The Aesthetics of Frank O'Hara:

Either/Or as Literary Theory

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Everything is in the poems.

— Frank O'Hara, 1959

Frank O'Hara's anti-literary approach to poetry has long stumped scholars attempting to place him in the academic canon. In his introduction to *The Collected Poems*, John Ashbery compares O'Hara's hundreds of poems to Satie's "furniture music," suggesting that O'Hara wrote without the intention of being read.[1] O'Hara's poems, each designed around individual moments, are nonetheless complete in their ephemerality; even those in fragment form are "whole." Any critical examination of O'Hara's work reveals scores of contradiction: he is improvisational and decisive, anti-artistic and stylish, autobiographical and removed. In particular, O'Hara's poetry flaunts itself as poetry while refusing to take itself seriously. "It is not just that it is often aggressive in tone—it simply doesn't care," writes Ashbery.[2]

In the decades since *The Collected Poems* was compiled and released, O'Hara has garnered a niche critical following. He was popular during his lifetime, too, within the boundaries of the abstract New York art scene; Peter Schjeldahl described him as the "universal energy source in the lives of the few hundred most creative people in America."[3] Still, he has managed to evade literary scholarship, as no literary terminology accurately describes his poetry.

So, rather than using traditional theories to describe O'Hara, I offer a different way to interpret his poetry—one founded in Søren Kierkegaard's early work, *Either/Or* (1843). For an anti-literary poet, it is only sensible to discard literary theories. In the following pages, I hope to both demonstrate a new way to read O'Hara and a new way to apply Kierkegaard to literature.

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[1] Ashbery, John. "Introduction." *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* [1st ed.]. Frank O'Hara, edited by Donald Allen. New York: *Knopf*, 1971. p. vii
[2] ibid, p. viii
[3] Peter Schjeldahl. "Frank O'Hara: He made things and people sacred." New York: *The Village Voice*, orig. pub. Aug. 11, 1966; repub. June 1, 2019.

Whereas the either/or choice was initially presented as two modes of living, I find it aptly describes two modes of writing, as well.

But before divulging into my analysis, I will first define *what* Kierkegaard means by either/or. His book, divided into two volumes, splits life into two: the aesthetic and the ethical. Respectively, they can be simplified as a) living for the sake of pleasure and b) living for the sake of others. The former values art and gratification; the latter, social responsibility and commitment. The former searches for beauty; the latter follows systems. Volume I of *Either/Or* is a collection of essays written by the fictional author "A," himself an "aesthete." I will primarily reference Chapter 7, "Rotation of Crops." Volume II is written as a response to A's essays, in the form of two (long!) letters by an author known as "Judge," in support of the "ethical option."

Either/or becomes applicable to literature with the emergence of the postmodern poetry movement, which made every effort to reject traditional form. In a word, "postmodern poetry" may be summarized as anti-structural; late postmodern poets adopted devices such as free verse and fragmentation, as to distinguish themselves from the traditionals. In rejecting structure, postmodern poetry thus suggests that style—the *aesthetic*—and content—the *ethical*—are two separate poetic qualities. Theoretically, then, poetry can be purely aesthetic; such is well-exemplified by O'Hara.

I.

In the ceaseless search for beauty, writes Kierkegaard, the aesthete makes every effort to avoid boredom. As A claims in "Rotation of Crops," boredom is "corrupting"[4] and "the root of all evil."[5] Thus, the aesthete lives to amuse themself; they live by *doing*. O'Hara's poems, which he pertinently described as "I-do-this, I-do-that poetry," are styled around activity. This is perhaps most clearly concretized in his collection *Lunch Poems*, which begins with "Music" (1953):

> If I rest for a moment near The Equestrian
> pausing for a liver sausage sandwich in the Mayflower
> Shoppe,
> that angel seems to be leading the horse into
> Bergdorf's
> and I am naked as a table cloth, my nerves humming.[6]

As the opening lines of both the individual poem and the book, "Music" is an introduction to O'Hara's free style; from the onset, his writing reads as spontaneous, even rambling. Phrases tumble into one another as though unfiltered from brain to paper; he begins with the word "if" but never finishes the "then" clause, instead diverting focus to a department store in a distracted stream of consciousness. Though O'Hara calls on himself to "rest," "Music" is motivated by action. Each line bleeds into the next, somewhat ungracefully—see his use of enjambments in contrast to traditional form. Orphan lines call attention to otherwise non-monumental details; he employs this method throughout "Music," later writing

> As they're putting up the Christmas trees on Park
> Avenue
> I shall see my daydreams walking by with dogs in
> blankets
> put to some use before all those coloured lights come on![7]

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[4] Søren Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, vol. I. Translated and edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, N.J.: *Princeton University Press*, 1987. p. 285
[5] ibid, p. 286
[6] O'Hara, "Music" (1953), lines 1-6.
[7] ibid, lines 20-4.

As it were, "Music" is uninterested in obvious subjects (see the separation of Park / Avenue; O'Hara cares about the avenue as *form*, not as location). By way of this "unobvious interest," "Music" embodies A's proposed solution to boredom: "crop rotation."

In "Rotation of Crops," A argues that busyness is counterintuitively an ineffective antidote to boredom, and that constant busyness perpetuates cycles of dissatisfaction: "One indulges in the fanatical hope of an endless journey from star to star…this method cancels itself and is the spurious infinity."[8] Instead, he writes, the aesthete should search for beauty in creative ways: "The method I propose does not consist in changing the soil but, like proper crop rotation, consists in changing the method of cultivation and the kinds of crops."[9] He suggests that we are less bored when we limit ourselves: "A solitary prisoner for life is extremely resourceful; to him a spider can be a source of great amusement."[10] He encourages his fellow aesthetes to zoom in, not out; to mind the details; "to listen to the monotonous dripping from the roof."[11] To live aesthetically, one must disregard what we conventionally categorize as enjoyable, and instead embrace spontaneity: "The so-called social pleasures for which we prepare ourselves a week or a fortnight in advance are of little significance, whereas even the most insignificant thing can accidentally become a rich material for amusement."[12]

True to A's advice, O'Hara gets as close to the world as possible; another good example from *Lunch Poems* is the short poem "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday" (1953):

> Quick! a last poem before I go
> off my rocker. Oh Rachmaninoff!
> Onset, Massachusetts. Is it the fig-newton
> playing the horn? Thundering windows
> of hell, will your tubes ever break

[8] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* vol. I, p. 291-2
[9] ibid, p. 292
[10] ibid
[11] ibid
[12] ibid, p. 300

> into powder? Oh my palace of oranges,
> junk shop, staples, umber, basalt;
> I'm a child again when I was really
> miserable, a grope pizzicato. My pocket
> of rhinestone, yoyo, carpenter's pencil,
> amethyst, hypo, campaign button,
> is the room full of smoke? Shit
> on the soup, let it burn. So it's back.
> You'll never be mentally sober.

As an aesthetic poem, "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday" cares more about how its content is styled, less about its substance; consider the treatment of "fig-newton" as a horn player, or "thunder" as an adjective. O'Hara uses "non-monumental" objects, seemingly irrelevant to one another, as though they are puzzle pieces: he constructs a palace out of "oranges," "junk shop," "staples," "umber" and "basalt"; he uses another list to describe his pocket. The more specific he gets, the more abstract his imagery becomes. In this way, the poem is a practice in exactly what A recommends—finding amusement in a "spider," entertainment in "monotonous dripping," pleasure with limited material. Indeed, aesthetics is the *arrangement* of beauty.

The punctuation in "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday" further exemplifies aesthetics. O'Hara's placement of punctuation, more generous in this poem than in others, is as selective as it is manipulative: Take the poem's only semicolon, at the end of the seventh line; it conjoins two completely unrelated clauses. This, too, is an experiment in arrangement, as O'Hara insinuates that his abstract palace correlates with his childish misery.

Punctuation also informs the poem's tone. "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday" begins with a command of urgency—"Quick!"—that is reinforced with a second exclamation—"Oh Rachmaninoff!" Question marks maintain a sense of spontaneity. Without direct address, O'Hara's questions may be transient, but they are not isolated; actually, question marks set the pace of the poem, helping O'Hara to fluidly transition from one "random" idea to the next. With

a sprinkle of periods, O'Hara breaks up long lines with punchy fragments: "Onset, Massachusetts"; "So it's back." As a whole, the poem's rhythm is a sandwich; snappy at its beginning and end, sprawling in its middle.

Despite its title, the poem makes little reference to Sergei Rachmaninoff—content-wise. But aesthetically, "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday" emulates certain qualities of Rachmaninoff's music, namely, *tempo rubato*, as found in his *Symphony No. 3*[13] and *Symphonic Dances*.[14] Tempo rubato may be paraphrased as "spontaneous rhythm," as it permits the performer to mess with tempo for expressive effect; O'Hara uses a comparable technique with his punctuation. A second comparison: *counterpoint*, or the simultaneous orchestration of at least two independent lines of music, as found in *Symphony No. 2*[15]; I liken this to O'Hara's creative arrangement of unrelated objects ("rhinestone"; "yoyo"; "carpenter's pencil"; "amethyst"; "hypo"; "campaign button") to form an abstract image. O'Hara's writings "on" a given subject, therein, manifest as aesthetic.

These two examples, "Music" and "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday," happen to be written in free verse. However, free verse is not a requirement of aesthetic poetry; so proves "Poem" (1954), which alternates between tercets and quatrains. The first stanza reads:

> I watched an armory combing its bronze bricks
> and in the sky there were glittering rails of milk.
> Where had the swan gone, the one with the lame back?[16]

Like he does in "On Rachmanioff's Birthday," O'Hara creates abstract from specifics. The spectacular, dream-like imagery is really just a dressing-up of two sights he sees while walking home—again, beauty in mundanity. He writes about an armory, likely the 7th Regiment on the

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[13] Sergei Rachmaninoff. "First Movement," Symphony No. 3 in A Minor. Performance by the Philadelphia Orchestra, conducted by Rachmaninoff, 1939.
[14] Sergei Rachmaninoff. "Second Movement," Symphonic Dances. Performance by the Philadelphia Orchestra, conducted by Eugene Ormandy, 1941.
[15] Sergei Rachmaninoff. "Second Movement," Symphony No. 2 in E Minor. Performance by the Cleveland Orchestra, conducted by Nikolai Sokoloff, 1928.
[16] O'Hara, "Poem" (1954), lines 1-3

Upper East Side (its bricks are less so bronze, more so red, but color is hardly among O'Hara's extremest of liberties) with a double use of action-writing—the building is both the object of *his* action ("watched") and is an active object *itself* ("combing"). The "glittering rails of milk" in the sky refer to vapor trails left by airplanes, another abstract—O'Hara is not being symbolic here, only artistic. And then, O'Hara tacks on a more literal description with trademark spontaneity, neither clarifying nor returning to the image of an injured swan after its first mention. Once again, the question mark is a transition.

By a method akin to the orphan lines in "Music," the following quatrain is indented to the right, visually separate from its proceeding stanza. It reads:

> Now mounting the steps
> I enter my new home full
> of grey radiators and glass
> ashtrays full of wool.[17]

At this point, O'Hara qualifies "Poem"'s aesthetic as one of dissonance. These two stanzas, contained within their respective forms, follow different rhythms. The first is slower, its three lines broken into two descriptive sentences; the second is quick and incisive. The introduction of slant rhyme in the second stanza, "full / wool," further exacerbates "Poem"'s disjointed pace. Because rhyme is an auditory tool, "successful" or harmonious rhyming depends on a consistent balance of meter and tempo, establishing predictability; particularly when matching the final sounds of a set or series of lines, rhyme introduces a variable of anticipation, as the reader learns to predict the next word. But in the same way that rhyme is affected by pace, pace is affected by rhyme; by waiting to use rhyme until the second stanza, O'Hara disrupts the pacing.

It is not long before O'Hara disrupts the poem's structure, too. Though he continues to alternate between tercets and quatrains, he connects the stanzas:

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[17] ibid, lines 4-7

O my enormous piano, you are not like being outdoors

though it is cold and you
are made of fire and wood!
I lift your lid and mountains
return, that I am good.[18]

This excerpt exemplifies the final characteristic of O'Hara's style: humor. O'Hara's humor is tricky to pin down; he is at once dry and cheeky, sometimes—as I will discuss further—reliant on reader participation. But overall, his humor is the result of an aesthetic approach to poetry.

Before he can arrange specifics into abstract, O'Hara must first collect specifics. He accomplishes this by isolating details from their contexts, a process I would describe as "literalization." He chops objects into their finest materials—e.g., the piano as wood. "[W]ords possess an almost archeological status," observes Charles Molesworth, in his essay "The Clear Architecture of the Nerves."[19] "Look, the words, say, this is how we came out, this is how we were used *for the moment*."[20]

Once O'Hara has literalized enough material to work with, he can play: the fig newton becomes a horn player; milk becomes a jet stream; the piano becomes "being outdoors." Some objects develop self-awareness. The "armory combing its bronze bricks" is one example; the armory, as a building that *can* "comb" its bricks, becomes a building that *wants* to comb its bricks. Definition turns arbitrary. By interfering with language arrangements, O'Hara pushes the boundaries of what words can do and how they can appear; he aestheticizes the "literal," as if to ask, *what is meaning, anyway?* The humor that ensues, with varying degrees of subtlety, is quite organic.

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[18] ibid, lines 31-5
[19] Charles Molesworth. "The Clear Architecture of the Nerves: The Poetry of Frank O'Hara." *The Iowa Review*, no. 3/4, 1975. p. 64
[20] ibid

Comparable playfulness shines through A's writing in "Rotation of Crops." Reflecting on various social systems, like the global economy, and various problems, like national debt, he wonders why "amusement" does not receive the same level of attention. He recommends Denmark simply ignore its national debt—"why does no one think of this?"[21]—and dole out cash to the public: "Just as there currently are boxes everywhere for contributions of money, there should be bowls everywhere filled with money."[22] That way, everyone would be free to indulge their pleasures. After all, the meaning of "debt" was invented by people—why not change it?

Herein, A and O'Hara share a dislike for seriousness; or, at the very least, for what we consider to be "serious." Where A humorously rebukes social systems, O'Hara humorously rebukes poetic systems. In "Poem," he blasphemes the poetic apostrophe "O," traditionally used to communicate strong emotion, or as a plea; O'Hara uses it to talk to a piano. O'Hara "felt that art is already serious enough," Ashbery writes in his tribute,"A Reminiscence"; "there is no point in making it seem even more serious by taking it too seriously."[23]

To attend to another example: O'Hara's "Why I Am Not a Painter" (1957). In it, the poet describes writing his series "Oranges: 12 Pastorals" (1953) by comparing his process to that of abstract expressionist painter Michael Goldberg, referencing his piece "Sardines" specifically. "I think I would rather be / a painter, but I am not," O'Hara begins.[24] As the poem continues, he watches Goldberg cover an 80-by-66 inch canvas with oil paint, starting by scribbling the word "SARDINES" on its bottom: "It needed something there."[25] But the next time O'Hara visits Goldberg's studio, SARDINES has been wiped out: "It was too much."[26] O'Hara ends the poem:

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[21] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. I, p. 287
[22] ibid
[23] John Ashbery, "A Reminiscence." *Homage to Frank O'Hara*, edited by Bill Berkson and Joe LaSeur. Berkeley: *Creative Arts Book Company*, 1980. p. 20
[24] O'Hara, "Why I Am Not a Painter" (1957), lines 2-3
[25] ibid, line 9
[26] ibid, line 16

> But me? One day I am thinking of
> a color: orange. I write a line
> about orange. Pretty soon it is a
> whole page of words, not lines.
> Then another page. There should be
> so much more, not of orange, of
> words, of how terrible orange is
> and life. Days go by. It is even in
> prose, I am a real poet. My poem
> is finished and I haven't mentioned
> orange yet. It's twelve poems, I call
> it ORANGES. And one day in a gallery
> I see Mike's painting, called SARDINES.[27]

Though the poem initially sets up poetry and painting as different forms of art, O'Hara suggests, by its conclusion, that the two are actually quite similar. The main contrast between Goldberg's "Sardines" and O'Hara's "Oranges" is that Goldberg started with one word and then painted over it, whereas O'Hara started with one word and wrote around it, without ever mentioning it. All things considered, this is a technicality. In both painting and poem, arrangement is precedent.

Using "Sardines" as a point of comparison allows O'Hara to frame his writing process as an unscripted one. The final stanza is a dizzying, fast-paced chronology of "Oranges," reading like an arrhythmic heartbeat: *and then, and then, and then*. Writing is all-consuming: "Days go by." Yet, there appears to be little planning behind what O'Hara pens—he is surprised by the product: "It is even in / prose, I am a real poet." I call attention to two words: "even," implying that form, to O'Hara, triumphs, though an afterthought—I should mention that "Oranges: 12 Pastorals" is actually written in free verse, not prose—and "real." Following the inaccurate use of "prose," the word "real" takes an interesting position; it is as much a challenge to "high poetry" as it is a joke.

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[27] ibid, lines 17-29

O'Hara's short declarations, stacking on top of each other, provide us with a window into his writing process; he is as inventive as he is improvisational. We learn the inspiration behind "Oranges" sprang from a passing thought and that the product of "Oranges" emerged from passing time; O'Hara thus embodies the spontaneous style of his poems in his writing process. Ashbery further observed in "A Reminiscence" that O'Hara wrote with a "zest" that dissipated once a poem was completed[28]; perhaps the act of writing is as central to aesthetic poetry as the writing itself. When style overtakes content, "product" exits the foray. More than anything, "Why I Am Not a Painter" offers an explicit depiction of O'Hara's unusual nonchalance towards his own poetry. He does not (necessarily) seek profundity. He *does* revoke seriousness.

To summarize this first section: O'Hara's style can be identified by three qualities—action, spontaneity and unseriousness, all of which function as different modes of aesthetic arrangement. These three qualities take priority over everything else.

[28] Ashbery, "A Reminiscence," p. 20

II.

In reading O'Hara as an aesthetic poet, I do not mean to propose that O'Hara's poetry lacks content altogether; rather, I argue his poetry lacks content that is "ethical." To elaborate, I again refer to Kierkegaard. In Volume II of *Either/Or*, he suggests that the "ethical" way of living adheres to social responsibilities and commitments. Writing as Judge to A, he argues that "only responsibility gives a blessing and true joy."[29] As the chapter's title, "Esthetic Validity of Marriage" implies, Kierkegaard's primary example of social responsibility is marriage, but the expectations of friendship, employment and parenthood apply, too. Put simply, living ethically means living for others.

To use Kierkegaard's "ethic" as literary theory, I draw upon Matthew Arnold's essay "The Study of Poetry." The responsibility of the poet, Arnold suggests, is "to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us."[30] For Arnold, poetry is superior to everything—it can even replace "most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy"[31]—and thus, he holds poetry to the highest of critical standards; all poems, he insists, must contain "higher truth" and "higher seriousness."[32] As with living, writing ethically means writing for others; to touch, to teach, to challenge, to inspire.

Ethical poets accordingly select "serious" subjects in which to hide "truth." I point to the American confessional poets, whose emergence coincided with O'Hara's. Though they share some elements with O'Hara, such as use of the "I" and of free verse, confessional poets harnessed intimacy as a way to broach upsetting, often taboo topics; O'Hara did not. To examine one example, take W.D. Snodgrass' "After Experience Taught Me…" (1959), which opens:

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[29] Søren Kierkegaard. *Either/Or*, vol. II. Translated and edited by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton, N.J.: *Princeton University Press*, 1987. p. 86.
[30] Matthew Arnold. "The Study of Poetry." *Essays in Criticism; second series*. London: Macmillan and co., 1888. p. 2
[31] ibid, p. 3
[32] ibid, p. 21

> After experience taught me that all the ordinary
> Surroundings of social life are futile and vain;
>
> I'm going to show you something very
> Ugly: someday, it might save your life.[33]

The poem continues to follow these two different voices, one baring introspection, the other relaying self-defense instructions; they join in the last stanza, asking "What evil, what unspeakable crime / Have you made your life worth?"[34] Instead of honing in on details like O'Hara, the poem's first voice remains vague in describing the "things" they fear and value, striking a balance between "confessing" and remaining open to interpretation. O'Hara, on the other hand, is always explicit about what he wants: "I wish I were staying in town and working on my poems / at Joan's studio for a new book by Grove Press," he writes in "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul" (1959).[35] Unlike Snodgrass, O'Hara is inconsiderate of the readers' impulse to self-insert. "Adieu" ends with a name-drop of the French poet Pierre Reverdy; the angle of relatability is acute. Where Snodgrass reaches to his reader with a broad embrace, hoping to teach optimism by "follow-my-lead" tactics (see the title), O'Hara does not address his reader at all. Reading "Adieu" is like "dropping in" uninvited. We are spectators.

Robert Lowell, another confessional poet, also writes with an agenda. "For the Union Dead" (1964) is crafted with meticulous precision; every description relates to a definitive "big picture," that being a meditation on collective memory, war, repetition and American heroism. Compared to "After Experience Taught Me…" "For the Union Dead" inches closer to O'Hara's affinity for detail; the poem is grounded in a specific place, the South Boston Aquarium, and makes creative use of specifics to world-build: the "Puritan-pumpkin colored girders,"[36] the

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[33] Snodgrass, "After Experience Taught Me…" (1959), lines 1-4
[34] ibid, lines 29-30
[35] O'Hara, "Adieu" (1959), lines 7-8
[36] Lowell, "For the Union Dead" (1964), line 19

"bell-cheeked Negro infantry,"[37] the "wasp-waisted" soldiers,[38] to cite a few examples. Also like O'Hara, Lowell dabbles in action-writing: "Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass"[39]; "My hand draws back. I often sigh."[40] However, "For the Union Dead" is undoubtedly a political poem, drawing comparisons between the Civil War and school integration. In comparison, "Adieu" is descriptive, full-stop. Where the primary character in "For the Union Dead," besides Lowell as "I," is Colonel Shaw, who commanded the first all-Black regiment in the Northeast, the characters in "Adieu," besides O'Hara as "I," are O'Hara's friends. He begins the poem:

> It is 12:10 in New York and I am wondering
> if I will finish this in time to meet Norman for lunch
> ah lunch! I think I am going crazy
> what with my terrible hangover and the weekend
> coming up[41]

It is quite the "non-monumental" "confession."

To return to my original question: the trouble with placing O'Hara in the academic canon stems from his choice of aesthetics over ethics, because traditional interpretation treats poetry as a *content*, not as a *style*. This "highly dubious theory," Susan Sontag writes in her essay "Against Interpretation," "violates art," but it prevails nonetheless.[42]

"Interpretation," Sontag continues, may be supplemented by "translation" as readers seek to uncover "true" meaning: "Look, don't you see that X is really—or, really means—A? That Y is really B? That Z is really C?"[43] Such a process assumes that every text is actually *two* texts: what is presented and a hidden, second text, of which it is the reader's job to find and decode.

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[37] ibid, line 22
[38] ibid, line 47
[39] ibid, line 5
[40] ibid, line 9
[41] O'Hara, "Adieu" (1959), lines 1-5
[42] Susan Sontag. "Against interpretation." *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961. p. 6
[43] ibid, 3

The "second text" is what the first text is *really* about; Arnold's "higher truth" and "higher seriousness." Evidently, every writer is political, every phrase has a purpose; as Nietzsche writes: "Art is the great stimulant to life: how could we understand it as purposeless, goalless, as *l'art pour l'art*?"[44] If the two-text theory holds, then we can assume that writers *want* to be interpreted, that they scheme with symbols and similes and metaphors. O'Hara rebuts this assumption.

Let us now examine the content of O'Hara's poems. As established, aesthetic poetry cares about non-monumental details; O'Hara's poetry cares particularly about the non-monumental details he encounters in his day-to-day. Consider "Poem (Lana Turner Has Collapsed!)" (1962), inspired by a headline he saw in the February 9, 1962 copy of *The New York Post* reading "Lana faints; in hospital." Before plunging into the poem itself, I want to mention its legendary composition, as O'Hara allegedly wrote it on the Staten Island Ferry on his way to a poetry summit, incidentally organized by Lowell.[45] In electing to read this poem, freshly written moments before his arrival at Wagner College, O'Hara proudly *rejects* ethical poetry. "Lana Turner" is a poem about process more so than it is a poem about content; so, too, are his *Lunch Poems*, written during his lunch breaks, often *about* his lunch breaks—so, too, is "Why I Am Not a Painter" (1957). Lowell, ever the ethic, famously the "Lana Turner" stunt. The poem reads:

> Lana Turner has collapsed!
> I was trotting along and suddenly
> it started raining and snowing
> and you said it was hailing
> but hailing hits you on the head
> hard so it was really snowing and

[44] Friedrich Nietzsche. "Twilight of the Idols." The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, vol. 9, edited by Alan D. Schrift, Duncan Large and Adrian del Caro. California: Stanford University Press, 2021. p. 102.
[45] Joe Dunthorne. "Joe Dunthorne's Cheery Threats." *The Poetry Society.* 2017.

raining and I was in such a hurry
to meet you but the traffic
was acting exactly like the sky
and suddenly I see a headline
LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!
there is no snow in Hollywood
there is no rain in California
I have been to lots of parties
and acted perfectly disgraceful
but I never actually collapsed
oh Lana Turner we love you get up

Lana Turner—who was fine after fainting at this party—was an actress and pin-up model, nicknamed "Sweater Girl" for her tightfitting clothing; she was, put simply, *the* prototype of beloved, trashy American pop culture, and definitely an odd subject for a poem.

Nevertheless, Marjorie Perloff contends in her essay, "Reading Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* after Fifty Years," "Lana Turner" is a "great poem," successful for its "grace of *accuracy*."[46] The poem begins with stress. O'Hara is late and caught in bad weather, which in turn makes him late-*r*. His rambling pedant about the type of weather he is experiencing—rain, snow or hail—adds to the poem's quick, senseless pace. Rushing and irritated, he is bogged down by stupid obstacles out of his control, like the traffic. But when he sees this headline—his second use of "suddenly" in the poem—his mood improves.

Although "self-importance is his bugbear," as Perloff writes,[47] the conclusion of "Lana Turner" is self-important, or, at the very least, self-righteous. O'Hara takes glee in the fact that somewhere, a Hollywood actress is having a worse day than him; he may be late, wet and cold, but she has her embarrassments laid out in a newspaper. Perloff mentions that by 1962, Turner

[46] Marjorie Perloff, "Reading Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* after Fifty Years," *Poetry Foundation*, vol. 205, no. 4, Jan. 2015. p. 387
[47] ibid, p. 386

was a has-been, scandalized by the murder of her mobster-lover by her teenage daughter,[48] making O'Hara's final line all the more tender.

As much as "Lana Turner" is driven by action, the poem is also an exercise in omission. Perloff writes:

> A lesser poet would tell us what he or she has learned from contemplating the headline or would pontificate about the hollowness of Hollywood glamor. A lesser poet would explain how and *why* he "acted perfectly disgraceful"...O'Hara knows better than to dwell on such disclosures: his aim is to portray a situation with which anyone can identify…It's all quite absurd, as he lets "you" know, and yet quite accurate in its relation of inside to outside, traffic on the ground to the natural traffic in the sky, Hollywood to O'Hara's uptown Manhattan.[49]

O'Hara does not attend to the content of "Lana Turner" as though it is serious; he has selected a "frivolous" subject matter and rightfully treats it as such. Still, he never explicitly expresses his thoughts regarding the headline, only repeating "Lana Turner has collapsed!" twice, the second time in capitalized letters; he is winking at us, to let us know he is "in" on the joke. We, too, are "in," if privy to Turner's scandalized career, or privy to her as a person in general. As aforementioned, some of O'Hara's humor is contingent upon his readers "getting" it. He is choosy with what he reveals in his poems, for nothing kills humor like explanation.

As O'Hara demonstrates in his approach to language—literalizing the specifics, using words as "archeological"—he does not care about context. But whereas he disregards the context of words as to challenge "meaning," he omits the context of content as to *provoke* meaning. He asks his readers to fill the gaps he leaves, to discover what he hides. So, it appears as though O'Hara *does* seek to be interpreted. Those familiar with the Sherman monument in Central Park

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[48] ibid
[49] Perloff, *Poetry Foundation*, vol. 205 no. 4, p. 388

can better picture the "horse into / Bergdorf's"[50]; those who know Rachmaninoff's birthday as April 1 may chuckle at the alternative title "On April Fool's Day."

Still, I do not think O'Hara's poetry complies with the two-text theory, for anything interpreted from O'Hara's omissions offers no "higher truth" or "higher seriousness." To return to Kierkegaard: The aesthete lives for personal amusement, in perpetual search for "the interesting," not for others. In their effort to defeat boredom, they get as "close" to the world as possible, paying attention to the non-monumental.[51] Aesthetic poems, then, are performances of amusement; they are as much the action of finding beauty as they are the arrangement of beauty.

I would like to point out that "arrangement" is both an inclusive and exclusive process. All the context that O'Hara chooses to omit—Sherman, April 1, "sweater girl"—is part of his aesthetic. At the same time, O'Hara's omissions invite the reader to participate as aesthetes. As he gets "close" to the world, the reader gets "close" to his poems. But, in doing so, the reader must first accept the poem as aesthetic. Molesworth writes:

> Personal and allusive, like an 'in' joke, [the poems] say you can't know me fully unless you accept all the particularity of my context ('fitful sentiment'), yet simultaneously promise that such intimate knowledge is worth more than any merely 'objective' reality (the 'mock-ironic praise'). You, too, can be in, they seem to say, and by accepting me fully in all my quirkiness the value of your own quirkiness will become clear.[52]

O'Hara does not invite his readers to interpret his content, but the ways he arranges his content. *How does he turn a buzzy tabloid headline into poetry?* In a larger sense, he asks: *is this a poem?* For the ethical interpreter, O'Hara's omissions are false clues, leading only to more detail. He taunts the ethical interpreter, and his poems thus become practices of his own self-amusement fulfillment. As A writes: "When sentimental people, who as such are very boring, become

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[50] O'Hara, "Music" (1953), lines 4-5
[51] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. I. p. 286
[52] Molesworth, *The Iowa Review*, no. 3/4, p. 73

peevish, they are often amusing. Teasing in particular is an excellent means of exploration."[53] Thus, the traditional model of interpretation, upon which the academic literary canon relies, simply does not work for O'Hara.

[53] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* vol. I, p. 299

III.

O'Hara is often described as a "city poet." This is unsurprising, for much of his poems are about the city, almost always in praise of the city. In an examination of his "city poems," "Meditations in an Emergency" (1954) is a comprehensive place of departure, particularly the following stanza:

> However, I have never clogged myself with the praises of pastoral life, nor with nostalgia for an innocent past of perverted acts in pastures. No. 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. It is more important to affirm the least sincere; the clouds get enough attention as it is and even they continue to pass. Do they know what they're missing? Uh huh.[54]

The poem is free and casual, like a conversation. O'Hara employs a combination of long-winded sentences with punctuated sounds—simply "no" or "uh huh." Similarly, he interrupts rambling, chunky stanzas like this one with monostitches: "Destroy yourself, if you don't know!"[55]. Notably, he describes New York as a container, arguing that one may be completely satisfied without leaving its "confines"; it is quite evocative of A's argument of "limits."[56]

"Meditations" does not just express love for the city; it also expresses a glaring distaste for the "pastoral." It also expresses a distaste for ethical content, or what O'Hara describes as the "sincere." With reference to cloud watching, he urges us to create abstract out of detail—rather than searching for shapes in the clouds, search for the clouds in shapes. In other words, he urges for aesthetics.

This is not the only poem where O'Hara alludes to "an innocent past of perverted acts in pastures." Consider "Ode to Michael Goldberg ('s Birth and Other Births)" (1958), a

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[54] O'Hara, "Meditations" (1954), lines 10-6
[55] ibid, line 36
[56] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* vol. I, p. 292

retrospective on O'Hara's maturity. He begins with his childhood in Grafton, Massachusetts, though he "do[esn't] remember anything of then,"[57] affirming that "there's never been an opportunity to think of it as an idyll."[58] The pastoral quickly becomes the backdrop to his sexual naivité, as he overhears the following conversation between farmers:

> "I'd like to put my rolling-pin to her" his brother Bailey
> leaning on his pitch-fork, watching
> "you shove it in and nine months later
> it comes out a kid"
> Ha ha where those flowers would dry out
> and never again be seen[59]

Where O'Hara cannot remember his childhood before becoming "aware of a certain neutrality called satisfaction,"[60] his introduction to sex is vivid; he prefaces the memory with a series of sensuous descriptions, recounting its visuals, smells and sounds (the yellow morning, the scent of hay with semen, the noises of a cutter-bar[61]). But, as he states in "Meditations," he does not surrender to "nostalgia." Once O'Hara was aware of sex, he was aware of shame, writing of it, "It's odd to have secrets at an early age."[62] Whether he is referencing the shame of sex generally or the shame of homosexuality—likely, it is both—neither is present in "Meditations," where he writes lightly about sex, as well as romance and heartbreak. "*Je suis las de vivre au pays natal*," O'Hara declares in "Ode," meaning, "I am tired of living in the homeland,"[63] or Grafton. The city is O'Hara's chosen home; it is the requirement for his happiness ("I can't even enjoy…"[64]).

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[57] O'Hara, "Ode" (1958), line 1
[58] ibid, line 6
[59] ibid, lines 40-5
[60] ibid, line 4
[61] ibid, lines 33-39
[62] ibid, line 90
[63] ibid, line 103
[64] O'Hara, "Meditations" (1954), line 12

As a rebuttal to "pastoral poetry," O'Hara offers "Song" (1959), wherein he addresses the inconsistency between appearance and beauty, arguing that the latter is not always informed by the former. It is worth including the poem in its entirety here:

> Is it dirty
> does it look dirty
> that's what you think of in the city
>
> 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 as his character is bad. is it. yes
>
> that's what you think of in the city
> run your finger along your no-moss mind
> that's not a thought that's soot
>
> and you take a lot of dirt off someone
> is the character less bad. no. it improves constantly
> you don't refuse to breathe do you

I would like to return to Molesworth's term "mock-ironic praise,"[65] as I referenced earlier. If "mock-ironic praise" means to describe an implicit expression of praise within a negative representation of something, then "Song" is its perfect manifestation. The first two lines immediately establish a difference between what "is" and what "look[s]" and suggest that the city primes one to recognize this difference, careful to pose shallow and real "dirtiness" as two questions. As the poem continues, O'Hara analogizes visual impressions of the cityscape with visual impressions of people. In the first instance, he writes that we ("you") love the city, though it is dirty. Conversely, we ("you") love a "bad" attractive person.

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[65] Molesworth, *The Iowa Review*, no. 3/4, p. 73

At its core, "Song" is O'Hara's defense of the city. The line "you don't refuse to breathe do you," repeated at the end of the second and final stanzas, accuses his addressee, an apparent dirt-critic, of hypocrisy. While dirt may be the city's "objective reality," to borrow from Molesworth once more,[66] its "worth" is evidently separate—if the two were entwined, then his addressee *would* "refuse to breathe."

To balance this accusation, O'Hara assures the reader that no one is exempt from the seeming/being contradiction; not even our own minds. "[T]hat's not a thought that's soot," he writes in the fourth stanza. This revelation is sandwiched between two stanzas of O'Hara's own thought process as he goes back and forth between determining whether or not a man is good or bad, his indecisiveness accentuated by periods: "is he really. yes." and "is the character less bad. no." Such staccato imitates the structure of an internal monologue flitting between two opposing points; Molesworth would call this "fitful sentiment,"[67] put simply, erraticism. Laying bare his fitful sentiment, O'Hara opens a line of casual communication with his addressee, seeking to relate. His fitful sentiment is a mirror, poised to reveal the seeming/being contradiction that affects us all; "by accepting me fully in all my quirkiness the value of your own quirkiness will become clear."[68]

Among O'Hara's most famous city poems is "The Day Lady Died" (1959), which records a Friday he spends running errands around New York. We know this from its opening: "It is 12:20 in New York on a Friday / three days after Bastille day, yes, / it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine."[69] He continues with a series of timestamps and landmarks, writing, as usual, in his "I-do-this, I-do-that" style. He grabs a hamburger and a malted milkshake; he goes to the bank;

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[66] ibid
[67] ibid
[68] ibid
[69] O'Hara, "The Day Lady Died" (1959), lines 1-3

he purchases Strega and French cigarettes and the *New York Post*; he takes the Jitney to East Hampton for a restaurant: "I don't know the people who will feed me."[70] In another example of mock-ironic praise, he purchases "an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets / in Ghana are doing these days."[71]

Quickly, O'Hara's New York emerges. "[T]he poet represents and mobilizes the city by means of the route he takes through it,"[72] writes Hazel Smith in her essay "The Hyperscape and Hypergrace." The New York O'Hara portrays is a New York shaped by his movement. Smith describes this as a "hyperscape," drawing upon the sci-fi concept of "hyperspace," or a higher dimension that compresses vast distances together. The "hyperscape," she explains, is a cityscape constructed out of travel: In "The Day Lady Died," New York is a bank, a bookstore, Sixth Avenue. "[T]he walk and text are almost synchronous,[73]" she explains.

The trouble with the hyperscape, Smith argues, is that movement is "associative rather than stabilizing."[74] O'Hara attempts to ground his readers with time—12:20, 4:19, 7:15—but the fact is, the hyperscape is intrinsically ephemeral, constantly and subjectively changing. There is no point of orientation. "The Day Lady Died" is yet another aesthetic poem, made of arrangements of action. We cannot grasp its content.

Pointing to the action that constructs O'Hara's poetry, Michael Clune suggests that his city poems embody an "aesthetic of free choice." "O'Hara's work is characterized by its insistent and explicit thematizing of the process of choosing," he writes.[75] Personal choice is the "basic

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[70] ibid, line 6
[71] ibid, lines 9-10
[72] Hazel Smith. "The Hyperscape and Hypergrace: The City and the Body." *Hyperscapes in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara*. Liverpool University Press, 2000. p. 61
[73] ibid
[74] ibid
[75] Michael Clune. "'Everything We Want': Frank O'Hara and the Aesthetics of Free Choice." *PMLA*, vol. 120, no. 1 [Special Topic: On Poetry], Jan. 2005. p. 184

unit" of O'Hara's poetry,[76] manifest in his use of specifics—Strega, Jitney, NEW WORLD WRITING. "The particular details…are the outcome of selections by the poem's speaker," Clune asserts.[77] If free choice is the goal of O'Hara's aesthetics, then "the city" is the obvious muse. The city affords an incomparable plethora of choices as compared to rural spaces; I return to O'Hara's "Meditations in an Emergency," where he relies on the access to various shops and public transportation to even enjoy his time in nature. Urbanization in *itself* is a choice—the choice to build and change landscape.

But Clune soon realizes that O'Hara's aesthetic of free choice is nothing like that of his time. He explains that in postwar America, specifically within intellectual circles, the popularity of the "aesthetic of free choice" represented an economic and social shift between the relationship of the individual to the world:

> The idea that national life should be directed by the private interests of the sovereign individual received its highest theoretical elaboration in the aggressive, colonizing discipline of postwar neoclassical economics and the "rational choice" political science derived from it. Individual choice is the solid determinant of value for neoclassical thought.[78]

Under the free market, personal choices march towards a greater objective. Choice is wanting, in its most material sense; choice expresses identity. But O'Hara's choices do not reveal anything about him. Each is pure, straightforward action, unattached to materialistic, superficial or metaphysical desire. The result: "The self-centered world of O'Hara's I-do-this, I-do-that poems requires a self without a center."[79] Therefore, O'Hara's poems are difficult to locate in context. Just as context is dispensable for O'Hara's language and content, so it is for his poems as wholes.

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[76] ibid
[77] ibid
[78] ibid
[79] ibid

Molesworth, from the very beginning of "The Clear Architecture of the Nerves," seems to understand this, writing

> These poems outline their own territory by operating with a high degree of consciousness about themselves as literature, and simultaneously flouting the notions of decorum and propriety. Just when they seem placed, or placeable, in some historical or theoretical classification, they are off again saying such classifications don't matter, and it's clearly wrong-headed of people to ask any poem to maintain an attitude long enough to be labelled.[80]

Like Hazel, Molesworth ascertains that O'Hara's poetry is itself ephemeral and thus, to use her language, "lack[s] absolute definition of space."[81] Still, he attempts to place O'Hara's poems in context. With reference to commodity-market capitalism, wherein "poetry has no market value," Molesworth argues that O'Hara's poems "striv[e] to remain autotelic and non-referential" and possess[...] their own status as objects."[82] By becoming an object, O'Hara's poems avoid becoming ethical, or "a reservoir of truth and value, created by an artist and offered to an audience in order to question, clarify, and re-affirm those values."[83] As Judge would summarize: "for others."[84]

I agree that O'Hara's poems share a connection with Objectivism, which prioritizes poetic style over poetic content. Louis Zokofsky's synopsis, appearing in the February 1931 edition of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, suggests that poetry oscillates between either "sincerity" or "objectivism." Sincerity may be aptly described as the "higher truth" of a poem—in fact, O'Hara uses the word in "Meditations" in his dismissal of cloud-watching. Zukofsky writes:

> In sincerity shapes appear concomitants of word combinations, precursors of (if there is a continuance) completed sound or structure, melody or form. Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing

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[80] Molesworth, *The Iowa Review*, no. 3/4, p. 61
[81] Smith, "The Hyperscape and Hypergrace," p. 56
[82] Molesworth, *The Iowa Review*, no. 3/4, p. 71
[83] ibid
[84] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* vol. II, p. 86

> them along a line of melody. Shapes suggest themselves, and the mind senses and receives awareness. Parallels sought for in the other arts call up the perfect line of occasional drawing, the clear beginnings of sculpture not proceeded with.[85]

As it appears, sincerity beckons the reader to interpret its meaning, and is therefore incomplete without interpretation. In comparison, objectification accomplishes what Zukofsky calls "rested totality," or perfect wholeness.[86] He writes:

> [...] distinct from print which records action and existence and incites the mind to further suggestion, there exists, tho it may not be harbored as solidity in the crook of an elbow, writing (audibility in two-dimensional print) which is an object or affects the mind as such.[87]

In "rested totality," the object—or content—is closed to interpretation. Thus, objectivist poetry is a type of aesthetic poetry, where interpretation is directed to the arrangement of objects, rather than the objects themselves.

However, there is a crucial discrepancy between the aesthetics of O'Hara's poetry and Zukofsky's theory of "objectification" that makes me hesitate to label O'Hara an objectivist poet. Zukofsky describes objectification in the terms of its relationship to sincerity, the two being opposites. If sincerity is "melodic," as he suggests, and objectification is the opposite of sincerity, then objectivist poetry must therefore be *un*melodic. To use Zukofsky's own work as an example, I examine section III of "A-13," a small excerpt from his epic "A" (1978):

> Too heavy
> for
> my
> breast pocket—
>
> small as it
> is

[85] Louis Zukofsky. "Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff." *Poetry*, vol. 37, no. 5, 1931. p. 273
[86] ibid, p. 274
[87] ibid

in
my wallet

the size of
a
vis-
iting card [88]

These three stanzas, like O'Hara's poems do, zero-in on a singular object. But in terms of flow and form, "A-13" is different. Zukofsky's frequent line breaks are frustrating to read, as they reject natural prosody; take his separation of "visiting" into "vis-iting." Spoken aloud, the second syllable of "vis-it-ing" is the natural stressed syllable; however, as Zukofsky isolates "vis" on its own line and keeps "-it-ing" as one phrase, "vis" becomes the stressed syllable. The rhythm of speech is completely distorted, to appease the strict shape of each stanza. While O'Hara experiments with dissonance and structure, like in "Poem" (1954), his verse remains dynamic. Further missing from Zukofsky's poetry is the decentered "I," which moves, guides and changes the text. Returning to "Poem":

Against the winter I must get a samovar
embroidered with basil leaves and Ukrainian mottos
to the distant sound of wings, painfully anti-wind.

a little bit of the blue
summer air will come back
as the steam chuckles in
the monster's steamy attack

and I'll be happy here and happy there, full
of tea and tears. I don't suppose I'll ever get
to Italy, but I have the terrible tundra at least.[89]

[88] Louis Zukofsky. "[A-13]," from "A." Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978. p. 303
[89] O'Hara, "Poem" (1954), lines 8-17

The "I" works with the poem's objects. Neither are "static, unified nor impermeable," to use Hazel's terminology[90]; the "free" or spontaneous style of verse persists, even within a stricter poetic structure. Zukofsky and O'Hara both aestheticize language by messing with it—Zukofsky breaks up syllables, O'Hara literalizes—but they differ in melody. Ultimately, objectivism is a type of aesthetic poetry, but for O'Hara, the label is an imperfect fit.

[90] Smith, "The Hyperscape and Hypergrace," p. 54

IV.

Despite O'Hara's use of the "I," "he," as a character, remains shrouded in mystery. His use of extreme specificity and subjectivity actually fail to facilitate intimacy; the poems may front as personal, but O'Hara never bridges the distance between himself and his reader. "Personal Poem" (1959) begins as follows:

> Now when I walk around at lunchtime
> I have only two charms in my pocket
> an old Roman coin Mike Kanemitsu gave me
> and a bolt-head that broke off a packing case
> when I was in Madrid the others never
> brought me too much luck though they did
> help keep me in New York against coercion
> but now I'm happy for a time and interested[91]

"Dear Diary" would work as a header. The poem bombards the reader with a wave of details that spill from one line to the next, arranged across enjambments for the effect of urgency. But without collecting into a satisfying, concluding rumination, the "Roman coin" and "Mike Kanemistu" and "bolt-head" and "Madrid" and his happiness keep O'Hara at a distance. As readers, we glean insight into the whirlwind of thoughts inside O'Hara's mind, but lack an understanding of their "point." He continues his walk:

> I walk through the luminous humidity
> passing the House of Seagram with its wet
> and its loungers and the construction to
> the left that closed the sidewalk if
> I ever get to be a construction worker
> I'd like to have a silver hat please
> and get to Moriarty's where I wait for
> LeRoi and hear who wants to be a mover and
> shaker the last five years my batting average
> is .016 that's that, and LeRoi comes in
> and tells me Miles Davis was clubbed 12

[91] O'Hara, "Personal Poem" (1959), lines 1-8

> times last night outside birdland by a cop
> a lady asks us for a nickel for a terrible
> disease but we don't give her one we
> don't like terrible diseases, then[92]

In this stanza, O'Hara's use of hyperscape is on full display. He invents the city as he observes it. Hazel argues that O'Hara's treatment of the non-monumental—"everyday aspects of the city," in her words[93]—simultaneously ascribes meaning to peculiar details—the House of Seagram, Moriarty's, LeRoi, wristwatch straps—while dismissing all that remains unmentioned. Recall that aesthetics require inclusion and omission.

We acquire more of O'Hara's humor here, especially in the last three lines, as he takes a stranger's misuse of the word "for" literally. He also jokes about becoming a construction worker as he passes a closed sidewalk, the operative word being "get," as though construction work is a long-pursued goal for which he yearns—humorous in its performative naivety. The final stanza reads:

> we go eat some fish and some ale it's
> cool but crowded we don't like Lionel Trilling
> we decide, we like Don Allen we don't like
> Henry James so much we like Herman Melville
> we don't want to be in the poets' walk in
> San Francisco even we just want to be rich
> and walk on girders in our silver hats
> I wonder if one person out of the 8,000,000 is
> thinking of me as I shake hands with LeRoi
> and buy a strap for my wristwatch and go
> back to work happy at the thought possibly so[94]

It is a continuation of the second stanza, the two working together to form one enormous run-on. For the first time, O'Hara introduces the pronoun "we," though it is unclear to whom it

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[92] ibid, lines 9-23
[93] Smith, "The Hyperscape and Hypergrace," p. 54
[94] O'Hara, "Personal Poem" (1959), lines 24-34

references—the character remains unintroduced, as if the reader is interrupting a private conversation. O'Hara criticizes an arbitrary list of writers, calls back to his dream of construction work, thinks of his fellow New Yorkers, shops and returns to work, ending the poem without ending the sentence. As suddenly as it began, it ends: one complete moment.

Living by the moment is the default of the aesthete, Kierkegaard writes. The aesthete is in search of beauty, and in so, takes close observation of the world. However, Judge warns in Volume II that living by the moment strips life into "nothing but interesting details."[95] Notably, he writes that the feeling of "home" crystallizes self-identity: "When one has a home, then one has a responsibility, and in itself this responsibility gives security and joy."[96] The aesthete, dislocated, is "a stranger and an alien in the world,"[97] and thus lacks a self; see here A's namelessness; O'Hara's distance from his readers.

There is a remarkably direct connection between A's and O'Hara's lack of identity with the *flâneur*, a term which originated in France during the 19th century, describing a particular urban "idler" or "stroller." To understand this relationship, first consider Charles Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life":

> For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the center of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world—such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can by clumsily define.[98]

The *flâneur*'s destiny is to wander, and his natural habitat is public life. I use the pronoun "his" on purpose here, for the *flâneur*'s life of leisure in France's July Monarchy is contingent upon the

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[95] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or* vol. II, p. 11
[96] ibid
[97] ibid, p. 83
[98] Charles Baudelaire. "The Painter of Modern Life." *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. Translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne. *Phaidon Press*, 1964. p. 9

ability to camouflage; to simultaneously "see", "be at the center of" and "hid[e] from" the world, one must be entitled to space. The *flâneur*, delighting in mystery, must preserve the mystery of himself and mold to the "ebb and flow" of urban life. "He is an 'I' with an insatiable appetite for the 'non-I'," Baudelaire continues.[99]

In his introduction to *The Flâneur*, Keith Tester explains that the "ontological basis of the Baudelairean poet resides in *doing* not *being*" and that "*flânerie* is the *doing* through and thanks to which the *flâneur* hopes and believes he will be able to find the truth of *being*."[100] Such is the objective of O'Hara's "I-do-this, I-do-that" poems—*facio, ergo sum*. O'Hara's poetical foundations lay in movement; take "A Step Away From Them" (1956), which begins: "It's my lunch hour, so I go / for a walk among the hum-colored / cabs." Consider the choice of the word "so"; the most natural way for O'Hara to fill his personal time is to walk the city, without explicit aim.

By aimlessness, I mean to say that O'Hara's walks do not follow a predetermined path nor are they slouching towards a destination; there is, of course, a general purpose to his walks, for walking the city is how he collects material for his poetry. Baudelaire's artist, named Monsieur G., spends his days "marvel[ing] at the eternal beauty and the amazing harmony of life in the capital cities, a harmony so providentially maintained amid the turmoil of human freedom,"[101] and spends his nights, while the rest of the world is asleep, "ben[t] over his table, darting on to a sheet of paper the same glance that a moment ago he was directing towards external things."[102] Likewise, O'Hara's poems are the culmination of observation. "A Step Away From Them" continues:

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[99] ibid
[100] Keith Tester. "Introduction." *The Flâneur*. Edited by Keith Tester. London: *Routledge*, 1994. p. 5-7
[101] Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," p. 11
[102] ibid, p. 12

> …First, down the sidewalk
> where laborers feed their dirty
> glistening torso sandwiches
> and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets
> on. They protect them from falling
> bricks, I guess…[103]

He records what he sees (laborers), then adds his own explanation of meaning (the helmets' protection) with his usual casual flair ("I guess"). We know that O'Hara has a personal preference for the city as opposed to the pastoral—again, I refer to "Meditations"—but Tester takes it a step further, arguing that the *flâneur* lives in the city not because of favoritism, but necessity. Without city life, the *flâneur* has nothing, and thus, is nothing. "In a sentence, it might be said that even though the *flâneur* does not choose his urbanity, he senses himself to be responsible for it. It is his inescapable fate," he writes.[104] Surely, the kinds of poems that O'Hara writes could not be accomplished in any scape outside of the city, for nowhere else provides the same energy, subjects and movement.

Baudelaire suggests that the *flâneur*, as an artist, is in search of modernity.[105] Rather than studying and imitating the artists of the past, he looks to capture his present.[106] Here, we encounter our first problem in defining O'Hara as a *flâneur*, for Baudelaire fails to distinguish "modernity" from 19th century Paris; obviously, "modernity" has an entirely different meaning in 20th century New York (such is the broader problem of trying to define "modernity" at all, for "modern" is constantly progressing). Tester claims that "the *flâneur* dies in the modern city,"[107] referring to so-called "rationalization" of space; in a physical sense, the structural organization of the city, such as naming streets, and the resulting removal of mystery from the city, kills the

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[103] O'Hara, "A Step Away From Them" (1956), lines 3-8
[104] Tester, "Introduction," p. 8
[105] Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," p. 12
[106] ibid
[107] Tester, "Introduction," p. 16

flâneur's ability to be aimless. In "The *Flâneur* in Social Theory," David Frisby writes that the *flâneur* as a sociological tool is a way to "read the city," but as a sociological term, cannot be distilled from its historical context.[108] There can be no 20th-century *flâneur*, he writes, because of the invention of grand boulevards and, most importantly, the department store.[109]

"The *Flâneur* in Social Theory" is in many ways a response to German philosopher Walter Benjamin's book *The Arcades Project*, his unfinished effort to capture and critique the bourgeois life of the 19th century. The focus of Benjamin's book, French "arcades," were the "forerunners of department stores," taking the form of beautiful marble corridors with glass roofs, the climactic site of a variety of merchants selling luxury goods.[110] As shopping clusters, arcades effectively shrank the world and fetishized commodity, an effect Benjamin describes as a "world exhibition." He writes:

> World exhibitions glorify the exchange value of the commodity. They create a framework in which its use value recedes into the background. They open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted. The entertainment industry makes this easier by elevating the person to the level of the commodity. He surrenders to its manipulations while enjoying his alienation from himself and others.[111]

Differing from the marketplaces of the past, arcades promoted consumption of "useless" goods—to use contemporary jargon, we can think of arcades as the antecedent to "retail therapy." Arcades sustained themselves by their own self-invention; as atmospheres of indulgence, as centers of multitude, they encouraged shoppers to visit and participate.

Benjamin argues that arcades, and definitely their department store successors, are the "last promenade for the *flâneur*. There his fantasies [are] materialized."[112] By surrounding the

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[108] David Frisby. "The Flâneur in Social Theory." *The Flâneur.* Edited by Keith Tester. London: *Routledge*, 1994. p. 82
[109] ibid, p. 85
[110] Walter Benjamin. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999. p. 3
[111] ibid, p. 7
[112] ibid, p. 895

flâneur with commodities, "the *flânerie* that began as art of the private individual ends today as necessity for the masses."[113] While the *flâneur*'s anonymity, to Baudelaire, is a source of "joy" for the artist as he finds "home" in the crowd ("the spectator is a *prince* who everywhere rejoices in his incognito"[114]), anonymity, to Benjamin, is "the gaze of the alienated man."[115] He uses *flânerie* to describe the reaction of an individual who feels isolated from and is uninterested in industrial capitalism: "He is at home neither in his class nor in his homeland, but only in the crowd…the *Communist Manifesto* as their death certificate."[116] Referencing Marx's assertion in *Das Kapital* that the value of a commodity is determined by the "working-time socially necessary for its production,"[117] Benjamin presents the *flâneur* as a foil to an industrial world, for "basic to *flânerie*, among other things, is the idea that the fruits of idleness are more precious than the fruits of labor."[118] A agrees: "Idleness as such is by no means a root of evil; on the contrary, it is a truly divine life, if one is not bored."[119]

This delineation of idleness and boredom as separate entities is crucial. While labor cures idleness, A attests, it does not cure boredom. He writes that the aesthete should avoid taking a job: "If one does that, one becomes just a plain John Anyman, a tiny little cog in the machine of the body politic."[120] Instead, one should commit to pursuing aimlessness, for the state of idleness allows for self-amusement.

By this same logic, true *flânerie*, Benjamin argues, cannot exist in a city structured around productivity, as *flânerie* is itself the absence of structure. He returns to the subject of arcades, which, he argues, appropriate and butcher *flânerie* as they invent artificial "wandering

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[113] ibid
[114] Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," p. 9
[115] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 10
[116] ibid, 895
[117] ibid, 446
[118] ibid, 453
[119] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. II, p. 289
[120] ibid, p. 298

spaces"; "wandering" is made central to the culture and experience of the arcade. One passes from storefront to storefront, likely without aim—the activity of "shopping" is an ambiguous one, grounded in the experience of browsing. But, Benjamin points out, "wandering" in an arcade is not investigative or spontaneous, for it takes place in a structure designed for the consumer ("The floors form a single space. They can be taken in, so to speak, 'at a glance.'"[121]) and there is an end goal, which is consumption ("In fitting them out, art enters the service of the merchant"[122]; "The arcades as temples of commodity capital."[123]).

In contrast, O'Hara embraces commodity. (He even writes about Bergdorf Goodman in "Music.") Commodity comes to characterize O'Hara as a *flâneur* and the city, generally. Much of his "doing" is consumption: "I stop for a cheeseburger at JULIET'S / CORNER," he writes in "A Step Away From Them." He is sure to be specific when referencing shops and commodities, often in all-capital letters for emphasis. Contrary to Tester's argument for an unrationalized city, O'Hara's New York is not a labyrinth, but a map made of personal landmarks. He favors JULIET'S CORNER for its front sign: "Neon in daylight is a / great pleasure." The extent to which this lunchtime outing may be considered *flânerie* is up for interpretation. I would argue yes—it is modern *flânerie*. (Again, the problem of defining "modern" surfaces, but I digress, for lack of a better term.) If O'Hara is in search of modernity, as Baudelaire proposes, then he has no choice but to write about Coca-Cola and chocolate malted and nude magazines and BULLFIGHT posters. Commodity is likewise the impetus behind many of O'Hara's poems. "Lana Turner" is not the only piece inspired by a copy of the *Post*; "The Day Lady Died" comes from Billie Holiday's print obituary, which O'Hara purchases from a tobacconist on Sixth

[121] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 40
[122] ibid, p. 3
[123] ibid, p. 37

Avenue.[124] (Tangential note: "The Day Lady Died" is another episode of omission, its title referencing Holiday's nickname, "Lady Day." Without this prior knowledge, the subject of the poem remains elusive.)

Frisby writes that, as the *flâneur* is only at home in the crowd, his "marginality creates a distance between the figure and that which is observed."[125] As I have already mentioned, O'Hara's poems, no matter how intimate their details may appear, fail to elucidate the character of O'Hara beyond a wandering New Yorker. By centering himself as the subject, he is both the "figure" and the "observed" that Frisby mentions. He is as much a *flâneur* as he is a piece of the city, a piece that, as readers, we grasp no further beyond observation. The *flâneur* can only be located in the dislocated space—the hyperscape—for he only feels at home when he is untethered.

As the *flâneur* is detached from location, Frisby argues for a connection between *flânerie* and journalism, presenting the *flâneur* as a "producer of texts"[126] (see Monsieur G.'s paintings and O'Hara's "I Am Not a Painter"). Walking and writing, the *flâneur* strives to create an untampered record of his city, like a journalist might. "A Step Away From Them" embodies this:

> ….A
> Negro stands in a doorway with a
> toothpick, languorously agitating.
> A blonde chorus girl clicks: he
> smiles and rubs his chin.[127]

However, O'Hara does not abstain from interacting with his environment altogether, often in the form of transactions—buying a wristwatch and papaya juice at other points in "A Step Away From Them" are examples. In the hyperscape, a certain degree of participation is warranted:

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[124] O'Hara, "Lana Turner" (1962), lines 22-6
[125] Frisby, "The Flâneur as Social Theory," p. 92
[126] ibid, p. 100
[127] O'Hara, "A Step Away From Them" (1956), lines 18-22

> He both shapes and is shaped by the city, eroticising and mythologising the doorway and turning it into an urban sublime, a parodic gateway to heaven which also transforms into a jungle of luxuriant growth.[128]

To invent a place out of subjective experience requires interaction with place. But O'Hara does not treat "place" as something separate from himself; take the last stanza of "The Day Lady Died," following his purchase of the *Post*:

> …I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
> leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
> while she whispered a song along the keyboard
> to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing[129]

O'Hara, as well as his other characters, is embedded *into* his environment—as he "does," his surroundings "do," too. The word "along," for example, besides rhyming with its preceding word to create a cutesy cadence, is a purposeful choice that includes the keyboard as an actor within the world. Holiday's musical performance does not happen *to* the keyboard—i.e., she is not playing "on" the keyboard—but *with* it, as she whispers "along" it. (It is the same type of personification that O'Hara uses in "Poem" when describing the armory and vapor trails.) The ending, "everyone and I stopped breathing," is a punch, as O'Hara leaves us, in the middle of a sentence, with the memory of one of Holiday's concerts, so remarkable that she left the room breathless, though O'Hara swaps the adjective for a verb, literalizing the exaggeration. His choice to leave the final line unpunctuated gives the poem a quality of infiniteness.

A second problem that arises in classifying O'Hara as a *flâneur* is time. Benjamin argues that "the street conducts the *flâneur* into a vanished time."[130] Tester agrees, writing that the *flâneur* is "more or less independent of the clock."[131] But O'Hara does not ignore time. Broadly,

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[128] Smith, "The Hyperscape and Hypergrace," p. 66
[129] O'Hara, "The Day Lady Died" (1964), lines 27-30
[130] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 416
[131] Tester, "Introduction," p. 15

all of his *Lunch Poems* are contained within the ambiguous period of "lunch." Sometimes, he uses timestamps to move the poem: "...Everything / suddenly honks: it is 12:40 on / a Thursday," reads "A Step Away From Them." Other times, he tracks time with transactions; the purchase of the *Post* in "The Day Lady Died" anchors O'Hara to the moment, as seen in the poem's second line, when he reassures himself of the date: "three days after Bastille day, yes." In a different way, spotting the "Lana Turner" headline helps O'Hara exit time, as it soothes his stress over his lateness.

As an "I-do-this, I-do-that" poet, O'Hara has no choice but to use time in his poetry, because the things that he does are unavoidably contained to schedule. Realistically, O'Hara cannot abide by A's instruction to "never take any *official* post"[132]; herein, a rare instance where O'Hara cannot escape the context of his life, for he needs to make a living. Still, I do not think that O'Hara has reached "the last promenade for the *flâneur*."[133] He chooses *flânerie*. Certainly, this is a process of aesthetics; did A not call for limitations?[134] O'Hara uses the structure of his day as he does the structure of poetry, challenged to arrange within the confines of form (the quatrains and tercets of "Poem" (1954), for example). The poem is a day; the day is a poem. In this way, aesthetic poetry becomes a way of living.

[132] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or,* vol. II, p. 298
[133] Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 895
[134] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. II, p. 292

V.

It has now become clear that O'Hara's poetry chooses aesthetics over ethics. For this reason, his poetry has yet to be treated as "academic," because under traditional interpretation, the value of poetry is determined by its content, specifically, its capacity to be "meaningful." Though O'Hara has been appreciated by critics as "amiable and gay," he has also been denoted as someone *not* to be read "as an antiquarian two hundred years from now,"[135]; he is a "charming minor poet."[136] In the absence of allegory—i.e. God, death, life, war—critics struggle to understand O'Hara's work—i.e. Coca Cola, B-list celebrities, television, juice. His poems become "streamers of crepe paper fluttering before an electric fan."[137] Arnold's "Study of Poetry" apparently perseveres; the value of a poem rests upon its commitment to the "ethical."

Correspondingly, the ethical mode of living is typically considered the "correct" mode of living, for it is embedded within social structure. The aesthete, choosing to live outside of the systems of society, consequently inherits a stereotype of foolishness. But this bias is ungrounded. I point to A's description of his aesthetic utopia—the one with bowls of money—wherein he makes the following comment: "No one would be allowed to own any property. An exception should be made only for me."[138] Only a self-aware individual could so impishly mask as foolish, demanding for the simultaneous equalization of wealth and personal exception of power; in wearing the mask, A thus subverts "foolishness." O'Hara exhibits this subversion in his own way; recall "I am a real poet."[139]

I want to conclude by pointing out that Kierkegaard does not position the aesthetic/ethical dichotomy as hierarchical. One is not "better" than the other; they are merely two different

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[135] Marius Bewely. "Lines." *The New York Review*, vol. VI, no. 3, orig. pub. Mar. 31, 1966.
[136] Perloff, Marjorie. "Introduction." *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters*, 2nd ed. Chicago: *University of Chicago*, 1997. p. ix
[137] ibid
[138] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. I, p. 287
[139] O'Hara, "Why I Am Not a Painter" (1957), line 25

spheres of existence, two different ways to experience the "self." By this logic, O'Hara's poetry—despite Arnold's belief—has no less "value" than ethical poetry. Rather: to be aesthetic, to be anti-literary, to be unserious, a poem is itself queer.

Sontag writes that literary criticism needs a revamp, one that "serve[s] the work of art, not usurp[s] its place."[140] One, she continues, that pays attention to form: "What is needed is a vocabulary—a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, vocabulary—for forms."[141] I have offered *Either/Or* as one such "vocabulary." Though I have focused on Frank O'Hara, I do not see *Either/Or* as a theory exclusive to him, and I invite further scholarship to expand its application.

In "Rotation of Crops," A poses the question "Is consideration being given to any means of amusement?"[142] When we laugh at his innocence ("Instead of increasing the debt, they want to pay it off in installments. From what I know about the situation, it would be easy for Denmark to borrow fifteen million rix-dollars" he writes, on the topic of national debt[143]) we are confronted with our own problematic constructions of what makes a world (what is silly about a place where "everything is free" and everyone lives to "celebrate"[144]?). Likewise, there is one singular aspect of O'Hara's poetry that is earnest: why not *l'art pour l'art*?

[140] Sontag, "Against Interpretation," p. 8
[141] ibid
[142] Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, vol. I, p. 286
[143] ibid
[144] ibid, p. 287

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