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IN STEP WITH THE POETIC FORM: THE EXPRESSIONISM OF FRANK O'HARA

Since his tragic death more than forty years ago, poet/writer Frank O'Hara continues to captivate and inspire. Writer Majorie Perloff, in her biography about O'Hara and his work, sheds light on the circumstances surrounding his sudden death, and offers insights into his life and art beginning with that fateful summer of 1966 on Fire Island. After a night out with friends, in the early morning hours of July 24, a sand buggy/taxi vehicle accidentally struck O'Hara while he was standing on the moonlit beach. He died the following day from "traumatic internal abdominal injury." His life was as dramatic and colorful as his death (1). At the time, O'Hara was at the epicenter of the New York art world that was closely associated with the "New York School" of poets and writers. Various poets and artists of the 50's and 60's formed a mutual alliance, with O'Hara at its core (5). His relationship to the visual arts not only inspired his poetry, it changed the form itself. The process of assimilating varying influences such as painting, music, film, and traditional form poetry, led to the evolutionary shifts that reinvented and restructured modern poetry. In the poem "Steps," O'Hara exemplifies this evolution of form by way of invoking the image through words, style, and technique against a backdrop of abstract musings that serve as the foundation for his poetic canvas, or a picture in words that shares the sensory experience, which is reliant upon the emotional body.

The poem begins its focus within an abstraction that follows with the use of simile that captures the essence of emotion that stems from the "objective correlative," first

introduced by T.S. Eliot, and described by noted writer and poet, Ellen Bryant Voight in “The Flexible Lyric” as, “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art [...] in other words, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately invoked” (37). O’Hara writes, “How funny you are today New York/ like Ginger Rogers in *Swingtime*/ and St. Bridget’s steeple leaning a little to the left (lines 1-3). Here he uses the poetic device of simile (comparing New York to a musical about dancers, and an off-center church steeple) to take the reader out of the initial abstract thought of New York being “funny today,” by also creating the sensory experience by the power of the concrete noun that serves as image. He confirms the concrete world, then integrates simile to give the poem weight and density thereby formulating the emotional connection, which becomes relevant to the reader.

In the second stanza O’Hara moves the poem along in the absence of punctuation and unconventional line breaks. The lines, “here I have just jumped out of a bed full of V-days/(I got tired of D-days) and blue you there still/accepts me foolish and free/all I want is a room up there/and you in it,”(4-8) mimic the thought patterns of the speaker as he places emphasis on certain phrases. Also, this absence of punctuation, according to Perloff, gives the poem its “speed, openness, flexibility, and defiance of expectations” (132). This technique mirrors that of the abstract expressionist painter where the piece is “deprived of its beginning, middle, and end” (133). The rapidity from one thought to another gives the poetry its sense of immediacy where all thought forms are “absorbed in the now”(133). This unconventional style as it relates to traditional form poetry is the very essence of O’Hara’s work.

O'Hara further creates the image by applying the use of concrete nouns and intimate detail in stanza three with, "where's Lana Turner/ she's out eating/and Garbo's backstage at the Met/ everyone's taking their coat off/so they can show a rib-cage to the rib-watchers" (16-20). Instilling images, as Voight explains, "amplifies or exaggerates what the mind is thinking...thereby sharing the lived experience in language that correlates to the emotion"(55-56). What O'Hara proceeds to do here is articulate his inner landscape which lies in close proximity to the visual experience. The imitate detail in "rib-cage to the rib-watchers" is a colorful manipulation of words that conjures up an image that is both figurative and literal.

By stanza four we see, feel, hear, and taste the sensuous elements in his poetry, captivating our imagination by yet more imagery that is also combined with a certain level of abstraction. We can see the "gay couple" that moved away, feel the "stabbings," and taste the "alcohol." He muses about "all those liars have left the U N," which is suddenly perceived as an abstraction, a vague reference, that if unaware of its origins leaves the reader questioning; however, questioning and interpreting is precisely what the poet and painter strive for.

There is a sense of immediacy in this poem, of experiencing O'Hara's New York as it happens, and as it might happen, both in the sense of the now and in the sense of O'Hara's experiential content presented in this form. In the case of the now, stanza five shows us "the sidewalk/next to the delicatessen/so the old man can sit on it and drink beer/and get knocked off it by his wife later in the day"(lines36-39); however, he also writes about what might happen "later in the day" by the wife. O'Hara brings us out of the immediate and suggests another reality later on, a rethinking of the image, something of

value to the artist. Again we see O'Hara's poetry in direct relation to abstract expressionism and his connection to that genre.

The poet drives the sensory experience further through the expressiveness contained in the last five lines. He offers additional imagery through the use of concrete nouns capped off with the abstract expression of love: "oh god it's wonderful/to get out of bed/and drink too much coffee/and smoke too many cigarettes/and love you so much" (41-45). The image as Voight points out, is "capable simultaneously of the representational and expressive, and remains the chief agent for mimesis in a poem written for the page"(65). The ending stanza gives us a sense of clarity as it suggests a certain level of self-acceptance and joy that is grounded in the grand word "love," and manifested through the various elements in which the poet's tools become apparent. We identify with the concrete, and relate with it on our own personal level.

O'Hara exemplifies the evolution of form poetry in "Steps" by generating the image through words, style, and non-traditional techniques intermixed with abstract contemplations that culminate in a picture in words. Much in the same style the abstract expressionist painters of his time turned on convention and sparked critical change, O'Hara shares the lived experience by inviting us in through the objective-correlative appeal that transfers to an emotion that inspires reaction, giving the poem its spirit while at the same time giving us a slice of New York life.

Works Cited

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