
 glistening torsos sandwiches  
 and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets  
 on. They protect them from falling  
 bricks, I guess. Then onto the  
 avenue where skirts are flipping  
 above heels and blow up over  
 grates. The sun is hot, but the  
 cabs stir up the air. (PC, 257)

The starting point of his walk is some details of the street such as the exact time and date, the construction site with laborers who consume “sandwiches and Coca-Cola,” the “hum-colored Cabs,” and “where skirts are flipping”.

Those are images that may seem devoid of grand meaning or simply referring to a consumerist culture, yet the use of the verbs 'go' and 'walk' endows the poem with a dynamism, animation, and motion of visual images. As O'Hara asserts in the previous poem discussed that such daily objects and scenes of the mundane "do have meaning. / They're strong as rocks (15).

As O'Hara's flâneur strolls the city, he never resists its flux, speed, or commercial drive; instead, he interacts with it: "desiring faster pace and greater urban activity" (Evans, 55). The speaker in the poem is totally comfortable and at ease with the urban environment around him, enjoying the hectic traffic, hot pavement, and crowded sidewalks. Ironically, he seems bothered by the natural elements, not the urban. Note for example that toward the end of the first stanza he says: "The sun is hot, but the/ cabs stir up the air." The sun, which represents the natural element here, is the only thing that seems to annoy the speaker in the scene, while the man-made 'cabs' rescue him from the heat by stirring up the air. Similarly, the sun is represented in a quite upsetting to the city stroller in "Seven Nine Seven": "A disgusting sun / trying desperately to look lonely / walks over the asphalt shivering sky / when were you in Times Square" (CP, 433).

Moreover, the emphasis on lively images of city life correlates with the emphasis on the idea of death and the transience of time, which are recurrent themes in O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*. The transience of the lunch break seems to reflect the transience of life, and the different images of life around the speaker seem to reflect his sense of mortality. By referring to the Manhattan Storage Warehouse which "they'll soon tear down" and "the sign blows smoke over my head" the poem takes a dramatic turn as it ends. As much as it shows a city that is moving at a fast pace, and the speaker seems to be enjoying this current of motion.

However, the issue of loss of the speaker's closest friends comes to be pondered on to change the motion of the poem:

First

Bunny died, then John Latouche,  
then Jackson Pollock. But is the  
earth as full as life was full, of them?  
And one has eaten and one walks,  
past the magazines with nudes  
and the posters for BULLFIGHT and  
the Manhattan Storage Warehouse  
which they'll soon tear down. (257-58)

It is worth saying that the poem was written the day after Pollock's funeral, who was one of the major artists whom O'Hara admired and one of the coteries. Instead of writing an elegy or an 'ode to dejection,' he writes a poem that is full of life, yet acknowledging, as the title suggests, that he is just a step away from those who parted. As the poem suddenly shifts from immediate impressions on a casual walk to the memory of the deceased friends: Bunny Lang (1924-1956), John Latouche (1914-1956), and Pollock, the present tense which dominates most of the poem changes to the past tense. It denotes the speaker's recognition of the affinity of life and death. The city landscape, people, and all objects are all in mutation, a matter which enhances in him the awareness of being alive.

The speed with which the speaker mentions the death of friends as well as his quick observations of other details as he walks, such as 'magazines,' 'posters,' and 'Manhattan storage Warehouse,' makes of the very notion of death one of the phases that an individual may come across while strolling the city. The hasty mentioning of death becomes part of the hasty city

lifestyle. In this respect, professor Olivier Brossard states in his “The / profile of a city / exploding:” Frank O’Hara’s Aesthetics of Shock”:

these deaths become yet another stage in the poet's walk, a mere moment in a broader cycle. The photographs of nudes hark back to his friends' dead bodies, and the posters conjure up images of hits and blows.... Lastly, the impending destruction of the Manhattan Warehouse is a sign that nothing remains in the city. (6)

Would O'Hara's flâneur stop city strolling or would his passion for observing the quotidian details be put to an end? Unmistakably, his knowledge of the imperfection of the city's mundane nature is not a reason for him to stop browsing the beautiful in the ugly. With a final "glass of papaya juice," the speaker decides to go back to work, choosing to cope with the fear of death simply by moving on.

Charles Altieri, Professor, and Chair in the Department of English at the University of California assumes that O'Hara's poems reflect a sense of pain and anxiety that is potentially lurking in every moment from which a reader gets the feeling that his anxiety is ready to seize if the flow of events around should slow down for a moment (94). It is for this reason that he develops an evident joy in the kaleidoscopic rush of details and encounters. It does not mean that death has a minimal meaning for O’Hara, but that the experience of everyday life naturally embraces joy and pain, death and life.

In "The Day Lady Died," which is one of the most quoted "I do this, I do that" poems, O'Hara elegizes the death of the famous jazz singer, Billie Holiday (1915-1959). The poet-flâneur does not only endeavor to write a tribute to an American singer who inspired a large part of the literary and artistic sphere, but he also establishes an understanding of the identity of everyday he lives in. Instead of focusing on writing an elegy, the poet,

surprisingly begins "The Day Lady Died" with setting the exact time and place of the poem in connection to the speaker's to-do list:

It is 12:20 in New York a Friday  
 three days after Bastille Day, yes  
 it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine  
 because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton  
 at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner  
 and I don't know the people who will feed me (*CP*, 425)

Similar to other *Lunch Poems*, the speaker simply starts by reflecting on the subtle ordinariness of the situation in which he finds himself: "It is 12:20 in New York a Friday." All the things he does and the items he buys during his walk seem to underline the normalcy of his day. The speaker goes for a shoeshine, shops for gifts for his friends, casually asks for cigarettes, goes to a dinner invitation by some people whom he does not know that well. The seems to be activities of a typical modern and consumer individual.

In many of his poems, consuming material goods is turned into elements of the creative act, reflecting a sense of ambivalence about the issue of consumerism. Yet, the way they mirror the pro-consumerist ideas that were popular amongst cultural theorists in the 1990s seems to stand in opposition to the Marxist critique of commodity fetishism, suggesting that consumerism is not necessarily a wasteful activity, but can be creative, active, and generative. This notion can be seen in various parts of O'Hara's poetic work, where everyday shopping for consumer goods generates the inescapable fact that these goods are an indispensable part of everyday life. Joon Hwang asserts that O'Hara's flâneur: "utilizes consumption as a limited means of appreciating his personal life in conflict with the ephemerality of life" (218). Consequently, when O'Hara's poetry refers to a certain consumer good or a mass-produced product, the poet does not exactly

celebrate the American consumerist culture but he presents to his readers a city life picture with which they can identify.

Coca-Cola, or coke as Americans like to call it, is one of O'Hara's favorite consumer goods to mention in his work. The famous American brand appears in many of his poems and is always associated with his lover, Vincent Warren, to whom the poet would address in several poems. O'Hara wrote a series of Coca Cola poems during the time he spent with Warren, approximately between August 1959 and May 1961. For instance, in a poem titled "Song," the speaker fantasizes his friend's face in a magazine while drinking a Coke: "having a Coke in the heat it was your face / I saw on the movie magazine, no it was Fabian's / I was thinking of you" (CP 367). "Early on Sunday" is another example in which the speaker is miserable and alone and too fatigued to go out or do anything during the day, yet he is seen "washing the world down with rye and Coca-Cola" (405).

"Having A Coke With You" is one of his most widely read love poems which is written in 1960 and also addressed to Warren, which is all about the experience of sharing a "Coke" with a friend, proclaiming it to be more fun than almost every other experience, including art and traveling:

is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne or being sick to my stomach on the Travesera de Gracia in Barcelona partly because in your orange shirt you look like a better happier St. Sebastian partly because of my love for you, partly because of your love for yogurt. (360)

In the above lines, O'Hara uses a classic American object to demonstrate his affection for his lover. The activity of consuming soda is turned into a meaningful act of sharing a more pleasant moment than visiting a variety of destinations like "San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne." Here, the flâneur figure appears as a consumerist individual, not only of Coca-Cola but also of love and culture. While the poem's main theme is arguably the

poet's affection for his lover, one can see how Coca Cola, a very popular consumer good, has replaced Italian or French red wine that is widely used in poetry as the romantic drink of choice, and how consumption is turned into a creative activity, employed as a means of communicating deep emotions. One may say that O'Hara's queer expression of love to place a Coca-Cola can in the same level of art is a source of destroying both. But his readers are always supposed to remember that poetry for him is simply to go on one's nerve.

Moreover, coffee is another drink that O'Hara likes to consume everywhere he goes as he expresses in "Joe's Jacket": "I am rising...I have coffee / I prepare calmly to face almost everything" (330). Similarly, in "Steps," the speaker equates his affection to his lover to the way he consumes coffee and cigarettes, in the sense that both are extremely delightful:

oh god, it's wonderful  
to get out of bed  
and drink too much coffee  
and smoke too many cigarettes  
and love you so much (*CP* 371).

The speaker is obviously eager for consumption describing it as a "wonderful" experience. However, in a differently-toned poem of 1956, the normal daily activity of drinking a cup of coffee revives in the speaker a memory of the death of his first love: "Instant coffee with slightly sour cream / in it, and a phone call to the beyond / which doesn't seem to be coming any nearer" (244).

O'Hara's use of consumerist symbols is not confined to drinks. In a short poem entitled "An Airplane Whistle (After Heine)," he personalizes another mass-produced object, an airplane whistle that was, according to

Gooch "given him by Vincent Warren from a Cracker Jack box" (353). The whole poem is inspired by a cheap plastic object, which seems to replace traditional symbols of high verse such as "The rose, the lily, and the dove." The poem starts with paying homage to classical images of lyrical poetry, then reverses direction by indicating that these romantic icons do not fit in the "soot" of New York:

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

The Romantic symbols are not well suited for modern life in the city whose dirt "withers" the beauty of nature, or they may lose their beauty as they encounter the sunlight of the beloved. The mass-produced plastic whistle, on the other hand, can survive the dirt of the city because it is made by the city. In other words, O'Hara transforms a plastic trinket into a personal object of value and interest, serving a love poem. In other words, the figure of the flâneur comes to have a "queer role in society as a consumer of glittery objects, books, foreign cigarettes, and books of Russian or French poetry" (Boyer 75). O'Hara's flânerie as a city-strolling artistry is willing to embrace consumerism mainly for elevating trivial objects to be not merely aesthetic elements of his poetry but to be communal factors that may unite city dwellers into one reality. His poetics of the mundane is meant also to withstand the sense of disintegration of the individual in the midst of the challenges of a consumerist society. While flânerie becomes the mode to embrace the mundane of everyday life, it nourishes an insight into the cultural, artistic, and social spheres of New York City.

Indeed, O'Hara's city poems invite the reader to take the same journey as a sort of guideline not to instruct him but to reveal how city strolling functions. As the poet-flâneur engages in city walks, he endeavors blend text life with real life as an integral unity, creating poems from the heart and noise of the metropolis to become an embodiment of life events and realist observations. Moreover, the consumerist mass-produced goods he often refers to in his poetry do show how the modern individual is ontologically integrated with them. The tactics of everyday life along with the urban places dwelled by the masses become of spatial value.

In the very consumerist culture that invaded the United States in the 1950s and 1960s and trivialized both people and objects are morphed in O'Hara's poetry into a fertile ground for poetic and artistic creativity. That is to say, the most disturbing and intense facts of city life are meant to strike and bump into the spirit of American capitalism with the same abstracted and demeaning objects it created. Would reading O'Hara's 'walking poems' reclaim a mode to defy the times of Covid-19 and the sense of confinement that encircled us? Can such poetry be a ground-breaking method to reconnect with the stirring realities of city life, its people, and cultural and artistic realms that we take for granted and miss to see? Would the figure of the flâneur enjoy the city when there is no flux of city-life or someone to bump into? Indeed, to see the everyday anew, one would need to be the flâneur of city streets.

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