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Remembering the Avant-garde: Vision and Time in the Poetry of Frank O'Hara

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time moves, but is not moving in its strange grimace ....

Frank O'Hara.

Criticism means the mortification of the works.

Walter Benjamin.

An early poem by Frank O'Hara ends simply "Yes. To kill the time" (CP 40). If this last line is taken as announcing O'Hara's enduring interest in time, it might also give pause for thought. O'Hara has come down to us as the poet par excellence of the present, the poet who attempts more than any other to grasp the fleeting and fragile vibrancy of lived experience in the city, and render it in all its dazzling immediacy and vitality. But what is striking about this final line is its acknowledgment of the violence which is involved in such an aspiration, and what it most visibly remembers is not the vitality of the living present but the prospect of death. And this is not an isolated instance in O'Hara's poetry. In a poem written some five years later in 1956, "A Step Away from Them" (CP 257-8), the vibrancy and allure of the city bustle is interrupted by the memory of dead friends: "First / Bunny died, then John Latouche, / then Jackson Pollock" (258). Such instances tend to be construed either as the idiosyncrasy of autobiography or as the nostalgic return of the lyric ego of Romanticism. Taken singly it is not difficult to see why, but when taken together the proliferation of such instances begins to describe a different image, one which involves not only lyrical vision but also time. Seen from
this perspective, O'Hara's poetry does not so much offer a poetry of vision as of retrospection, a term that is central to the present study.

But this term is itself doubly problematic. First, it appears to work an illegitimate conflation of conceptually distinct terms, namely vision and time. The question would immediately occur as to whether the operations implied by the term, such as perspective, focus, visual field, foreshortening, reflection, invisibility, the persistence of vision, and so on, are in fact appropriate or sustainable when transferred across to thinking about time. But above and beyond these kinds of terminological difficulties, the act of critical retrospection is itself curious and fraught with difficulty. For if O'Hara's poetry can be said to offer a site for retrospection, this statement already suggests a temporal distance or breach since it implies a position from which retrospection is undertaken. The question is immediately raised as to how the critical present might grasp the poetical past, and equally what this grasping might entail. And indeed, O'Hara's poetry seems to pose these questions sharply. Geoff Ward's recent study of the 'New York School', Statutes of Liberty, locates a particular kind of difficulty for contemporary criticism in the poetry of O'Hara, among others. While contemporary theory - in the shape of deconstruction - finds the literature of the nineteenth century particularly rewarding, according to Ward the poetry of O'Hara and his contemporaries Schuyler and Ashbery proves oddly recalcitrant to its critical procedures, precisely because it already enacts them. A strange kind of temporal structure emerges here, in that the contemporaneity of poetic text and critical approach finds too close a compatibility, and consequently in the face of the most rigorous critical inspection the poetic text yields up a blankness. And if, to counter this situation, a critical perspective from another time were imported - in the form of, say, phenomenology or New Criticism - it is by no means clear how
or to what extent this would alter the transaction; for recourse to such a critical perspective would still return it into the present.

The question of retrospection is further complicated in the case of O'Hara, since the looking back offered by his poetry is not simply a matter of autobiographical reminiscing but involves the recollection of tradition. And the moments of tradition which are seen to recur most frequently in his work are the poetry of Romanticism and of the European avant-gardes, a contradictory and incompatible combination since the former is committed to the autonomy of the aesthetic and the latter to its destruction. Indeed, this combination is particularly puzzling and difficult for our own present. According to Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-garde*, the historical avant-garde marks the negation of the autonomy of art from the praxis of life, and in view of this the return of either moment appears curious. For if it is difficult to see how, after the avant-garde, the return of Romanticism could be anything other than nostalgic, then equally it is difficult to understand what the announcement of the 'end' would mean after it has already been completed and is over. But if these questions are not foreclosed, then oddly enough O'Hara's poetry comes to find itself at the centre of at least one of the most widely circulated accounts of our own present, namely Frederic Jameson's notion of Postmodernism. For Jameson, the negation of aesthetic autonomy identified by Peter Bürger in the avant-garde comes to be realized as the loss of 'critical distance' in our own cultural present, a cultural situation which as a consequence is defined precisely by the loss of retrospection. According to this account, the cultural residues that litter our present are no longer able to return to the present the sense of another time, and thus the present loses the ability to locate itself within the meaningful continuum of tradition.
But given this situation, if O'Hara's poetry is not prejudged - either as nostalgic or simply inert - then it might be understood to embody paradoxes which are in some sense integral to our own present. The present study locates such an approach in the writing of the German philosopher Walter Benjamin. If the recourse to the work of Benjamin appears either too trite or too far fetched, on closer inspection O'Hara and Benjamin can be seen to have a certain affinity, though unconnected by autobiographical, historical or textual linkages. Although in very different ways, both share an interest in film, visual imagery, Romanticism, the recollection of childhood, avant-garde practice in both visual art and poetry, and the temporal and spatial situation of perception in the city. But further, as their interest in the avant-garde suggest most strongly, they can also be seen to share a certain attitude or disposition. For although contemporaneous with the European avant-gardes, oddly enough in his post-war writings Benjamin - like O'Hara - adopts the position of looking back, either by refracting his vision through past moments, as in the Trauerspiel study, by fixing his gaze on the avant-garde just gone, as in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", or as in the case of his essay on Surrealism, by exploiting the temporal delay involved in cultural distance. And it is in this disposition which the present study identifies the value of Benjamin's writing for looking back at O'Hara. As Benjamin explains at the opening of the essay on Surrealism, his apprehension of its phenomena is bereft of the familiar coordinates which would be taken for granted by an observer located within its milieu, and yet this position is not accorded the superiority of an objective perspective somehow 'outside', but is understood as one of both temporal and spatial dislocation. This dislocated vision is not exempt from the necessity of attending to the details of the structuring of the phenomena, but rather the reverse; it must engage all the more scrupulously with what, to a familiar observer, may appear as obvious. Yet what is most striking about Benjamin's account of this kind of approach is that its very
dislocation makes visible both the history which has given the coordinates of its own
apprehension and the process of transmission which gives the phenomena to it.

Through this approach the present study offers a different image of O'Hara. The study begins
by offering an analytical survey of the construction of O'Hara in contemporary criticism in
order to identify the difficulties which his work presents. This survey centres on the perceived
commitment of O'Hara's work to the capturing or rendering of the living present, an impulse
which is understood to revolve around his particular concern for vision and time. Through a
consideration of recent philosophical texts which explore the involvement of vision in the
question of presence, the value of Benjamin's writing for reading O'Hara is first identified.
The second chapter examines elements of the reception history of O'Hara's work which
impinge on his association with vision and visual art, and this reception history is shown to
suggest the centrality of the notion of translation to O'Hara's poetic practice. The third
chapter explores this notion within O'Hara's engagement with the visual art of New York in
his poetry and critical writing, and in Walter Benjamin's theorization of language and colour.
This exploration is able to locate within O'Hara's poetry a complex figuring of retrospection
which is rooted in language and not in the conflation of poetry and vision. Consequently the
last two chapters are able to offer a reading of key moments within O'Hara's oeuvre which
trace the return there of elements of Romanticism and the historical avant-garde.

What emerges from this study is a quite unexpected image of O'Hara. In its exploration of the
temporal and spatial coordinates of signification, his work is shown to have anticipated key
shifts in poetry criticism in ways which argue strongly against the assessment of his poetry as
nostalgic or unrewarding to the present. The engagement which his writing offers with the
visual art of New York is shown to cut across accepted accounts of O'Hara as the poet laureate of Abstract Expressionism; rather, O'Hara's poetry is shown to anticipate the moment of its passing, and already to have been looking back. Finally, this study offers an account of the complex return of the claims of the aesthetic and their negation in the avant-garde which suggests that O'Hara's work offers an important and valuable yield to our own theoretical present.

It might be objected that the kind of approach adopted here is not 'true' either to Benjamin or O'Hara, and in one sense at least this charge is accurate. Necessarily, such an approach may emphasize elements which once might have been peripheral, relate motifs which were not necessarily connected, and construe or interpret them in terms which could not have been possible at the moment of writing. But Benjamin's methodology is not simply the imposition of the perspective of the present on the past, but works instead to recognize the role of the past as tradition in the giving of the present. And yet, as Howard Caygill demonstrates, if Benjamin's thinking employs the signposts of tradition, its recollection of tradition brings its "destruction".

What does need to be conceded at the outset, however, is the limitations of this kind of study. It does not propose a new theory of Romanticism, Abstract Expressionism, or the avant-garde. Rather, by attending to the coincidence of these different moments in O'Hara it interrupts ways of thinking these terms which forget the persistence of heterogeneous moments within them. And if it offers a different reading of O'Hara to that with which we are familiar, the procedures and practices of reading and interpretation which it deploys are specific to this particular moment of retrospection. In joining O'Hara and Benjamin, these two
points imply a third - the moment of writing - and consequently this study cannot claim to return these figures without a certain disfigurement. But as Benjamin reminds us, retrospection requires a "firm, apparently brutal grasp". 2