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"The death of literature as we know it": Reading Frank O'Hara

When Frank O'Hara's *Collected Poems* were published in 1971, reviewers had mixed feelings. The book contains 510 poems, of which only 286 had appeared in print during O'Hara's lifetime. Although he was notoriously careless with his manuscripts—stuffing them into drawers and forgetting they existed, or sending them to friends without keeping a copy for himself—the publication of everything that the editor had unearthed was taken by some reviewers as a potential disservice to O'Hara's posthumous reputation. There are a number of slight poems in the volume, and some others are just plain bad, so it seemed reasonable to assume O'Hara would not have wished to see them in print. Helen Vendler sums up the matter prudently in her review of the *Collected* in *Parnassus*: "for the record, we need this new edition; for the sake of fame and poetry, we need a massively reduced version, showing O'Hara at his best" (qtd. in Perloff 6). Indeed, an ample selection was soon made available, while the search for his unpublished work continued. This resulted in the publication of 214 newly discovered poems (*Poems Retrieved*) in 1977, and ever since, critics have been at work trying to establish some sort of order and hierarchy in O'Hara's impressively large oeuvre.

Forty five years have passed since O'Hara's death, and it is fair to say that the poems critics focus on, or even refer to in passing, are greatly outnumbered by those that never get mentioned. His canon has been more or less firmly established, though for how long is anyone's guess. It is curious that at least one of these "canonical" poems, generally agreed to be major, has elicited relatively few sustained critical examinations—I am thinking specifically of "Biotherm." At the same time, it polarized critical opinion like no other poem by O'Hara, with the possible exception of "Second Avenue." When the reception of his work was in its early stages, and separating the wheat from the chaff appeared as the most urgent task, Anthony Libby and Richard Howard castigated "Second Avenue" for its structural shortcomings (Libby 135-137, Howard 114-116), while Marjorie Perloff allowed it some measure of success; Charles Molesworth found "Biotherm" to be "an aleatory set of transcriptions, the recording of many merely different things" which "seldom compels an energized response" (213); whereas Perloff praised it as exhilarating, in spite of similar reservations. She also calls it O'Hara's "last great poem and one of the important poems of the sixties" (Perloff 178). Five years later,

in 1982, Mutlu Konuk Blasing claimed that "Biotherm" "can serve as a focal point for a study of [O'Hara's] entire career, which in a sense is a countdown for this final explosion" (307). More recent readings do not do away with valorizations, but these are of a quite different kind, as I shall try to show. Still, the fact remains that these initially controversial poems, despite their present canonicity within the O'Hara corpus, are very resistant to the kind of close reading that aims at a comprehensive, totalizing interpretation. The reasons for this resistance, and the ways in which readers have attempted to overcome it, will be my main concern in this paper.

Before taking up these questions, however, I would like to take a closer look at "Biotherm," which was written between September 1961 and January of the following year. Soon after he started work on the poem, O'Hara wrote to Donald Allen, who later edited his posthumously published books, to say that what had started as an occasional "birthday poem" for Bill Berkson was developing into something much larger, as had been the case with the "Ode to Michael Goldberg ('s Birth and Other Births)," a long autobiographical work from 1958 in which Goldberg plays a cameo role. "I don't know anything about what it is or will be but am enjoying trying to keep going and seem to have something. Some days I feel very happy about it, because I seem to have been able to keep it 'open' and so there are lots of possibilities, air and such" (qtd. in Perloff 173). Berkson was O'Hara's closest friend at that time, and although they were not lovers, their intimacy in every other sphere of life went far enough for a kind of private language to exist in their conversation—nothing radical or extraordinary, just set phrases or quotations, dependent for their effect, usually intended to be comic, on the various discursive contexts of their shared experiences. This finds its way into the poem, which is in part a conversation between O'Hara and Berkson, or perhaps a record of conversations they actually had. From time to time O'Hara switches to a lyrical mode, describing his feelings for Berkson, and these two strands of the poem differ greatly from everything else in it and therefore are fairly easy to identify.

"Everything else" is, I admit, a vague term, but the materials are so heterogeneous that calling them anything but interruptions of the conversational/confessional passages would result in even more egregious simplification. Yet if we rest content to call them interruptions, we impose on the poem an order it manifestly does not have. In other words, we might just as well take the conversational/confessional passages as interruptions in the flow of, well, everything else. Take, for instance, the following passage:

> you were there I was here you were here I was there where are you I miss you
> (that was an example of the 'sonnet' 'form') (this is another)
> when you went I stayed and then I went and we were both lost and then I died

oh god what joy
you're here
sob and at the
most recent summit
conference they
are eating string
beans butter
smootch slurp
pass me the filth
and a coke pal
oh thank you

down at the box-office of Town Hall I was thinking of you in your no hat
music often reminds me of something, that way, like reforming. (*CP* 442)

O'Hara mocks not just his own direct presentation of emotions ("what joy / you're here / sob") but the tradition of lyric poetry in general, subsumed by the category of "sonnet form." The reference to a "summit conference" and the ingestive onomatopoeia stand in no determinable relation to the theme of lyricism, although this theme is clearly related to other confessional passages in the poem. Geoff Ward points to the connections between the summit feasting and the images of filth and "expressions of disgust" that reappear throughout the poem, but such connections do not account for why these particular instances of filth and disgust are located between the reflections on lyricism and a reminiscence introducing the motif of reform (21).

In an earlier "occasional" poem, "John Button Birthday," O'Hara interrupts the flow of reflections on friendship and affection with references to the scene and process of writing, once when he announces "[a]nd now that I've finished dinner I can continue," and again with '[n]ow I have taken down the underwear / I washed last night from the various light fixtures / and can proceed" (*CP* 267). His comment on these cracks in the poem's surface also takes the form of an interruption: "[a]nd now / not that I'm interrupting again, I mean your now, / you are 82 and I am 03" (*CP* 268). These intrusions of the quotidian into a celebratory text emphasize its literariness, even though by conventional standards they are radically anti-literary. In "Biotherm" such a distinction cannot hold, because of the poem's refusal to privilege its lyrical parts at the expense of the others. There is no intrinsic reason for which we could take the conversations with Berkson, or the author's expressions of his feelings, for the poem's substance, presented against the backdrop of so much white noise. Such a leveling does more than eliminate depth, or

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make depth and surface one and the same. It removes the poem from the sphere of interpretability, which is also the sphere of the literary. This does not mean it makes interpretation impossible or pointless, but indicates that the poem is meant to frustrate readers' efforts at achieving hermeneutic fullness.

O'Hara's ambitions in this regard can be traced back to his poetic manifesto, "Personism," written in 1959. It is generally taken for a crucial point of reference by O'Hara scholars, but rarely do they pay serious attention to the passage in which he contextualizes the writing method he has just explained.

> In all modesty, I confess that [Personism] may be the death of literature as we know it. While I have certain regrets, I am still glad I got there before Alain Robbe-Grillet did. Poetry being quicker and surer than prose, it is only just that poetry finish literature off. For a time people thought that Artaud was going to accomplish this, but actually, for all their magnificence, his polemical writings are not more outside literature than Bear Mountain is outside New York State. (*CP* 499)

Perhaps the hyperbolic and jocular cast of these remarks discourages taking them in earnest, but the only joke here is that made at the expense of Robbe-Grillet, while the comments about Artaud and the hoped-for consequences of Personism are intended to be serious. Artaud, O'Hara suggests, botched the job of killing literature, because he did not abandon its trappings even as he called for its destruction.[1] Therefore, they are not "outside literature," or more precisely – outside literature "as we know it." Is "Biotherm?" Let's consider another passage from the poem.

> ENDGAME WAITING FOR GODOT WATT HAPPY DAYS which means I love you
> what is that hat doing on that table in my room where I am asleep
> 'thank you for the dark and the shoulders'
> 'oh   thank you'
>
> okay I'll meet you at the weather station at 5
> we'll take a helicopter into the 'eye of the storm
> we'll be so happy in the center of things at last

[1] Mutlu Konuk Blasing takes the expression "outside literature" as an instance of what Derrida terms the "fatal complicity" of destructive discourse, "which must inhabit the structures it would destroy. O'Hara is trapped along with Artaud, and there is a basic affinity between them" (312). I don't think this is applicable to "Personism," because O'Hara concerns himself with what is deemed sufficiently literary to be called literature, and thus with a historically-specific set of discriminations, and not with an ontological definition and the paradox Derrida derives from it.

now the wind rushes up nothing happens and departs
L'EUROPA LETTERATURA CINEMATOGRAFICA ARTISTICA 9 – 10

your back the street solidity fragility erosion
why did this Jewish hurricane have to come
and ruin our Yom Kippur

favorites: vichyssoise, capers, bandannas, fudge-nut-ice, collapsibility,
the bar of the Winslow, 5:30 and 12:30, leather sweaters, tunafish,
cinzano and soda, Marjorie Rambeau in *Inspiration*
whatdoyoumeanandhowdoyoumeanit (*CP* 444-5)

The passage is framed by references to love and meaning: "which means I love you" and "whatdoyoumeanandhowdoyoumeanit," and it is easy to imagine that the latter is Berkson's reply to O'Hara's confession of love. The juxtaposition of solidity, fragility and erosion with "your back the street" suggests that stability may be achieved only if the object or subject in question is removed from all of the contexts within which it normally exists and functions. This is true of Berkson as a person, of O'Hara's relationship with him, and, most importantly, of their poetic representations. At the same time, happiness requires being in a helicopter "in the 'eye' of the storm," "in the center of things at last." So if we ask, as most readers of this poem do, why O'Hara refers to so many activities, so many events, so many objects and so many people, all either real or imaginary, we might begin to answer these questions by dissociating happiness from stability. As in the experiential sphere we can't expect to understand everything that is going on around us, so the chaos of reference in "Biotherm" has to be seen as an irreducible given, an axiomatic ground of representation.

One of the victims of this way of "keeping the poem happy" is causality. Do the titles of a novel and three plays by Samuel Beckett mean "I love you" because the last one in the series is *Happy Days*, or are there other, quite private reasons for this pseudo-explanation? If such reasons exist, in all likelihood we'll never find out what they are, so the answer must be *Happy Days*: the title of the play, no matter what it's actually about, allows O'Hara to connect the titular happiness with his love for Berkson. He lists the other titles simply to make the line sound better, fuller, more convincing. In other words, reading Beckett will not explain anything about "Biotherm"—his presence in the poem is associational in the most literal sense, lacking what readers in the early sixties would expect of literary allusions, having learned how to make use of them in interpreting Pound or Eliot. "The death of literature as we know it" also means the death of reading

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as we know it, and most immediately of the kind of reading many Modernist works make necessary.

The catalogue of "favorites" strengthens the metonymic tendency apparent in the list of Beckett's works. The inclusion of "collapsibility" prevents it from being utterly banal, even if the word itself has no determinate reference within a set of things to wear or eat and drink, and the places and times of day particularly well suited to these activities ("Marjorie Rambeau in *Inspiration*" might be there solely on account of her name). "Collapsibility" may be seen as a caprice, meaningful only as such. It is not as easy to dismiss the "Jewish hurricane" which ruined "our Yom Kippur." This seems to be a reference to something that actually happened, most likely a hyperbolic one. But since the reference is completely obscure, are we at liberty to ignore it? Marjorie Perloff has in mind the numerous instances of such referential obscurity when she asks of "Biotherm:" "[h]ow much openness can a poem bear?" (174). Her reading of the poem indicates that the only way to enjoy it is to focus on its flow and flux, finding meaning wherever possible, but without insisting that everything be meaningful or comprehensible.

As far as my own pleasure of reading "Biotherm" is concerned, this is certainly the best way to proceed. But what if a reader's pleasure requires a full understanding of everything in the text? This question goes beyond "Biotherm," extending to Language poetry and its frequent refusal to be meaningful in any recognized sense. Perhaps readers who take no pleasure in this kind of writing and feel in some way excluded from it might revise their approach by foregrounding O'Hara's stated purpose of "finishing literature off" and his positioning of his "Personist" poems "outside literature as we know it"—but this is merely speculative, so let us return to the pleasures of "Biotherm." In a recent article, Geoff Ward suggests that the openness of this poem can be taken for a critique of O'Hara's earlier work which, by comparison, is very tightly controlled:

> The risk undertaken by 'Biotherm' is one of moving on to a poetry of signs whose openness to fleeting micro-data is so emphatic that it begins to critique the earlier poetry. This critique potentially discloses a level of authorial guidance in the choices available to readers of the 'I do this, I do that' poems that might make their apparent openness relative, a property of stage-machinery now starting audibly to creak. It is a risky move, and one that allies O'Hara to modernism, not in any comfortable, library-bound sense, but in the sense that what is avant-garde destroys by superseding its predecessors, including the author's own work. (24)

What Ward implies here is paradoxical: while the putative "authorial guidance" in poems heretofore seen as "open" enables comprehensive readings of them, relinquishing

such guidance and granting readers complete interpretative liberty can make the poem impenetrable and therefore—closed. But for this to be the case, our approach to the poem must be primarily interpretative, and that is precisely what O'Hara opposed in his poetic theory and practice. Ward sees "Biotherm" as a risky project because of the poem's retroactively destructive potential, but is that not the whole point of all the great Modernist projects of bringing about "the death of literature as we know it"? To put it plainly, no risk, no fun. O'Hara's alliance with Modernism can be narrowed down to exclude such figures as Eliot or Stevens, while foregrounding Stein and her "Stanzas in Meditation," or the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*, or even some of Ronald Firbank's fantasias. We can argue about the relative success of these works as attempts on the life of "literature as we know it," but their revolutionary intent is beyond question.

This brings us to the role of authorial intentions in the interpretative apparatus needed to analyze, but also to contextualize such resistant works as "Biotherm" or "Second Avenue." When James Joyce said that *Ulysses* contains enough riddles to keep scholars guessing for a century, he was not accused of arrogance or cruelty: the boast was taken for an instance of the great writer's impish sense of humor. O'Hara's comments on "Second Avenue" have prompted one critic, Andrea Brady, to call his attitude towards readers sadistic, and to present her own interpretation of the poem as carried out despite the author's discouragement: the act of reading is also, in her case, a form of defiance, perhaps even self-defense. Brady claims that "Second Avenue" "seeks to outwit hermeneutic analysis":

> O'Hara doesn't want to allow readers to make anything of his poem: it is to unfold immediately and without repercussions…. O'Hara prevents the reader from intervening in the making of the text's meaning. This differentiates his intentions (if not his text) from the emphasis on the reader as participant producer in such later developments as Language poetry, but also raises the question of what the reader is actually meant to do with this text. It situates the reader very specifically. (62-63)

Although Brady goes on to show that, in spite of this, "hermeneutic analysis" of "Second Avenue" is possible, cutting through the poem's obscurity is no less important for her than questioning the ethics of O'Hara's intended refusal to grant the reader the possibility to interpret—or, to take this a step further than Brady, his denial that the reader is a reader, and not merely a spectator. This "abridgment of readers' rights," to use a term from a different discourse, is ultimately self-defeating and illusory, as Brady convincingly points out, but that does not really change the reader's situation or the resentment she might feel at having been forced into it. And so Brady detects in the poet's "expectation

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of [the reader's] failure" a "sadistic relation to critics and readers," a "violent delight in humiliating the reader with his or her own insufficiency," a delight apparent in many other texts besides "Second Avenue" (she does not say which ones, but I think that readers can easily come up with their own lists—the chances these would include "Biotherm" are very good indeed).

Brady's reference to Language poetry and its programmatic inclusion of the reader in the process of creating meaning is particularly interesting because of the importance of poems such as "Biotherm" or John Ashbery's "Europe" for the theory and practice of poets like Charles Bernstein or Barrett Watten. The question I'd like to ask in concluding concerns the pragmatics of the distinction she makes between text and authorial intention. If we set an inscrutable Language poem against "Biotherm" or "Second Avenue," how will our awareness of the Language poet's generous receptiveness to readers' interpretations help us in making sense of the poem in question? Will such an awareness be more useful in the reading process than the belief that O'Hara wants to humiliate us with our insufficiency? Of course, everything depends on the reader. My own feeling is: no risk, no fun.

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