

**“I am Guarding it from Mess and Measure”:  
Poetics of Order/Disorder in Frank O’Hara’s “Urban Pastoral”**

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**Abstract**

Postwar America gave rise to multiple literary traditions, often referred to as the era’s counterpoetics in the sense that they veered from the Eliotic dictum of impersonality, in particular, and from the rigid academic verse of New Criticism, in general. Prominent among these groups are the Confessionals, the Beats and poets of the New York School. Their visions of poetry might seem irreconcilable at times; yet, these poets do share their discontent with the era’s containment culture. An eminent figure of the New York School, Frank O’Hara devoted his creative energy to a vibrant and vivid rendering of a disordered yet compelling city such as NYC. Its frantic atmosphere speaks to his imagination, fuels his aesthetic verve and, in a synergetic manner, feeds on it, gleaning order/meaning from the poet’s words. In this respect, O’Hara’s poetry can be construed as a containment of an established literary order, embodied in the rigorous dictates of New Criticism, but most important, as an outburst of meaningful disorder that finds strong resonance in life within NYC. Meaningful it is, for such disorder liberates the poet from feelings of vacuity and loss amplified especially by postwar anxiety, substantiating the poet’s thought that, after all, “people do not totally regret their life,” as O’Hara puts it (O’Hara, 1995, p. 97).

In probing into the synergy between O’Hara’s poetry and his city, this paper aims at examining the way in which the city, in O’Hara’s words again, “flatters meanings of my life I cannot find,” and in so doing, it not only invests the poet’s life with meaning but also galvanizes his quest for meaning itself (O’Hara, 1995, p. 230).

*Keywords:* postwar America, city, order, disorder, New York school, the “Urban Pastoral”

## Counterpoetics in Postwar America

Before probing into O'Hara's city as presented in his poetry – how the poet inhabits the city and how the city engulfs him poetically – a brief account of the anti-tradition poetics of postwar America is apropos as it will pave the way for the discussion about the emergence of the New York School, and the peculiarity of Frank O'Hara's poetry, in particular, upon which I shall dwell with more details in a later section.

Postwar America witnessed many changes on different levels – social, economic as well political. Notably, literature was equally affected by those changes, which accounts for the emergence of an anti-tradition poetics cutting with the long established traditions of writing and what was then perceived as “pure” art. The aesthetic detour that the era had witnessed, as it were, felt so drastic at times that experimentation, originality and innovative verse, in poetry, were considered as the new tradition of the era.

If we take a look at the different poetic circles that characterized postwar America, we can distinguish between different modes of writing that many poets espoused at that time period. Postwar American poetry, in this respect, clustered a wide range of sometimes distinct, sometimes overlapping modes of artistic expressions. We find, for instance, traditional poets such as Richard Wilbur and John Crowe Ransom, who followed the principles of New Criticism. We also find so-called idiosyncratic poets, such as Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, to name a few, who began writing traditionally. Feeling that their early verse was penned in the rigid confines of formalism, these poets made a sharp departure from such formal dictates so much so that their poetry was considered as a counter-discourse to the era's political rhetoric of containment. Experimental poets, on the other hand, were poets who, as their appellation denotes, experimented with fresher forms and content. Inspired by Jazz and Abstract Expressionism and often regarded as bohemian, they were referred to as counter-culture poets whose poems were sometimes decried as shocking at the time. Prominent among this group are the Beats. Allen Ginsberg's “Howl” epitomizes this poetics of revolt and shock, or what Robert Lowell (1960) called, in his National Award Speech, “raw” poetry: “Raw, huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience [that] are dished up for midnight listeners” (Lowell, 1960). To a large extent, the New York School Poetry aligns itself with the Beats, although with less intensity when it comes to its preoccupation with the era's political issues and moral flaws.

In his “Urban Pastoral: Natural Currents in the New York School”, Timothy Gray provides an expressive account of how the New Year School Poetry came to be born, as he pithily delineates the things that these poets have in common. Gray (2010) writes:

In the early 1950s, a group of young poets converged on New York City. Blessed with sophistication and wit, they forged close relationships with each other and with the avant-garde artists whom painter Robert Motherwell half-seriously dubbed the “School of New York.” Over time, thanks to their first publisher, gallery director John Bernard Myers, five of these poets (Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, James Schuyler, and Kenneth Koch) came to share the appellation with these artists, even though they resisted being pigeonholed in this way... Regardless of the label used to describe them, members of the New York School found in the city a charged atmosphere conducive to their ambitions, a realm where the discussion, exhibition, and

performance of literature, art, and music *quicken*ed their creative energies.  
(Emphasis added, p. 1–2)

Frank O’Hara is considered as one of the leading figures of the New York School, one whose poetry directly derives from the vibrant, hectic lifestyle characterizing New York City. This literary choice made O’Hara announce his departure from the modern idea of “impersonality” that T. S. Eliot (1982) put forth in his eminent essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”<sup>1</sup> In a sharp move from this Eliotic dictum, O’Hara wrote a short essay entitled “Personism: A Manifesto” in which he defines “personism” as such:

Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody knows about, interests me a great deal, being so 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... Personism has nothing to do with philosophy; it’s all art. It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it! ... It puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person ... and the poem is correspondingly gratified. (O’Hara, 1995, p. 498)

In a comic yet derisive tone, O’Hara argues for poetry that is spontaneous and colloquial, one that does not heavily rely on stylistic devices. Interestingly, a good deal of O’Hara’s poetry is, indeed, inspired from phone conversations, lunch chats, party gatherings, and so on. As he puts it in his manifesto, “The poem is at last between *two persons instead of two pages* (Emphasis added, O’Hara, 1995, p. 498).

### **Frank O’Hara (1926–1966): A Postmodern “City Poet”**

We cannot study Frank O’Hara’s city poems without alluding, albeit briefly, to his modern precursor Walt Whitman (1819–1892), who had also found life in New York City both invigorating and enticing. Reveling in metropolitan life, Whitman had lived in New York for around twenty years, during which time he had written profusely about the pleasantly rowdy nature of the city. In his poetry, he celebrated the city’s tumult and liveliness, finding in the throbbing mass of people inhabiting New York a place for all Americans. Whitman himself insisted that *Leaves of Grass* “arose out of [his] life in Brooklyn and New York from 1838 to 1853, absorbing a million people, for fifteen years with an intimacy, an eagerness, an abandon, probably never equaled” (as cited in Pannapacker, 2007, p. 199).

Although they lived in two different time periods, it is thanks to those who designed and built the steel railing overlooking the Hudson River, in New York City, that O’Hara and Whitman presently engage in a daily conversation that transcends time and space. Two quotations from these two poets are actually etched on the banks of the Hudson. They run thus: “City of tall facades, of marble and iron-proud and passionate city – mettlesome, mad, extravagant city!” (Whitman, 1995, p. 270), and “One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes” (O’Hara, 1995, 197).

Reading O’Hara’s poetry, it is therefore tempting to look for Whitmanesque influence, which O’Hara himself acknowledges, for he refers to Whitman as his “great predecessor” (O’Hara, 1995, p. 305). In “Dolce Colloquio,” O’Hara states his debt to Whitman even more bluntly:

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<sup>1</sup> In his essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” T. S. Eliot (1982) writes: “Poetry is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality ... an expression of significant emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet” (p. 42).

O Sentiments sitting beside my bed  
 what are you thinking of?  
 of an ebony vase?  
 of a pail of garbage?  
 of memorizing Whitman? (O'Hara, 1995, p. 150)

Frank O'Hara sets on poeticizing the quotidian in his poetry, making New York City – its flowing energy and idiosyncrasies – the blood that pumps life into his poems. For this reason he has been called “City Poet,” alongside Walt Whitman, despite the two poets' different styles. Harris Feinsod (2017) refers to O'Hara as an “urban choreographer ... whose poems are organized around the chatty observations of a metropolitan flâneur” (p. 249). So much attached to New York City, O'Hara wrote in “A Party Full of Friends”:

Someone's going  
 to stay until the cows  
 come home. Or my name isn't  
 Frank O'Hara (O'Hara, 2013, p. 25)

If anything, these lines denote O'Hara's infatuation with New York City, Manhattan in particular. O'Hara's city poems delight in the mobility that is reflected in the city. In “Rhapsody,” a poem in which he provides a detailed account of a busy day in NYC, the speaker wonders, in the opening lines: “515 Madison Avenue/ door to heaven?” (O'Hara, 1995, p. 326). To O'Hara, it could be so, for the city is often presented as a placebo to his restless soul.

Since we are talking about O'Hara's strong attachment to the city, the poet's poetic heart, as it were, is always a good place to start with in order to gain a good grasp of the poetics of order and disorder, distinctly revealed in his so-called “urban pastoral.” The last lines of his poem “My Heart” encapsulate the gist of O'Hara's poetics, as he says:

I want my feet to be bare,  
 I want my face to be shaven, and my heart –  
 You can't plan on the heart, but  
 The better part of it, my poetry, is open. (O'Hara, 1995, p. 231)

O'Hara's poetry, therefore, refuses to be restrained by rhyme, meter, or by the rigid principles of formalism. His verse is rather open to the possibilities lying ahead, as well as to new – if not unpredictable – circumstances. The coincidence that he often depicts in his poems reflects the kind of disorder in which he takes delight, as well as the untidiness that he fully embraces. It should be noted, however, that it is a *meaningful* disorder, not the mess against which he is carefully “guarding” his poetry.<sup>2</sup>

Frank O'Hara composed a considerable number of his poems during lunch hours, as he walked out from the museum where he worked as a curator, jotting down what he saw, what he heard, what he felt, and so on. In his introduction to his collection *Lunch Poems*, he wrote:

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<sup>2</sup> In a compelling line from his poem “Biotherm,” subtly alluding to poetry, O'Hara's speaker says: “I am guarding it from mess and measure” (O'Hara, 1995, p. 444).

Often this poet, strolling through the noisy splintered glare of a Manhattan noon, has paused at a sample Olivetti to type up thirty or forty lines of ruminations, or pondering more deeply has withdrawn to a darkened ware- or firehouse to limn his computed misunderstandings of the eternal questions of life, co-existence and depth, while never forgetting to eat Lunch his favorite meal. (as cited in Gilbert, 1991, p. 176)

In *Walks in the World*, Roger Gilbert (1991) talks about some sort of correspondence that takes place between O'Hara's poem, on the one hand, and New York City, on the other. He argues that:

Walking in a crowded city seems to have provided him with exactly the balance of solitude, motion, simulation, change and leisure that he needed for his poetry; the texture and rhythm of an urban walk corresponded closely to the texture and rhythm he sought for his poems. (p.176)

Indeed, so spontaneously does O'Hara's poetry flow that the reader would need no directions to journey through the poet's words. The reader's journey would be as spontaneous as the poet's words; that is why, as the speaker in "Life on Earth" puts it, the reader explores those poems "with no revolver pointing the roadmarks" (O'Hara, 1995, p. 156). The reader, thus, accompanies the poet in his literary journey without the forceful desire of getting precise directions to reach even more precise destinations. Teeming with coincidences and surprises along the way, O'Hara's poetry does not provide instructions and signs on how to get to a certain meaning. The heart of his poems beats against the thudding heart of so boisterous a city such as NYC. Its hustle and bustle seems even more vigorous in the poet's words – words that do pulse with action.

O'Hara makes his poems pulsate with action through the use of copious dynamic verbs, thereby endowing his poetry with much verve. His use of unconventional syntactic structures such as ellipsis, suspension, incremental repetition and choppy sentences at times also reflects the unconventional and hectic lifestyle in New York City. But perhaps the most remarkable feature of O'Hara's city poems is the swift shift between stanzas, sentences, and even phrases, a technique that captures the dizziness one would feel during a busy day in Manhattan. Along these lines, Gilbert (1991) provides an apposite remark about O'Hara's poem and the occasion of writing. He states the following:

Not only their habitual use of the present tense, but also their fluid, often ungrammatical language seems to cancel all distance between represented experience and representational text, as though the poem had come into being simultaneously with the walk itself. (p. 176)

O'Hara's poetry, therefore, reads as a reflection of mundane, everyday life. It captures the immediate moment, which probably explains the titles of his poetry collections such as *Lunch Poems* and *I Do this I Do that Poems*. As Mark Tursi explains in "Interrogating Culture":

O'Hara views and interprets experience, where the events of his life become the 'action' and the subject of the poems, as well as the 'art' of the poetry. ... O'Hara's poetry has a sense of urgency and immediacy, spontaneity and anti-formalism, which speaks in a directness of everyday experience and ordinary colloquial language. (Tursi, n.d.)

Indeed, for all the immediacy inherent in them, O’Hara’s poems are carefully guarded against “mess and measure,” as he writes in “Biotherm” (O’Hara, 1995, p. 444). That is, their disarray is not merely an untidy, futile mess: It is “mess” that refuses to be confined within any type of “measure,” that is, any type of order. Far from being inspired by rigid formalism or the credos of New Criticism, O’Hara declares, starkly in his poem “Memorial Day 1950,” that “Picasso made [him] tough and quick.” Eloquently, he adds:

At that time all of us began to think  
with our bare hands and even with blood all over  
them, we knew vertical from horizontal, we never  
smeared anything except to find out how it lived. (O’Hara, 1995, p. 17)

Indeed, in his city poems, O’Hara managed to get to the heart of the city, the people and himself, revealing poetically “how [they] lived.”

O’Hara’s poems, in this regard, are teeming with abundant details, often presented in the poet’s compulsive use of enjambment and caesuras, which generates a tense, yet therapeutic mood for the speaker and a somewhat breakneck rhythm that mimics the city’s rejuvenating disorder. Ruptured syntactic structures and the ensuing fragmented thoughts are a direct substantiation of the speaker’s present thoughts, collected on the spur of the moment and not “at tranquility,”<sup>3</sup> in a Wordsworthian sense.

Obviously, O’Hara did not compose his walk poems as he walked, but it was reported that he composed them not long after his walks, especially at the museum where he worked as a curator. The immediacy of the poems, though, is strongly conveyed through his use of the present tense, which gives us a deeper insight into O’Hara’s vision of poetry. His poems, he believed, should be as close as possible to the hectic pace of the city, embodying all the details of daily life in a way that mimics the immediacy of film watching (“I’d have the immediacy of a bad movie,” he writes in “My Heart” [O’Hara, 1995, p. 231].) Regarding this connection, James E. B. Breslin writes:

With their realistic precision and their swift, free, uncommitted movement, the lunch hour poems create the poetic self as a rapid, filmlike series of transparencies, open to experience, neutrally and indiscriminately taking it in. (as cited in Gilbert, 1991, p. 177)

Therefore, writing poetry becomes an activity inseparable in its nature from the other activities that the poem describes. Along these lines, Richard Gray (2011) rightly argues that “[t]he poet shifts rapidly from one place to another without the usual semantic props, such as ‘when,’ ‘after,’ or ‘before.’ Everything, as a result, is absorbed into an undifferentiated stream of activity, the flow of the now” (p. 289).

As we probe into his poems, we find the poet fully and wholeheartedly embracing the city’s disorder, meaningful and revitalizing chaos, and projecting this disorder unto his poems. His choice is ideological as it reflects, again, the era’s counterpoetics. In this sense, Tursi claims:

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<sup>3</sup> In his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth (1967) describes poetry as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings ... recollected in tranquility” (p. 13).

O'Hara's attempt to dismantle dominant ideologies about life and dominant assumptions about art, is, in a sense, a deconstructive mode. In other words, by working within the realm of the ordinary, with the language that we all think, act, construct and communicate with, but somehow outside of convention (by virtue of its slang and colloquialism and therefore critical of it), O'Hara finds and reveals the extraordinary. He is eccentric, yet entirely common; he is outside of 'approved' language, yet completely immersed in the language of everyday life ... O'Hara's poems are controlled distraction or conscious digression. (Tursi, n.d.)

### Frank O'Hara's "Urban Pastoral"

*"One need never leave the confines of New York  
to get all the greenery one wishes"*  
(O'Hara, 1995, p. 197)

Pastoral poetry is part of the long-established pastoral tradition that is based, among other things, on the idealization of rural landscapes and rustic lifestyles. It is not surprising, in this regard, that aesthetic energy and artistic revelations have been, for centuries, connected with the realms of sylvan charm, as it were. The oxymoronic phrase "Urban Pastoral" appeared when artists started to find in the urban experience a source of inspiration no less compelling than what the rural pastoral experience had to offer.<sup>4</sup>

As observed earlier, Frank O'Hara's poetry is an epitome of the urban pastoral tradition. In many of his poems, he provides a detailed account of the borough of Manhattan in its rowdy, hectic pace. The speaker in his poems finds order in the very disorderly atmosphere endemic to the city. Interestingly, in "Rhapsody," the speaker says: "Everywhere love is breathing draftily/ like a doorway linking 53rd with 54th" bringing together the "stringless labyrinth" of the city (O'Hara, 1995, p. 326). What is more, it is the "rancid nourishment" of the city and the energy it generates that fuels the poet's poetic imagination (O'Hara, 1995, p. 326).

Nothing so better reveals the synergy, harmony, almost telepathy-like relationship between the city and the poet than these opening lines from "A Warm Day for December:"

57th Street  
street of joy  
I am a microcosm in your macrocosm  
And then a macrocosm in your microcosm (O'Hara, 1995, p. 376)

"To the Mountains in New York" is yet another poem that depicts O'Hara's fond embrace of New York City, despite its defects:

Yes! Yes! Yes! I've decided,  
I'm letting my flock run around  
I'm dropping my pastoral pretensions!  
and leaves don't fall into a little halo  
on my tanned and worried head.

<sup>4</sup> *Pastoral Poetry and Pastoral Drama*, by Walter W. Greg (2004), is an informative book on the enduring tradition of pastoral poetry and pastoral Drama, their origins and development.

...

I love this hairy city  
 It's wrinkled like a detective story  
 and noisy and getting fat and smudged  
 lids hood the sharp hard black eyes. (O'Hara, 1995, p. 198)

Here, the speaker rejects the idea of ensconcing oneself in a pastoral environment that is associated with the rural experience, and instead he fully indulges in an urban life that he finds more exciting. He compares the city to a woman, being “hairy,” “wrinkled,” and “fat,” and decides that he is head and heels in love with her, despite the danger that lurks beneath “the smudged/ Lids [that] hood the sharp hard black eyes.”

Through both form and content, O'Hara's poem “Walking” depicts the city's disorder that the speaker longs for – disorder that he fails to find in the countryside, which probably explains the blankness that pervades the poem. The speaker says very overtly: “the country is no good for us” (O'Hara, 1995, p. 477). It is the city and not the countryside that provides the speaker with solace to his restless mind. Disenchanted with the country, he says:

the country is no good for us  
 there's nothing  
 to bump into  
 or fall apart glassily. (O'Hara, 1995, p. 476)

What is more, the lines that the poet jots on paper, in disarray, mimic the kind of motion the speaker is after. The uneven lines also reflect the nonconformist, bohemian lifestyle of NYC. His feelings of dissatisfaction are conveyed through the use of negation in “not enough” and “nothing.” The speaker seems to long for the air of the city, for its fast and furious rhythm, to fill in this haunting blankness and to reinvigorate the setting. In “O'Hara's Aesthetics of Shock,” Oliver Brossard (2009) brings about an even more pertinent observation of the structure of the poem, as he contends:

The presence of the city is to be felt almost organically as if the poem dealt with its elements in the same way an urban center manages its ongoing traffic of vehicles and people, its flux of information. The architecture of the poem answers, if not mirrors, the syntax of the city: in O'Hara's urban grammar, clauses are hit-and-run accidents. (p. 223)

O'Hara's prose poem “Meditations in an Emergency” equally confers this sense of haste that imitates the hasty lifestyle within New York City, which is revealed from the outset of the poem, that is, through the oxymoronic title, clustering “meditations” and “emergency.” “Even trees understand me! Good heavens, I lie under them, too, don't I? I'm just like a pile of leaves,” the speaker exclaims (O'Hara, 1995, p. 197). Certainly, greenery is not a characteristic feature of New York; that is why the speaker soon qualifies his statement by stating that he is not yearning for pastoral life: “One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes – I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally *regret* life” (O'Hara, 1995, p. 197).

## Conclusion

*So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*  
(Shakespeare, “Sonnet 18”)

In the above lines from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18, the poet eloquently expresses everlasting love, a feeling that can be preserved in abiding lines of poetry. In other words, metonymic of art, the poet’s lines will never die, nor will his love. By association, being one of the leading figures of the New York School Poetry, Frank O’Hara managed to preserve an era of American history in his poetry. This has greatly contributed to his enduring popularity. He also contributed, albeit indirectly, to a modern-postmodern dialogue revolving around the city – cultural dialogue that transcends time and space and attests, once again, to the American desire to transcend frontiers. After all, as Whitman wondered, rhetorically, in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”:

What is it then between us?  
What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us? (Whitman,  
1995, p. 149)

Through his poetry, Frank O’Hara blurred spacial and temporal distance between the poet’s modern and postmodern preoccupation with the city.

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