



Frank O'Hara's Lute against the Self

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When her time had come, that nymph most fair brought forth a child with whom one could have fallen in love even in his cradle, and she called him Narcissus. When the prophetic seer was asked whether this boy would live to a ripe old age, he replied: "Yes, if he does not come to know himself." (Ovid: 1955, 83)

Narcissus—a boy so beautiful that no one could help falling in love with him, yet, who himself never reciprocated such love. Rather, he played with the affections of Echo, allowing her to waste away to stone, and others, until one of his admirers prayed: "May he himself fall in love with another, as we have done with him! May he too be unable to gain his loved one!" (Ovid (1955), 85). Ironically, he came to know himself as others knew him, falling in love with his own reflection.

I can think of no better introduction to Frank O'Hara's long poem, "In Memory of My Feelings," than the story of Narcissus because of the questions it raises concerning the concept of the self, the ability to know one's self and the ability to be known by others. At the outset of the story, the seer prophesizes that Narcissus will live to "a ripe old age" if "he does not come to know himself." We are then confronted with the situation where Narcissus comes to know himself as others knew him, thus, on the one hand, fulfilling the seer's prophecy. On the other hand, as readers of the story, we might very well dissent, saying that Narcissus did not, in fact, come to know his true self, only himself as others perceived him. From this perspective, the seer's prophecy is erroneous.

Metanarratively, however, the seer's prophecy seems to argue that the concept of "self" is a constructed entity by revealing the distance between

the “Narcissus” constructed by the love-struck nymphs and the “Narcissus” constructed by Narcissus himself. This distance is furthermore accented by the ensuing despair and “narcissism” when the physical Narcissus falls in love with his reflection in the pool, seeing himself as the nymphs see him. The seer’s prophecy also seems to argue, unlike the Hegelian dialectic, that it is impossible to know oneself objectively. For if one were actually able to take leave of the self and inhabit the other (as Narcissus did), returning to the self again would be impossible because we would then only recognize our “self” as another. The dialectic would not come full circle and there would be no synthesis.

In *Memory of My Feelings* is like the seer’s prophecy. Throughout the poem, O’Hara distances not only the “self” others have constructed to represent him, but equally the “self” he has constructed in his poetry, from his actual physical self. *Memory of My Feelings* combats the idea of a coherent, ideal self.

Presence and Killing

There have been several useful studies that have already addressed the role of the self in O’Hara’s poetry. Charles Altieri, for example, has argued that the poets of the 1960s in rejecting the academic impersonal style of Eliot turned to English Romanticism by attempting, in their poetry, “to create a specific attitude or model for imaginatively perceiving relationships in a given situation, which—as attitude, not as symbol or statement—defines and gives value to a more general perspective on experience” (Altieri (1979), 16). O’Hara’s poetry, Altieri argues, falls within the “immanentist vision” of poetry established by the early Wordsworth where “poetic creation is conceived more as the discovery and the disclosure of numinous relationships within nature than as the creation of containing and structuring forms” (Altieri (1979), 17). It is marked by a “radical presence” which insists “that the moment immediately and intensely experienced can restore one to harmony with the world and provide ethical and psychological renewal” (Altieri (1979), 78).

Mutlu Konuk Blasing, on the other hand, characterizes O’Hara’s dilemma as follows: “On the one hand, he must transform his past into art so that it can no longer hunt him. On the other hand, he must try, as a person, to preserve his past as history in order to salvage a continuous and coherent self out of the flow of isolated moments of consciousness—these series of transparent selves” (Blasing (1977), 150). His poetry is a sort of “impure poetry, in which the poet is interested more in the processes of perception and

self-creation through language than in 'poetry'—more in daily history than in 'purity'"(Blasing (1977), 140-141).

I believe that the word "presence," in its aesthetic and not philosophical sense, is a good way to begin speaking about the poetry of Frank O'Hara. However, I am not sure that O'Hara's emphasis on "presence" is an insistence, as Altieri believes, on "ethical and psychological renewal." O'Hara's poetry is a poetry of "presence" because, for him, the "self" can only exist in the present. The polemic for the poet then is to capture these present selves within their particular contexts, knowing, all the while, that once the self, in a particular situation, has been captured in poetry it is no longer "alive" because it has become apart of history and memory and is therefore no longer organic and able to change. Blasing, I believe, is correct in asserting that O'Hara's poetry attempts to transform "his past into art" by presenting "isolated moments of consciousness." The goal, however, is not "to salvage a continuous and coherent self," but rather to capture his particular selves as they appeared particular situations in order to combat the idea that the self exists as an absolute, coherent, and ideal entity outside of time.

The poet as one who both presents his self and kills his self through the art of poetry is presented fairly clearly in stanzas III, IV, and V of "Ode on Saint Cecilia's Day," where O'Hara writes:

All of us who play at
 music fill our empty hearts
 and slump beside an indifferent pool
 in the passionless gloaming, hearing
 in the pure geometry of tones
 whatever complicated commentaries we wish.
 Our motive's not
 despicable, in play
 we separate desire from the mirage
 of sentiment and
 ideal choice.

Those who are not very fond
 of the tangible evidences of love
 shun music and are quiet, doctored by
 memory and the martyrdom of Saint Cecilia.
 The rest of us play and are played,
 seeking like Pan the pattern of our true desire,
 willing to follow
 motive anywhere

to the tempo of failure and crime.
I wonder can a
virgin make music?

For this is necessary. Memory
is a soundless ruin, a habit of
mourning that builds no bridges or hands.
It sighs, a harp no love can search; memory
is without symmetry, supine and bad.
Even with sandwiches and a pocket flask we die
among its black
houses. My dear!
seek things seriously on your flute!
I want you,
tomorrow! (*CP*, 28)

In stanzas III and IV poetry is presented as an art that should be organic. Poetry as music has tempo and rhythm. It affects those who play by filling “our empty hearts.” Poetry as music is a way of seeking “the pattern of our true desire” and way of separating “desire from the mirage of sentiment and ideal choice.” O’Hara, finishing the IV stanza with the question, “I wonder can a / virgin make music?” retrospectively raises the question of the relationship between poetry and sex. If poetry is the music (tempo and rhythm) of the pattern of our underlying emotions, expressed outside our body, then sex and poetry are also linked as external creations of the self. Stanzas III and IV are also full of references to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—a grouping of myths about humans changing form. This is integral information for understanding O’Hara’s thesis at the end of stanza V, where he claims that as poetry reflects the organicity of music and sex so poetry should reflect the organicity of the poet. O’Hara presents the idea that the self is, or should be, “radically present” in poetry when we concludes “My dear! / seek things seriously on your flute! / I want you, / tomorrow!” On one level, the song on the flute could be read simply as an aphrodisiac, creating the desire in the poet to “want” the flutist. On the other hand, the song on the flute could be read as the flutist himself; therefore, when the poet says that he “wants” the flutist what he means in fact is that he wants the flutist song. In this second case the flutist and his song are inseparable.

In O’Hara’s mock manifesto, *Personism*, a similar argument is made. A poem captures the poet’s feelings in a particular context without raising these feelings to a level of abstraction where the poem is no longer “be-

tween the poet and the person" but between "two pages" (CP, 499). O'Hara argues that "abstraction (in poetry, not in painting) involves personal removal by the poet." Personism, however, is "totally opposed to this kind of abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry" (CP, 498). In painting, the more the artist involves only himself in his painting, making himself the object of his painting (as in the abstract expressionism, for example, of Jackson Pollock (reference)) the more abstract, one could argue, the painting becomes. In poetry, however, the poet must use words and whenever he uses the word "I," involving himself in his poem, the less abstract the poem becomes. Therefore, poets such as Stevens attempted to be abstract by avoiding the use of such personal pronouns. O'Hara writes that "the decision involved in the choice between 'the nostalgia of the infinite' and 'the nostalgia for the infinite' defines an attitude towards degree of abstraction" because "nostalgia of the infinite," as a clause, does not require a personal pronoun whereas "nostalgia for the infinite" does. This is why O'Hara claims that "nostalgia of the infinite" represents "the greater degree of abstraction." The problem is that if the poet must remove the personal pronoun "I" from the poem in order to be abstract, poetry turns into philosophy because the abstraction presented in the poem is not an abstraction of a person but of an idea. "Personism," O'Hara writes, "has nothing to do with philosophy, it's all art." (CP, 499). On the other hand, it "does not have to do with personality or intimacy" either (CP, 499). Rather, it is an attempt to be deeply personal and abstract at the same time.

O'Hara's poetics is a chronicle of this attempt to present the self squarely at the center of the poem in order to be truly abstract without slipping into the abstraction in poetry typified by Eliot and Stevens. However, O'Hara's poetics is also a chronicle of the impossibility of placing the self squarely at the center of the poem because the self, as that which is living, changes whereas a poem, once written, is static. That is why O'Hara follows the lines "All of us who play at / music fill our empty hearts," in "Ode on Saint Cecilia's Day," with "and slump beside an indifferent pool," mimicking Narcissus' dilemma (CP, 28). The poem both captures the self in a particular present situation while "killing" the self by virtue of the fact that once a particular self has been captured in a poem it also becomes a part of the past and "memory." The only way to solve this problem would be to view the self as an absolute, ideal entity; thus, making the self as static as a poem. O'Hara, however, is unwilling to do this because, on the one hand, it has been done in the past and, on the other hand, it pushes poetry away from

the “life-giving vulgarity” out of which it was created—that of one person addressing himself to another—the particular situation.

Poetry, for O’Hara is not a Romantic chronicle of the search for the “coherent” self, nor is it a way of “ethical and psychological renewal.” Rather it is a presentation (and subsequent death) of the particular self in finite situations and the chronicle of the absence of the concept of the ideal self in the poet.

The Romantic ‘I’

Charles Altieri characterizes the Romantic poet as either a “symbolist poet [who] seeks to transform nature into satisfying human structures” or an “immanentist poet [who] stresses the ways an imagination attentive to common and casual experience can transform the mind and provide satisfying resting places in an otherwise endless dialectical pursuit by the mind of its own essences and of Transcendental realities” (Altieri (1979), 17). With a title such as *In Memory of My Feelings*, one might expect that what would follow would be a confessional, Wordsworthian, self-revelatory poem. O’Hara, however, follows the title with these first lines:

My quietness has a man in it, he is transparent
and he carries me quietly, like a gondola, through the streets (CP, 252)

These lines, while seemingly Romantic with the use of heavily connotative words such as “quietness” and “transparent,” in fact, bar the reader from pinpointing a clear Romantic “I” at the center of the poem. It is this process of pinpointing, or constructing, the “I” in others that itself becomes the subject of the rest of the poem.

The very first clause, while not yet directly dealing with question of the Romantic “I,” is interesting because of its reversal of the classical distinction, first made explicit by Plato, between the intelligible realm (noeton) and the visible realm (boraton) (Plato (1955), 269-270). If we understand “man” as that which is visible and “quietness” as that which is intelligible, according to the Platonic tradition the “man” should have the “quietness” in him. O’Hara, however, reverses these philosophical categories and places the intelligible as that which is readily perceived and the visible as that which is hidden by the intelligible realm (“My quietness has a man in it, he is transparent”). This first clause, then, is setting the scene for what will become a full-fledged attack on the categories of absolute versus particular, intelligible versus visible.

Returning to the question of the Romantic "I," the next clause, beginning "he is transparent," obviously refers to the "man" in the preceding clause due to the fact that "my quietness" has already been attributed the impersonal pronoun "it." So the line, in its amplified form, would now read: "My quietness has a man in it, this man is transparent." The barriers to establishing a clear Romantic "I" begin with the second part of the second clause, "and he carries me quietly." With the added pronoun "me," we now have three different references to the poet—the "quietness" of the poet containing a "man" who carries the poet, "me," through the streets "like a gondola." The question, here, is: Which one of these pronouns could work as the Romantic "I" of the poem? If all three are, how might we understand such a presentation in light of the traditional Romantic dichotomy of the conscious (freed) versus the unconscious (captive) self exemplified, for example, in Wordsworth (Wordsworth (1903), 375)?

We cannot, in fact, place a Romantic ego. O'Hara draws the reader in with Romantically connotative words while withholding the typical Romantic paradigm. He is playing with us, winking at "gondola." We see now why O'Hara must write that his quietness has a man "in it" and not "in him" in order to postpone the crisis until the second line and the entry of the third pronoun. If O'Hara had used "him" to refer to his "quietness" we would have stayed within a dichotomy of the poet's "quietness" versus the "man," with all subsequent pronouns arguably referring to either one or the other. A dichotomy that would, perhaps, not be all that different from the wordsworthian dichotomy in *The Prelude*.

Disassociations

This process of combatting the abstract idea of the ideal self as it is imposed on the poet from a variety of communities is the subject of *In Memory of My Feelings*. Terence Diggory writes that "community will tend to be viewed as a fusion or communion of individuals into some greater whole [...] To think community differently [sic] requires the death of the Subject, and those who participate in such an alternative community could be said to "belong to death" in this sense, insofar as this constitutes their community" (Diggory (2001), 24).

The first section of the poem sets the scene of the poet resisting the violence of different communities' tendencies to organize "selves" according to some predetermined norm. The poet presents his "naked selves" equipped with pistols, ready to defend themselves against "creatures who too readily have recognize my weapons / and have murder in their heart" (CP, 253).

The pluralities as well as the reference to murder establishes the idea that participating in a community requires the death of ones self or selves. Poetry, as a genre or as a school, tends to organize in the same way that community does. The first section of the poem, then, is not only concerned about setting up the polemic of a plurality of selves resisting the “murderous” desire of the participating in a community, it is also concerned with informing the reader that poetry is murderous as well.

In this first section, O’Hara refers to a serpent on three occasions. “So many of my transparencies,” O’Hara first writes, “could not resist the race” because of the “love of the serpent.” (CP, 253). In the next line, the poet is the serpent, “underneath its leaves as the hunter crackles and pants.” Then in the final stanza O’Hara writes:

My transparent selves
flail about like vipers in a pail, writhing and hissing
without panic, with a certain justice of response
and presently the aquiline serpent comes to resemble the Medusa. (CP, 253)

Medusa, as the mother of Pegasus, is also the mother of poetry. When Persus severed the Gorgon’s head, the blood spilled on the ground and bore Pegasus. Later, when Persus carried the head of Medusa around the world, the blood that dropped on the ground became poisonous snakes. O’Hara writes that his “transparent selves / flail about like vipers in a pail” but that “the aquiline serpent comes to resemble the Medusa.” (CP, 252). As Ovid makes the distinction between the creator (Medusa) and the creation (snakes), O’Hara distinguishes between the poet (the aquiline serpent coming to resemble the Medusa) and the poet’s poems (transparent selves flailing about like vipers). In the final section of the poem, O’Hara claims exactly this when he associates the “scene of my selves” with “the occasion of these ruses”:

and 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. (CP, 256)

O’Hara has lost what is “always and every present” because “memory is a soundless ruin” (CP, 28). Once particular occasions become apart of the past they are no longer useful in creating poetry. This explains, as stated before, O’Hara’s emphasis on the present in his poetry. It is the present moment couched within its particular context that is lively in poetry. However, poems, once written, transform what was once organic into memory. For

O'Hara poetry both captures and kills the present, which is what he means when he plays on the word "singly" in the penultimate line of the poem. The serpent in this last line, by virtue of it being presented in the demonstrative singular, is the same "aquiline serpent" resembling Medusa in the last line of the first section. Poems, selves, and serpents must be "killed" in order to "save the serpent," or poet, "in their midst." This salvation, however, is not brought about by some how participating in the larger poets guild, being, therefore, apart of the community of poets. After the poem is accomplished, remember the poet then "slumps beside an indifferent pool." (CP, 28). Poetry brings about death, as does the participation in any community. The poet is only "saved" from his despair by death itself and being apart of the community of death (Diggory (2001), 24). The real tragedy of Narcissus is that even death did not offer an escape from his despair because "when he was received into the abode of the dead, he kept looking at himself in the waters of the Styx." (Ovid (1955), 87).

While O'Hara the poet claims that he has allowed his selves to be killed (he is himself the murderer) by becoming apart of the community of poetry, he has withheld himself, however, from other communities and details this aloofness in sections two, three and four. In the second section, for example, O'Hara begins by speaking of his family moving to the military and philosophy all underneath the following introductory lines:

The dead hunting / and the alive, ahunted. (CP, 253)

O'Hara then goes on to present his grand-aunt, whom, he says, died for him "like a talisman, in the war, / before I had even gone to Borneo" (CP, 253). His aunt, unlike himself, is more than ready to die for a cause; thus O'Hara presents her as dying for him as he is going to war in order to mock this sort of sacrificial death--the distance in their blood relation adding to the ridiculousness of the act. O'Hara seems to imply that he will not sacrifice himself for his grand-aunt despite the fact that he is "ahunted" by the memory of family members, such as his aunt, who have died for their family.

As O'Hara presents the family in military verbiage, he presents the military in philosophical jargon, writing:

a rusted barge
 painted orange against the sea
 full of Marines reciting the Arabian ideas
 which are a proof in themselves of seasickness
 which is a proof in itself of being hunted.
 A hit? ergo swim. (CP, 254).

The military, organized like a great book of philosophy, is simply a community which plays at the game of logic. This community, as was the case with the community of his family, requires death of its members—a death that is presented in as ridiculous terms as the death of his grand-aunt (“A hit? ergo swim”). His grand-aunt, being apart of the community of family, had to die because of, or for, the family. Soldiers, being apart of the community of the military, have to die because of, or for, the logic of the organization.

In the following sections of the poem, the community of the military comes up again and again as O’Hara also introduces the community based on nationalism. Nations, O’Hara claims, progress to a certain climax, decline and then die. He writes:

You preferred the Arabs? but they didn’t stay to count
their inventions, racing into sands, converting themselves into
so many,
embracing, at Ramadan, the tenderest effigies of
themselves with penises shorn by the hundreds, like a camel
ravishing a goat.
And the mountainous-minded Greeks could speak
of time as a river and step across it into Persia, leaving the pain
at home to be converted into statuary. I adore the Roman copies.
And the stench of the camel’s spit I swallow,
and the stench of the whole goat. For we have advanced, France,
together into a new land, like the Greeks, where one feels nostalgic
for mere ideas, where truth lies on its deathbed like an uncle
and one of me has a sentimental longing for number,
as has another for the ball gowns of the Directoire and yet
another for “Destiny, Paris, destiny!”
or “Only a king may kill a king.” (CP, 254-255)

This “progress” presented in history, however, is not really progress because in each case it moves the nation closer to death. O’Hara mocks this idea of advancement with the pre-schoolish rhyme “we have advanced, France” in order to show the over-simplicity of the idea of progress. The next line confirms this over-simplification, presenting France as advancing “into a new land, like the Greeks, where one feels nostalgic / for mere ideas, where truth lies on its deathbed like an uncle” (CP, 254). While nations present themselves as resting upon unchanging “truths” these truths in fact change, for example, from an nation built about aristocracy, ““Only a king may kill a king”” to a nation built on democracy, ““Destiny, Paris, destiny!””

(CP, 255). Yet it is these same nations that ask their citizens to die for these “ideas” on a “deathbed.” O'Hara continues,

How many selves are there in a war hero asleep in names? under
a blanket of platoon and fleet, orderly. For every seaman
with one eye closed in fear and twitching arm a sigh for Lord Nelson,
he is all dead [...] (CP, 255).

Though he may not be physically dead yet, “he is all dead” because of his position in the community of the military and the nation.

We come to see a picture in these sections of family, philosophy, military and nationality all working together to incorporate individuals into the community. The poet, on the other hand, attempts to break free of these communities in the fourth section, where he writes,

Grace

to be born and live as variously as possible. The conception
of the masque barely suggests the sordid identifications.
I am a Hittite in love with a horse. I don't know what blood's
in me I feel like an African prince I am a girl walking downstairs
in a red pleated dress with heels I am a champion taking a fall
I am a jockey with a sprained ass-hole I am the light mist
in which a face appears
and its is another face of blonde I am a baboon eating a banana
I am a dictator looking at his wife I am a doctor eating a child
and the child_s mother smiling I am a Chinaman climbing a mountain
I am a child smelling his father_s underwear I am an Indian
sleeping on a scalp
and my pony is stamping in the birches,
and I've just caught sight of the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria.
What land is this so free?

The absence of either commas or periods between many of these sentences is an important detail. There is no separation between these selves because they are contained within the same “I.” There is not easy bipartite or tripartite classification of this “I,” nor is there any particular coherency or logic of relation between these selves other than the fact that they all find their expression under the umbrella of the “I” of the poet. Communities, however, impose a logic and an organization of the self, thus excluding certain selves (see Derrida (1967), *L'Écriture et la différence*, for a discussion of

logic and exclusion). Hence, O'Hara poses the question: "What land is this so free?"

We must remember, however, that while the poet withholds his own participation in these communities it is not in order to live a life of complete and autonomous freedom. He simply chooses death by poetry (CP, 257) as opposed to these other deaths; for we all must die, "philosophically speaking" (CP, 256) as well as physically. The title of the poem is a liturgy. It is In Memory of My Feelings like Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats." The only reason the poet gives for choosing death by poetry as opposed to other deaths brought about by participating in the collective self of a particular community is given at the end of the poem, where he writes "to move is to love and the scrutiny of all things syllogistic." As we saw previously, O'Hara sees poetry as that which is organic, which moves like music. Here he compares "moving" as poetry with philosophically "syllogistic" language and states that writing poetry, "moving," gives pleasure. It is lovely. It is an act of love. "So many of my transparencies," O'Hara writes, "could not resist the race" because of the "love of the serpent" (CP, 253). It is worth noting, first of all, that O'Hara is quite vague here on what he might mean by love, and second of all, that he does not seem to be claiming that poetry offers some sort of final resolution to man's dilemma (as Coleridge, perhaps, believed). Poetry kills, but the poet, O'Hara, seems to enjoy the killing.

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