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The Clear Architecture of the Nerves: The Poetry of Frank O'Hara

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previous work has richly evoked the verbal landscapes of American and British romanticism can now take the Orphic strain in a punningly Joycean direction. And Kathleen Raine's review of David Jones's *The Sleeping Lord* may remind us that even a poet who is justly called "the last of the bards" can be a modern sign-maker—indeed, a Joycean artificer of verbal labyrinths. David Jones, Charles Olson, Frank O'Hara and Ronald Johnson share few ideological or even stylistic assumptions. But surely they would all understand why Octavio Paz has insisted that, as our century goes on, any work which really counts must be "a form in search of itself."

Finally, Charles Altieri reminds us that the act of reading or interpreting must also involve a continual self-interrogation. He reviews the major theoretical models available to the interpreter, proposes a theory of the poem as act, and tests it by reading "Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour," one of Wallace Stevens' many poems "of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice."

CRITICISM / CHARLES MOLESWORTH

"The Clear Architecture of the Nerves": The Poetry of Frank O'Hara

Frank O'Hara's *Collected Poems*, as profuse in their inventiveness as they are pervasive in their influence, demand that we attempt to judge their place in American poetry. It is not only because these poems skirt the edges of such contiguous but opposing aesthetic qualities as artless simplicity and dazzling elaboration that they are hard to judge. 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. For all we can say about them, they yet remain chastely irreducible, as if they wanted nothing so much as to beggar commentary. But if we read them in bulk, we are left with the peculiar sensation we've been listening to a manic waif, someone for whom any audience becomes the most charitable therapy, for as soon as the poems stop talking, stop chatting, their speaker will fall dead. The chatter registers the *frisson*, the stimulation, but it also hints at the shiver of fear, the *gouffre*. Like all great improvisational artists, O'Hara thrives in the realm of nostalgia, a looking back that can never for a moment become true

regret. Like the Steinberg drawing of the hand holding the quill pen which has just completed the profile of its own face, O'Hara's poetry startles as does any utterance clearly self-begot.

Self-begot in more than one sense, for these are the most autobiographical poems we have; they make "confessional" poetry seem alexandrine or allegorical by comparison. The friends, the places, the objects, the very reverie: they are all his and all there for us to rummage through. Just by writing them down, just by taking note of them, O'Hara won for his personal ephemera another status. "Save him from the malevolent eyes of/spiders but do not throw him to the swans," he begs in "Words To Frank O'Hara's Angel," wanting neither gothic terror nor fruity sublimation. This poem ends with a simple, a necessary plea: "Protect his tongue." His tongue assumes the duties of his soul, of course, the principle of his individuation. An ordinary biography of O'Hara would be a distraction when looking at the poems. Yet reading the poems in an autobiographical, chronological order, we're struck by an early despair, the hint of a habit of mind that could have been crucial in the determination of the poetry's final texture. Frank O'Hara may well have despaired of ever escaping himself.

This early despair took the form of a fear of his own selfhood. Persistent emotional demands and the ability to be haunted by his own irremovable privacy characterize the fearful self, and it can be conquered only by turning over to the world of contingent actions all hope of finality. The solipsist must be conquered by the improviser. Once conquered, it is as if O'Hara never allowed his own self to become the subject of the poetry's intention. His self might be, almost always was, the *occasion* of the individual poems, but the poems' focus is rarely on that self as subject matter. It is the great given of his poetry; it is what memory was for Wordsworth or moral excellence for Milton, that concern without which his poetry, the very idea of his poetry, would be unspeakable. Unlike Whitman, O'Hara never sings *of* his self; rather, his self is the instrument *on* which the poet sings. More than an instrument, though, for his various selves form an ensemble, whose central organizing subject is always problematical:

I have lost what is always and everywhere
present, the scene of my selves, the occasion of these ruses,
which I myself and singly must now kill,
and save the serpent in their midst.

("In Memory Of My Feelings")

There are several relatively early poems that record intimations of this despair, this many-selved situation which could be burdensome if it weren't possible to metamorphose this problem into the very means of escape from

an even worse one. This is the end of "Poem" ('All the mirrors in the world'):

I
cannot face the fearful usage,

and my eyes in, say, the glass
of a public bar, become a

depraved hunt for other re-
flections, and what a blessed

relief! when it is some
disgusting sight, anything

but the old shadowy bruising,
anything but my private haunts.

When I am fifty shall my
face drift into those elongations

of innocence and confront me?
Oh rain, melt me! mirror, kill!

If this came later in his work, rather than as it does in the Hopwood Award manuscript submitted at the University of Michigan in 1951, its tone might register as less sincerely grim. Here the problem is a fixed self, yet one that longs to confront some chaos, some "disgusting thing," so that it might again become an Emersonian "transparent eyeball," some self with no private identity, nothing to contain or protect but the activity of its own indiscreet peering. But it must never look inward, nor must it see itself in the faces in the mirror. To do so would be to become a mere object in the world of objects, rather than the sustaining principle of the observed world. These poems are often personal but seldom intimate. Notions such as Laing's "ontological insecurity" might be applied here as well, since the speaking subject in O'Hara's poems often loses domination of himself to the surrounding objects. John Ashbery remarks that O'Hara would have been amazed to see his *Collected Poems* run to over five hundred pages, but surely the very dismemberment of his consciousness has no rational limits, and once the dispersal of its contents starts there is no way to stop or even slow it.

Such dispersal reaches its characteristic limits in O'Hara's long poems, sustained flights of improvisational inclusiveness in which a Whitmanian

voice seems intent on driving through the detritus of a surreal world, to celebrate and assume whatever it finds at hand. This is from “Biotherm (For Bill Berkson)”:

extended vibrations

ziggurats ZIG I to IV stars of the Tigris-Euphrates basin
 leading ultimates such as kickapoo juice halvah Canton chinese
in thimbles

paraded for gain, but yet a parade kiss me,
 Busby Berkeley, kiss me

you have ended the war simply by singing in your Irene Dunne foreskin
“Practically Yours”

with June Vincent, Lionello Venturi, Caspar Citron
a Universal-International release produced by G. Mennen Williams
 directed by Florine Stettheimer
 continuity by the Third Reich

after “hitting” the beach at Endzoay we drank up the liebfraumilch
 and pushed on to the Plata to the Pampas
you didn’t pick up the emeralds you god-damned fool you got
 no collarbone you got no dish no ears

O’Hara wrote a friend to say he was pleased he had kept this poem “‘open,’ and so there are lots of possibilities, air and such.” Seen in the light of avant-garde poetics, this poem is successful as an experiment—it is nothing if not open—but at the same time it is a failure as anything except a closed, non-referential object. The allusion to Hemingway and the parody of his style aren’t illuminated by the juxtaposition to Hollywood “gossip-fame”; rather, the poem is a tour de force only if we disregard all frameworks of meanings that it might momentarily generate. Like an “action painting” it might have begun as an attempt to register the energy that could accrue or discharge in any mind possessed of its myriad contents in all their rigorous denial of hierarchy. But it ends as something else: a collocation, a collage which seldom rewards lingering attention or compels an energized response. Somehow the poem manages to bring the marvelous and the humdrum together, not so much as fragments of heterogeneous values jostling together, but as an aleatory set of transcriptions, the recording of many merely different things. The things, of course, are not the objects referred to by the words but rather the words themselves, for language here is not employed to transmit information or express states of mind. In this poem, as in many of O’Hara’s, the words possess an almost archeological status: they are the thrown up, thrown in phenomena of a particular socio-cultural mix. Look, the words say, this is how we came out, this is how we were used *for the moment*. We may indeed have been used to point to some-

thing else, but whatever that is, or was, is surely gone now, and it couldn't have been ascertained or possessed in any case. "I hope the poem to *be* the subject, not just about it," O'Hara said. Here he has supplanted the fearful vacuum of a changeless, irreducible yet contingent self with the screen of a jumbled, particularized but impermeable language.

O'Hara may well have composed by lines, but it would seem more likely that the poems grew by phrases. The typography of the long poems isolates these phrases, or spurts of phrases, and it's hard to see any other architectonics at work. In the short lyrics this is also true, and the erratic syntax or arbitrary stanzaic patterns present no handicap to reading them, since we have to get the phrasing right on our own, regardless of line-breaks or any traditional sense of poetic measure. Performance, that special quality of an individual self flashing forth in gestures and sudden turns, is crucial here, and can be seen, dominant and offhand, in such poems as "Why I Am Not A Painter." O'Hara says it most humorously in his manifesto, "Personism":

I don't believe in god, so I don't have to make elaborately sounded structures. I hate Vachel Lindsay, always have; I don't even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve. If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don't turn around and shout, "Give it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep."

It may help if you *were* a track star, even if it wouldn't help to announce it. This is an American trait, this trust of activity over words, the sense that thought or cognition is a degraded form of motion. Going on your nerve requires something almost like a contempt for language, or at least an impatience with its discursive possibilities. This sensibility best registers itself in transcription, the literal recording of what is going on at the moment. Urban life, however, fragmented, skeptical, and alienated as it is, creates a feedback in the recording apparatus. It begins to skip, miss and jump. The pieces of the pattern overtake the cohesiveness and ask only to be recorded as pieces. Performance and preservation become synonymous. "You had to be there," says the observer, for the gesture remains as unique as the moment of expression that allowed it to be witnessed. When words are asked to witness the unique, to become induplicable, they may very well cling to a few neighboring words and then fall silent.

Many of O'Hara's short poems begin in one of several modes and continue in it until the end of the poem without development or variation, and as such these short poems present alternative (though similar) versions of the longer poems that surrealistically mix voices and levels of attention. These shorter poems manifest O'Hara's technical inventiveness as it shows

forth in a challenging syntactical verve, but even more immediately in the distinctive offhandedness so central to his sensibility. Take, for example, the openings of poems where this wit begins with such daring casualness. Here is what might be called the “personal madcap” mode:

Diane calls me so I get up
I wash my hair because
I have a hash hangover then
I noticed the marabunta have walked into the kitchen!
they are carrying a little banner
which says “in search of lanolin”
so that’s how they found me!

The flat quotidian voice drops to the confessedly anti-heroic only to raise the spectre of urban terror, till quickly we realize the terror exists only as the bizarre, salvaged from the realm of popular culture. The only thing to fear is that our momentary disorientation might make us discover how irrational the surfaces of life have been all along.

Then there’s the more directly surrealist mode where common objects perform fantastic maneuvers, where transformed memories and bizarre projections erupt in counterpoint against an almost relaxed, reflective structure:

I watched an armory combing its bronze bricks
and in the sky there were glistening rails of milk.
Where had the swan gone, the one with the lame back?
Now mounting the steps
I enter my new home full
of grey radiators and glass
ashtrays full of wool.

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

This mode, employed often by O’Hara’s comic friends and imitators, from Kenneth Koch to Michael Benedikt, obviously satisfies a desire, felt by many modern poets, to include both armories and Ukranian mottos in the poem if it is to maintain a level of interest commensurate with the world of objects. Owing much as it does to use of collage and *objets trouvés* by modern painters and sculptors, this might be called the mode of “surreal serendipity.” It resembles very strongly the “paranoiac-critical” method enunciated by Salvador Dali, and in attributing occult and protean abilities to

everyday objects, it has the same mixture of theatricalized terror and whimpering playfulness as Dali's paintings. At the same time it spins off such delightful accidents as the notion of the wings as "anti-wind."

A third mode arises from O'Hara's fascinated interest in personality, especially as it is revealed in the lives of artists and the inter-relationships of his own circle. This mode provides much of the tone that has led many of O'Hara's followers to become known as the "gang-and-gossip" school. Here the quiriness of human actions replaces the quiriness of objects, and the quotidian finds itself suddenly redeemed by uniquenesses of temperament and gesture. The "Bill" in this typical opening is probably Bill Berkson:

He allows as how some have copped out
but others are always terrific, hmmmmm?
Then he goes out to buy a pair of jeans,
moccasins and some holeless socks. It

is very hot. He thinks with pleasure that
his first name is the same as deKooning's.
People even call him "Bill" too, and
they often smile. He feels rather severe

actually, about people smiling without a
reason. He is naturally suspicious, but
easily reassured, say by a pledge unto death. . . .

The offhand approach to the extreme means of a death-pledge typifies the humor of this sort of poem, where endearing traits are simultaneously exaggerated and excused. This mode of praise must never be sentimental; even a sudden plunge into bathos or the absurdly inconsequential will be used to avert any sentimental tone from developing. Camaraderie remains on guard against slack soppyishness. This mode might be called "mock-heroic praise." (Provocative resemblances to mock-heroic satire suggest themselves. See especially Swift's "Description of a City Shower," a poem I imagine would have delighted O'Hara.) The attitudes of the speaker must shift as quickly as the facades in a cityscape, and everything is both available and vanishing.

Related in part to each of the preceding modes, yet occurring often enough in its own distinctive way, the fourth mode concentrates on sentiment itself. Often seemingly surprised at his own ability (or should we say liability?) to experience sudden occurrences of ordinary or even banal emotions, O'Hara writes many poems where he confronts his own reserves of sentiment. This confrontation veers sharply and quickly, however, into the ambiguous. Such poems can often be either the most frustrating or the

most intriguing of O'Hara's to read, and they often seem the most unstable, bearing more visibly the marks of conscious turns, labored leaps, and manifest evasions. Here is an opening where the first six lines promise something they never deliver:

There's nothing worse
than feeling bad and not
being able to tell you.
Not because you'd kill me
or it would kill you, or
we don't love each other.
It's space. The sky is grey
and clear, with pink and
blue shadows under each cloud.
A tiny airliner drops its
specks over the UN Building.
Everything sees through me,
in the daytime I'm too hot
and at night I freeze; I'm
built the wrong way for the
river and a mild gale would
break every fiber in me. . . .

Traditionally the poet finds those counters in the landscape that will measure his "inner weather," but that process visibly malfunctions here. (O'Hara's play with forms and formats reflects his inability to leave them alone; he was as much a tinkerer as an explorer.) The natural backdrop and the events that occur upon it have taken up the coloration of the poet's mood, even down to the quaint "tiny" to modify airliner, yet the poet refuses to maintain an attitude, either of constructive reflection or purgative expressiveness. This sort of poem offers the illusion of development or variation, but the inconclusiveness recurs so constantly that after a while it's implicit in the very forthrightness with which such poems announce their mood. Characteristically direct at the opening, they always finish off with a zany nonsense (this example concludes: "the Pepsi-Cola sign,/ the seagulls and the noise") signaling O'Hara's tacit admission that enough has been said, or that words have to be put in their proper place. Their place, of course, is free-wheeling through the consciousness, looking for random meanings, but mistrusting any discursive demands on their formal or syntactical possibilities. They are poems in the mode of "fitful sentiment." This mode presents the residue of that fear of selfhood mentioned earlier. John Ashbery says that O'Hara "talks about himself because it is he who happens to be writing the poem." But this is also why the poems are often

evasive and fitful; O'Hara is as concerned to escape as he is to reveal himself.

As was suggested above, these modes, though distinguishable, combine in varying degrees with one another and are often mixed in erratic ways in the longer poems. Each has close affinities with the others, and yet they can be separated out as dominant influences on various poets who have chosen to emulate O'Hara's style. Anne Waldman, for example, often uses the "personal madcap" mode, mixing it with that of "fitful sentiment," while the other two occur much less frequently in her poetry. James Schuyler's poetry overflows with examples of "surreal serendipity" and "mock-heroic praise," but he never tosses off revelations and incidents just to reflect disorder and hence seldom indulges in "personal madcap." Bill Knott, on the other hand, alternates all of the modes, using now one and then another in different books, changing styles (within a fairly narrow range) as the fashion dictates. But obviously O'Hara's influence cannot be attributed simply to the fact that he developed certain stances or tones that would allow personal inventiveness to assimilate large hunks of mundane material. (These modes were employed concurrently by Ashbery and Koch, and all three men form the fountain of influences that make up what is now all too tiringly, and resentfully by the poets themselves, known as the New York School.) Though his mastery of the low style comporting with the attitudes of high camp encompasses a significant portion of O'Hara's peculiar genius, I think his poetry reveals the stresses and offerings at work through larger, less easily named forces in contemporary poetry.

It could be argued, for example, that O'Hara's poetry, viewed in the context of the 1950's, formed a severe reaction against the "academic" poetry then in the ascendancy by mounting a challenging return to the true spirit of modernism. The breakthroughs of Eliot and especially the earlier Williams (of *Kora in Hell*, say) had been allowed to calcify, so the argument runs, into the prettified ironic set pieces so beloved by anthologizers and New Critics. What was needed, or in any case what would be most interesting, would be a re-assimilation of the first energies of modernism bolstered by an infusion of cosmopolitan, surrealist sensibility. Poetry would once again have a chance to get in touch with the crazily energized surfaces of modern life, but only by abandoning once and for all any lingering notions as to what constitutes proper "poetic" subject matter. Something similar, but more polemical, can be presented as a further argument: namely, that the English and American traditions never really secured the attacking front of modernism. Eliot and his peers flirted with the more readily assimilated parts of the European avant-garde, but withdrew when they realized what was really at stake. Stevens' hermeticism and Auden's conversion in the forties gave evidence that retrenchment was inevitable. What else might a young poet do in 1950? It was only in the plastic arts

that development seemed steadily exciting, that the forms had not set and the gestures been stilled. Jackson Pollock and William deKooning and other abstract expressionists were the only American artists as interesting as the Continental giants of the early years of the century. You simply had to side-step the current literary scene in the States, not a plunge backward to recover something lost or fading, but a jig sideways to pick up the floating currents in other forms. The poetic idiom available to O'Hara was not so much depleted as simply irrelevant.

O'Hara's relations with the circle of painters and poets were the fruition, then, not only of a singular temperament but of a larger national cultural need. Robert Creeley was listening to the improvisations of Charlie Parker, still digging out a native American idiom from the seemingly disreputable, chaotic cadences of a dispossessed class. Robert Bly was beginning to discover the European and South American surrealists; and voices from the San Francisco Renaissance, such as Ginsberg and Snyder, were turning to Eastern mysticism and their own version of the beatified lunacy of William Blake. O'Hara's work was just one more of the freaky alternatives thrown out by the pressures of growing up absurd in the American society of the 1950's. Such a construction of literary history, however skeletal, may go a long way towards normalizing O'Hara's poetic, and allowing it to share the banner of innovation with others both qualifies and increases our appreciation of it. But I would hold out for a more radical formulation of its literary value, both intrinsic and extrinsic. For this formulation we must bear in mind several things, but perhaps most especially the course of O'Hara's influence on the second and third generation of poets to follow his lead. Hardly any young poet today has not written at least a dozen poems in one of the four modes outlined above, and I would argue that no poet born since 1920 has had more of an impact on American poets today than Frank O'Hara. His role in shaping the current idiom challenges overstatement.

His work, as we have seen, resonates more fully when seen in the context of the plastic arts than in that of his contemporaries who wrote poetry. This is because O'Hara wanted his poems to assume the status of things, and he was even willing to run the risk that they would sink to the level of commodities. His refusal to mark off clear aesthetic patterns in his work, his insistence that the poems bear all the marks of their occasional nature, and his deliberately non-purified language reaffirm this commodity aspect of his poetry. In many important senses, O'Hara's poetry takes on the prospects of the perfect expression of a post-industrialized world: it is the highest poetic product of commodity-market capitalism. In the two decades after World War II and before O'Hara's death in 1966, American economics and society began to face, and some would say at last resolve, the problems of capitalism at its highest stages of development and production. America did this with its own peculiar, but trend-setting innovations,

or set of innovative social-engineering techniques: it created the consumer-oriented society. At its simplest level this can be seen as capitalism's enormous and pervasive effort, faced with the prospect of shrinking industrial growth rates, to "manufacture" the one element that could sustain an expanding economy, namely, consumer demand. In order to do this, and in part as a result of attempting to overdo it, previous areas of human activity were invaded, and their products monetized and marketed. Activities usually regarded as non-utilitarian, or set apart as ludic and arbitrary escapes from the pressures of a market system, were transformed both in their productivity and consumptive aspects. This happens most visibly in the plastic arts where a pool of palpable objects lay ready for merchandizing. Here is how Harold Rosenberg describes it in a recent essay:

In the reign of the market, the intellectual role of the artist, in which is embodied his social or philosophical motive for painting, is cancelled, and his public existence is restricted to the objects he has fabricated. . . . Today, art exists, but it lacks a reason for existing except as a medium of exchange, a species of money. Art as a commodity does not even exist for art's sake, since that implies existence for the sake of aesthetic pleasure.

Such socio-aesthetic formulations are fairly commonplace, but they are seldom applied to contemporary poetry. Very few people would deny that this is what has happened to modern painting in America, but I would extend the argument to O'Hara's poetry as well, with certain important reservations. Poetry has no market value, as do paintings (if we exclude the "market" of grants and awards), but its striving to remain autotelic and non-referential raises the possibility that it can be considered as a kind of specie. This impulse to depersonalize his most intimate utterances, to see his poems as possessing their own status as objects conflicts with O'Hara's equally strong desire for spontaneity and freedom.

O'Hara's poetry, in seeking to reduce itself to the status of objects, wants above all to avoid what Susan Sontag calls the "curse of mediacy," that is, it will not serve as a reservoir of truth or value, created by an artist and offered to an audience in order to question, clarify, and re-affirm those values. O'Hara's poems point to nothing else; they are absolutely im-mediate. This flight from the referential uses of language has many modernist exemplars and many explanations; in novelists such as Joyce it is a final form of artistic heroism, an attempt to make the book suffice for the world, or even supplant it. In the 'fifties and early 'sixties, I think O'Hara was fascinated by this myth, the last viable myth of modernism. His poetry would be sufficient unto the day, in all its dailiness, mundane and fallen and inclusive. But it would also, both as a preliminary and a result of this, not

have to answer to anything but himself and his own fantasies. If indeed the poems would take on a "currency" outside these strictures they would do so by paying their own way, by being taken up as the *lingua franca* and utilized by other poets in their commerce with the world of objects and words.

This aspect of O'Hara's work, of course, can be viewed under a different aegis. Some would call O'Hara a modern Whitman, the poet of the celebratory list, the praiser of the ordinary, the embracer of contradictions. We can agree with this view without denying or weakening the other view. As if over-determined in a Freudian sense, O'Hara's poetic compulsions represent the confluence of several large movements, and this welter of possibilities it both tosses up and mockingly refuses to choose among provides the richnesses his followers continue to tap. But central to O'Hara's poetic is the absence of any idealizing impulse, or any clash of opposing values; all is leveled into an ever more inclusive "yea," and the meretricious mixes easily with the meritorious. As Herbert Marcuse describes it, "works of alienation are themselves incorporated into this society and circulate as part and parcel of the equipment which adorns and psychoanalyzes the prevailing state of affairs. Thus they become commercials—they sell, comfort, or excite." It isn't simply that O'Hara's poems decline to oppose the current "state of affairs," so much that their particular mode of celebration leaves little room for any truly personal statement, any possible alternative vision. By using the language of fantasy in a flat, commonplace way and by projecting mundane reality onto a level occupied by the fabulous, O'Hara flattens his words into a scrap-heap of non-syntactical, non-discursive fragments which can do little beyond record—or reify—a world of objects and objectified sensations. Again, Marcuse:

For the expression of this other side [different from the established order], which is transcendence within the one world, the poetic language depends on the transcendental elements in ordinary language. However, the total mobilization of all media for the defense of the established reality has coordinated the means of expression to the point where communication of transcending contents becomes technically impossible. The spectre that has haunted the artistic consciousness since Mallarmé—the impossibility of speaking a non-reified language, of communicating the negative—has ceased to be a spectre. It has materialized.

O'Hara was fitfully aware of this possibility, this sense that the fullest statements had all been said, and being said were now only capable of being fractured, but no countervailing statement, no alternative myth was comfortably possible. (See such poems as "How To Get There" and his

essay on Pasternak.) What has happened, I think, is that his imitators and followers have not possessed the same agonized tension between this desire for objectification and the need for spontaneity that O'Hara felt, and therefore their poetry is increasingly threatened with inconsequentiality. The winners of the O'Hara Memorial Award published by Columbia University Press amply demonstrate this.

Finally, O'Hara's poetry reflects a needed vision and must be judged as work of a valuable consciousness because it is strung between two poles, each of which offers liberating possibilities and yet defeats them. These poles are the exaltation of sensibility and the celebration of a world of things. As the poems veer toward these polar extremes, their language faces its problematic limits: words reflect order, though sensibility is whimsical and chaotic, and words are fleeting when things are stable and dense when things are evanescent. In his greatest poems, such as "The Day Lady Died," the "personal madcap" mode vivifies the "mock-ironic praise," and the sense of "surreal serendipity" ("I buy/ an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets/ in Ghana are doing these days") never totally obliterates the "fitful sentiment." Such fortuitous combinations of the various modes are rare in his work, and even rarer in that of his followers.

Overloaded with gestures and attitudes as they are, O'Hara's poems are so fraught with their insistent personality that their status as objects never fully belies their existence in a special class. They reflect their humanness in a special way; they flaunt it and defy it at the same time. They flaunt it by their very availability (the "personal madcap"), heaving themselves forth indiscriminately asking for recognition, yet careful to retain their idiosyncrasy. Personal and allusive, like an "in" joke, they 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. Don't sell yourself cheap, they whistle irrepressibly

And
before us from the foam appears
the clear architecture
of the nerves, whinnying and glistening
in the fresh sun. Clean and silent.

("Early Mondrian")

At the same time the poems defy their humanness by their leveling of all values. A sort of falling rate of idiosyncrasy sets in and the poetry be-

comes nearly anonymous, like the scraps of printed matter in a Schwitters collage or the *dissecta membra* of a Cornell box (the “surreal serendipity”) floating between the ultimately arbitrary and the ultimately determined. A sharp dialectic of freedom and obsession energizes the poems; in spite of their desire to be objects, they retain numinous possibilities. For all their playfulness, the poems finally do affirm a set of values, or at least by reflecting certain values in their high resplendence, offer an allowance of affirmation without ever urging it. These values, of course, are insouciance and improvisation: though the poems want an objective structure, a clear architecture, they yet, inescapably it would seem, act out of a boundless trust of their own nerve. Hearing so many words and phrases that could apply to O’Hara’s poetry—pragmatic, Adamic, individualistic, insane energies revolving around a calculated center, for sale and yet priceless—it should be no wonder if we settle for calling them, and also judging them, as completely American.

CRITICISM / SHERMAN PAUL

In and About the Maximus Poems*

II *The Maximus Poems 11-22*

Yes, as Paul Blackburn complained, he twists:

He sd, “You go all around the subject.”
And I sd, “I didn’t know it was a sub-
ject.” He sd, “You twist” and I sd,
“I do” . . .

In what follows in “Letter 15,” Olson tells us that his poem will not make us comfortable. It does not follow a linear track (to a foreseen destination) and its songs or letters are woven together (“Rhapsodia”: *Greek*, songs stitched together). Subjects have definition, have boundaries, and are fields claimed by scholars—“academics” is Olson’s pejorative word. And Olson, who boasted “je suis un ecolier” when instructing Cid Corman in the high value of scholars like Robert Barlow, Carl Sauer, and Frederick Merk, is certainly not a scholar of the academic kind. He recognizes no boundaries; the field he enters is not a subject but the reality he fronts, a place of attentions. His subject, if he may be said to have one, is man-within-the-field; that, and the twisting of his own self-action.

* The first section of this essay, *The Maximus Poems 1-11*, appeared in *TIR* 6/1 (Winter, 1975).