“The Virtues of the Alterable”

By Helen Vendler

*Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1972

Frank O’Hara. *The Collected Poems*, ed. Donald Allen. Alfred A. Knof 1971. 586 pp. $17.50.

Now that Knopf has given us O’Hara’s *Collected Poems* they had better rapidly produce a *Selected Poems*, a book that wouldn’t drown O’Hara in his own fluency. For the record, we need this new collection; for the sake of fame and poetry, we need a massively reduced version, showing O’Hara at his best. His charms are inseparable from his overproduction—the offhand remark, the fleeting notation of a landscape, the Christmas or birthday verse, the impromptu souvenir of a party—there are his common forms, as though he roamed through life snapping Polaroid pictures, pulling them out of his camera and throwing them in a desk drawer sixty seconds later. And here they are—some overexposed, some underdeveloped, some blurred, some unfocused, and yet any number of them succeeding in fixing the brilliance of some long-forgotten lunch, or the curve a body in a single gesture, or a snowstorm, or a childhood movie. If these poems are photographic in their immediacy, they remind us too of the rapid unfinished sketches done by an artist to keep his hand in, or to remind him of some perishable composition of the earth. If there were a movie equivalent to a sketch, some of these poems would be better called verbal movies—the “I-do-this, I-do-that” poems, as O’Hara himself called them.

The generic form of O’Hara’s poems is conversation, the generic punctuation the exclamation point, the generic population of O’Hara’s friends, the generic landscape Manhattan and Fire Island, the generic mythology the flora and fauna of art shows, radio shows, and movie shows. Sureness and insouciance pervade this décor. But two aspects of his work tended to do O’Hara in: his radical incapacity for abstraction (like Byron, when he thinks he is a child) and his lack of a comfortable form (he veered wildly from long to short, with no particular reason in many cases for either choice). The longest poems end up simply messy, endless secretions, with a nugget of poetry here and there, slices of life arbitrarily beginning, and ending for no particular reason. “Dear Diary,” says O’Hara, and after that anything goes. The perfect freedom any diarist enjoys—to put anything down that happened on a certain day simply because at the head of the page there is that hungry date saying June 13, 1960—is what O’Hara claims for himself in the long poems. Beside these poems, even Ginsberg looks formal. The theoretical question O’Hara forces on us is a radical one: Why should poetry be confined in a limited or closed form? Our minds ramble on; why not our poems? Ramblings are not, to O’Hara, in the least, the native form of poets with metaphysical minds, but O’Hara, in his fundamental prescinding from the metaphysical, believes neither in problems nor in solutions, nor even in the path from one to the other. He believes in colloquies, observations, memories, impressions, and variations—all things with no beginnings and no endings, things we tune in on and then tune out of. Turn on the oscilloscope, attach the leads to the tuner, take gauge readings—these are the O’Hara processes. In one sense, there is no reason why a poem of this sort should ever stop. The inherent limitation seems not to be a formal one within the poem, but rather an external one—the limited attention span of the poet or his reader. We can attend to life in this hyper-attentive way for only a short time, and then our energy flags, so that like overexcited electrons we subside back into our own low-energy orbits. The poet’s language weakens, our response sags, and the poems loses us. And yet O’Hara was stubborn enough to wish, like Emily in *Our Town*, that life could always be lived on the very edge of loss, so that every instant would seem wistfully precious. Therefore the attitude of perpetual wonder, perpetual exclamation, perpetual naïveté. O’Hara had enough of all these qualities by nature (judging from their consistent presence from the earliest poems to the latest) so that this poise at the brink of life was no pose, but it does make me wonder how he would have endured that jadedness of age that, in their different ways, all poets confront.

Some of O’Hara’s poems are already deservedly famous, for the best reason in the world: nobody else has done anything like them in English. One reading of “Blocks” guarantees that the stunning last half will never be forgotten:

*O boy, their childhood was like so many oatmeal cookies.*

*I need you, you need me, yum, yum. Anon it became suddenly*

*like someone always losing something and never know what.*

*Always so. There were so fond of eating bread and butter and*

*sugar, they were slobs, the mice used to lick floorboards*

*after they went to bed, rolling their light tails against*

*the rattling marbles of granulation. Vivo! the dextrose*

*those children consumed, lavished, smoked, in their knobby*

*candy bars. Such pimples! such hardons! such moody loves.*

*And thus they grew like giggling fir trees. (108)*

The intense appeal of these lines comes from their having suppressed nothing of adolescence: the persistence of the childish in candy bars and giggles; the startling new growth “like first trees” the incongruous nursery scene of the mice in the children’s bedroom eating their bedtime snack while the children suddenly discover themselves having hardons and pimples; the suddenly flash of the personal (“I need you, you need me”) combined painfully with its psychic results (“like someone always losing something…such moody loves”). Almost all other poems about adolescence have concealed one of the other of these facets of the state, whether out of shame or aesthetics one scarcely knows. An aesthetic that permits the coexistence of moody loves, hardons, mice, and candy bars has a good chance of being a new source of truth.

The same capaciousness appears in the ethereal poem “First Dances,” where O’Hara touches in sequence a dancer’s first attempt to lift a ballerina, a high-school dance, and then, I think, his first dance ever.

*1*

*From behind he takes her waist*

*and lifts her, her lavender waist*

*stained with tears and her mascara*

*is running, her neck is tired*

*from drooping. She floats she steps*

*automatically correct, then suddenly*

*she is alive up there and smiles.*

*How much greater triumph for him*

*that she had so despaired when his*

*hands encircled her like a pillar*

*and lifted her into the air*

*which after him will turn to rock*

*like boredom, but not till after*

*many hims and he will not be there.*

*2*

*The punch bowl was near the cloakroom*

*so the pints could be taken out of the*

*boys’ cloaks and dumped into the punch.*

*…There were many*

*introductions but few invitations. I*

*found a spot of paint on my coat as*

*others found pimples. It is easy to*

*dance it is even easy to dance together*

*sometimes. We were very young and ugly*

*we knew it, everybody knew it.*

*3*

*a white hall inside a church. Nerves. (458-9)*

The wholly intimate presence of the male dancer in the first section is suddenly dispensed with—“He will not be there”—and the agony and pleasure sketched so vividly in the second dance give way to a seriocomic summation (“We were very young and ugly”)—and yet finally summary or dismissal is wholly scrapped and the primacy of recollection is allowed: “A white hall…nerves.” This invalidation of judgment is both dangerous and satisfying. After all, what difference does it make what happens later on or how the picture looks in retrospect or in second-order reflection? The final equation, First Dances = Nerves, is the truest.

O’Hara distrusts spectatorship, so that even his most cinematic self-filmings are expressed from the inside out, as though they were blood-pressure readings rather than a nurse’s external observations on a chart, self-generated electrical impulses which record themselves without the interposition of a watching person. An evening is improvised, in “At the Old Place,” and the gay-bar scene is sketched with no retrospective frame, noted down simply as it happens. I’m not sure why this method succeeds except that the mixture of frivolousness, bathos, high-pitched boredom, and self-satire is not one that men have allowed into poetry very often, if ever:

*Joe is restless and so am I, so restless.*

*Button’s buddy lips frame “L G T TH O P?:”*

*across the bar. “Yes” IU cry, for dancing’s*

*my soul delight. (Feet! feet!) “Come on!”*

*Through the streets we skip like swallows.*

*Howard malingers. (Come on, Howard.) Ashes*

*malingers. (Come on, J. A.) Dick malingers.*

*(Come on, Dick.) Alvin darts ahead. (Wait up,*

*Alvin.) Jack Earl, and Someone don’t come.*

*Down the dark stairs drifts the steaming cha-*

*cha-cha. Through the urine and smoke we charge*

*to the floor. Wrapped in Ashes’ arms I glide.*

*(It’s heaven!) Button lindys with me. (It’s*

*heaven!) Joe’s two-steps, too, are incredible,*

*and then a fast rhumba with Alvin, like skipping*

*on toothpicks. And the interminable intermissions,*

*we have them. Jack, Earl and Someone drift*

*guiltily in. “I knew they were gay*

*the minute I laid eyes on them!” screams John.*

*How ashamed they are of us! we hope. (223-4)*

The wish *not* to impute significance has rarely been stronger in lyric poetry. It happened, it went like this, it’s over. Why is it worth recording? Because it happened. Why is what happened worth recording? Because what else is there to record? And why should we want to read it? Because what else is there to know except what has happened to people? Such a radical and dismissive logic flouts the whole male world and its relentless demand for ideologies, causes, and systems of significance. The anarchic elasticity of O’Hara’s poetry depends entirely on his athletic effort to make the personal the poetic—the personal divested of religion, of politics, of mysticism, of patriotism, of metaphysics, even of idealism. One might be reminded in part of Forester’s ethic of personal relation but Forster shored up that ethos with innumerable arabesques of myth, ranging from Pan to Brahma. O’Hara’s designedly light explanation of his theory of poetry (which he winsomely named “Personism”) rests on intimacy and immediacy:

It was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959, a day in which I was in love with someone (not Roi, by the way, a blond). I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person, While I Was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem and so Personism was born. It’s a very exciting movement which will undoubtedly have lots of adherents. It puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person….The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages.  (499)

In another statement (500), later partially disavowed (511), O’Hara made a more serious formulation:

*I don’t think my experiences are clarified or made beautiful for myself or anyone else; they are just there in whatever form I can find them. … It may be that poetry makes life’s nebulous events tangible to me and restores their details; or, conversely, that poetry brings forth the intangible quality of incidents which are all too concrete and circumstantial. or each on specific occasions, or both all the time.*

Experiences, incidents, events—O’Hara’s vocabulary betrays how impatient he was of any notion which would separate novel-writing and poetry-writing. He liked to cite Pasternak as an example of a writer who could do both, and we may guess that O’Hara suffered from a persistent wish for a longer form than his own poems afforded him. Without that long form, we are offered glimpses of relation, happy and sad, but no continuous curve of a life-spiral; like Roman candles, O’Hara’s poems burst into a shower of bright particulars and then extinguish themselves, often enough in a few modest ashes, on the page.

O’Hara in some way refused to take his poems, I would guess, as seriously as he took life. “It’s a pretty depressing day, you must admit,” he wrote, “when you feel you relate more importantly to poetry than to life” (511) (a feeling that underlies one of his most brilliant poems, “A Step Away from Them”). The greatest poets would have found that antithesis unthinkable and unsayable, and it works to the harm of O’Hara’s poetry that he thinks it is *not* life. The shadowy, if immense, privileges he admits for art appear at their most impressive in his comic manifesto “Ave Maria”:

*Mothers of America*

*let your kids go to the movies!*

*get them out of the house so they won’t know what you’re up to*

*it’s true that fresh air is good for the body*

*but what about the soul*

*that grows in darkness, embossed by silvery images*

*and when you grow old as grow old you must*

*they won’t hate you*

*they won’t criticize you they won’t know*

*they’ll be in some glamorous country*

*they first saw on a Saturday afternoon or playing hookey (371-2)*

It’s typical of O’Hara that the silver screen, however glamorous it’s images, can’t compete with the real thing which is of course sex. The poem continues, in a child’s experience of a wonderful *épanouissement* better than anything in the movies:

*they may even be grateful to you*

*for their first sexual experience*

*which only cost you a quarter*

*and didn’t upset the peaceful home*

*they will know where candy bars come from*

*and gratuitous bags of popcorn*

*as gratuitous as leaving the movie before it’s over*

*with a pleasant stranger whose apartment is in the Heaven on Earth Bldg*

*near the Williamsburg Bridge*

*oh mothers you will have made the little tykes*

*so happy because if nobody does pick them up in the movies*

*they won’t know the difference*

*and if somebody does it’ll be sheer gravy. (372)*

O’Hara’s presentation of early sex as pure physical pleasure bestowed like the bribery of popcorn hovers on the edge of Romance. Would being picked up by a stranger in the movies really be that nice? Yes, maybe, sometimes, other times not, and the poem survives its loading of these particular dice only by its inveterate air of resolute comedy. O’Hara has a line in one poem about writing poetry to cheer people up, and there is an air of determined social duty about a lot of these poems, as though the balloon of group cheerfulness had to be batted back to the next player—over to you, Kenneth—and Kenneth Koch, himself equally noble in his obligations, serves a jaunty poem back, and so on through the clan, to Bill Berkson to John Ashbery, like Tinker to Evers to Chance. The important thing is to be quick on your toes, elastic and springy, especially springy.

It took O’Hara several years of writing to perfect his individuality. The reason he wasn’t noticed early on is that most of his early work is his worst. John Ashbery, in his introduction to this volume, suggests a cabal of the anti-avant-garde who, ostrichlike, hid their heads against O’Hara’s radiance:

It was not surprising that [O’Hara’s] work should have initially proved so puzzling to readers—it ignored the rules for modern American poetry that had been gradually drawn up from Pound to Eliot down to the academic establishment of the 1940s. (vii)

If Dylan Thomas, who sounded not at all like Pound or Eliot, could be welcomed in America, so could anyone else, and this conspiracy theory is entirely untenable. O’Hara’s poems got measurably better with the publication of *Meditations in an Emergency* (1957), and by the time O’Hara published *Lunch Poems* in 1964 he was well known. The early poems are often tiresomely insistent: the last of the twelve “pastorals” entitled “Oranges” reads in its conclusion (after five pages of ramblings):

*Marine breeze!*

*Golden lily!*

*Foxglove!*

*In these symbols lives the world of erection and destruction, the dainty despots of society.*

*Out of the cloud come Judas Agonistes and Christopher Smell to tell us of their earthy woe. By direction we return to our fulfilling world, we are back in the poem.*

*Across the windowsill lies the body of a blue girl, hair floating weedy in*

*the room. Upon her cypresses dance a Black Mass, the moon grins between their legs, Gregorian frogs belch and masturbate. Around the window morning glories screech of rape as dreadful bees, consummately religious, force their way in the dark. The tin gutter’s clogged by moonlight and the rain barrel fills with flesh. Across the river a baboon blesses cannibals.*

*O my posterity! This is the miracle: that our elegant invention the natural world redeems by filth. (8-9)*

A lot of this has been picked up from the more blasphemous French poets, and the strain is felt. The confused antagonism between art (“elegant invention”) and sex (“filth”) is almost buried in a welter of lurid images, and the soapbox is not far away. In the early verse exclamation points attempt over and over a rape of the reader, and even in “A City Winter,” the title poem to his first volume, O’Hara sounds like bad Meredith:

*I plunge deep within this frozen lake*

*whose mirrored fastnesses fill up my heart,*

*where tears drift from frivolity to art*

*all white and slobbering, and by mistake*

*are the sky. I’m no whale to cruise apart*

*in fields impassive of my stench, my sake,*

*my sign to crushing seas that fall like fake*

*pillars to crash! (77)*

The miracle is that even while O’Hara was writing trash like this there was growing a small pile of poems far more unassertive, self-deprecatory and self-admiring, at once combining pain and joy:

*AUTOBIOGRAPHIA LITERARIA*

*When I was a child*

*I played by myself in a*

*corner of the schoolyard*

*all alone.*

*I hated dolls and I*

*hated games, animals were*

*not friendly and birds*

*flew away.*

*If anyone was looking*

*for me I hid behind a*

*tree and cried out “I am*

*an orphan.”*

*And here I am, the*

*center of all beauty!*

*writing these poems!*

*Imagine! (11)*

This was written in 1949 or 1950, when O’Hara was twenty-three or twenty-four, and even that early O’Hara had found the poignant way of talking to the world that he brought to perfection in “A True Account of Talking to the Sun on Fire Island,” written in 1958:

*I picked up a leaf*

*today from the sidewalk.*

*This seems childish.*

*Leaf! you are so big!*

*How can you change your*

*color, then just fall!*

*As if there were no*

*such thing as integrity!*

*You are too relaxed*

*to answer me. I am too*

*frightened to insist. (21)*

Breathless and marveling, as he says of himself in an early verse letter to Bunny Lang, O’Hara patrols the paths of the world, hoping to unclutter himself of cynicism and false sophistication, tempted by fantasy and yet shamed by it. one of the most finished of the early poems is a transparent look inward to the fascination of the movies:

*AN IMAGE OF LEDA*

*The cinema is cruel*

*like a miracle. We*

*sit in the darkened*

*room asking nothing*

*of the empty white*

*space but that it*

*remain pure. And*

*suddenly despite us*

*it blackens. Not by*

*the hand that holds*

*the pen. There is*

*no message. We our*

*selves appear naked*

*on the river bank*

*spreadeagled while*

*the machine wings*

*nearer. We scream*

*chatter prance and*

*wash our hair! Is*

*it our prayer or*

*wish that this*

*occur? Oh what is*

*this light that*

*holds us fast? Our*

*limbs quicken even*

*to disgrace under*

*this white eye as*

*if there were real*

*pleasure in loving*

*a shadow and caress*

*in a disguise!*

The medium of the poem is so simple that the title—“An Image of Leda”—comes almost shockingly to reinterpret our attachment to movies. Hypnotized and repudiatory at once, the poem holds it double feelings in a momentary tranced suspension, quickening from reflection to vicarious action and then subsiding in withdrawal. These small triumphs succeed in their pure colloquial strength, and even such random samples as these few quotations from the early poetry demonstrate that O’Hara’s native gifts for simplicity and a fresh view, though scarcely noticeable in the bulk of less complete achieved poems, were nonetheless present from the beginning.

There is scarcely a poem lacking striking lines in this volume, and almost never a poem, no matter how bad in general, lacking some wonderful words from O’Hara’s tumultuous vocabulary. Chasubles and buzz saws, zebra and tendrils, yawns and ponies, gullies and rattletraps, Afghanistan and Broadway, Prussian leather and Mack trucks, the U.S. Senate and Spenser’s False Florimel—all join the proliferating herbage of O’Hara’s acquisitive mind. There is everywhere a breakdown of logical categories, sometimes only in a false imitation of Dad, but later in the volume in a true attempt to synthesize all of American experience, taking even a wider field than Whitman (though Whitman, to do him credit, wanted a poetry that could have room for all the names of all the drinks served in all the taverns of America, as he said in *An American Primer*). O’Hara follows both Whitman and Williams in writing urban pastoral, but neither Whitman nor Williams took the pleasure in the city that O’Hara did:

*I love this hairy city.*

*It’s wrinkled like a detective story*

*and noisy and getting fat and smudged*

*lids hood the sharp hard back eyes. (198)*

*the country is no good for us*

*there’s nothing*

*to bump into*

*or fall apart glassily*

*there’s not enough*

*poured concrete*

*and brassy*

*reflections…*

*New York*

*greater than the Rocky Mountains*

Both Whitman and Williams suffer from a rueful attachment to the natural world (and in Williams’s case to the past as well) precluding any full assent to city life. But the sun has to chide O’Hara for not looking up more:

*I know you love Manhattan, but*

*you ought to look up more often. (306)*

Impulsive and appetitive, O’Hara rakes in friends, paintings, and evenings-out with the same impartial joy. Tedious though the in-group references (to Bill and Kenneth and Janice and Edwin and Vincent, etc., etc.) can be, they are genuinely invoked to make the real precious, an experiment that is at least worth trying. In one of the most beautiful of many beautiful love poems, “Having a Coke with You” (1960), there is a praise of consummated life which always, for O’Hara, must (the highest compliment) transcend art; and this consummation is here the most banal of acts, having a Coke. Having the Coke, O’Hara can scorn to change his state with kings (in this case Marini, Duchamp, Leonardo, or Michelangelo). These quintessential hyperboles of love begin partly tongue-in-cheek, but suddenly gather to a crystallization of liberated insight, and conclude in happiness:

*HAVING A COKE WITH YOU*

*is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne[…]*

*partly because in your orange shirt you look like a better happier St. Sebastian*

*partly because of my love for you, partly because of your love for yoghurt[…]*

*and the portrait show seems to have no faces in it at all, just paint*

*you suddenly wonder why in the world anyone ever did them*

*I look*

*at you and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world*

*except possibly for the Polish Rider occasionally and anyway it’s in the Frick*

*which thank heavens you haven’t gone to yet so we can go together the first time*

*and the fact that you move so beautifully more or less takes care of Futurism*

*just as at home I never think of the Nude Descending a Staircase or*

*at a rehearsal a single drawing of Leonardo or Michelangelo that used to wow me*

*and what good does all the research of the Impressionists do them*

*when they never got the right person to stand near the tree when the sun sank*

*or for that matter Marino Marini when he didn’t pick the rider as carefully*

*as the horse*

*it seems they were all cheated of some marvelous experience*

*which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I am telling you about it.*

The happy marriage in this poem of the paintings, the trees, the Coke, the past, the present, the lovers, and the artists shows how unerringly the jumble in O’Hara’s sensibility could sort itself out into shapely forms. Though the *journal intime* can be sometimes more gripping for the diarist than for us, yet in the late poems there are signs that O’Hara could take the full measure of himself, America, and the arts better than any other of his contemporaries except perhaps Lowell and Ginsberg. In his “Answer to Voznesensky and Evtushenko” he forsakes the winsome, the cute, the childish, and launches into a grand manifesto resisting the conventional picture of America transmitted by contemporary Russian poets, and reminding them in scorn of their great ancestors Mayakovsky and Pasternak:

*We are tired of your tiresome imitations of Mayakovsky*

*we are tired*

*of your dreary tourist ideas of our Negro selves*

*our selves are in far worse condition than the obviousness*

*of your color sense*

*your general sense of Poughkeepsie is*

*a gaucherie no American poet would be guilty of in Tiflis[…]*

*how many*

*of our loves have you illuminated with*

*your heart your breath*

*as we poets of America have loved you*

*your countrymen, our countrymen, our lives, your lives, and*

*the dreary expanses of your translations*

*your idiotic manifestos.*

The accomplished swings between the grand and the minute, contempt and love, keep us teetering on a bravado always just avoiding the ridiculous on the one hand and the sentimental on the other, a version of public poetry which does not abolish the private. O’Hara would like a world where nothing excluded anything else, where a conversation can coexist with a private fantasy, as it does in his almost seamless abutting of a private recollection of a movie (*Northern Pursuit*) with a search for remedies for Allen Ginsberg’s stomach:

*…Imagine*

*throwing away the avalanche*

*so early in the movie. I am the only spy left*

*in Canada,*

*but just because I’m alone in the snow*

*doesn’t necessarily mean I’m a Nazi.*

*Let’s see*

*two aspirins a vitamin C tablet and some baking soda*

*should do the trick that’s practically an*

*Alka*

*Seltzer. Allen come out of the bathroom*

*and take it….*

*Ouch. The leanto is falling over in the*

*firs, and there is another fatter spy here. They*

*didn’t tell me they sent*

*him. Well, that takes care*

*of him, boy were those huskies hungry.*

*Allen,*

*are you feeling any better?*

All of these poems are demonstrations—demonstrations of what minds is by what mind does, its remarkable double and triple tracks, so that a question about old movie scores leads to a full-dress recollection-fantasy even while one is collecting vitamin tablets, getting down the baking soda, uncapping the aspirin, and hollering to Allen in the bathroom, all the while having second-order reflections on movie-making. The number of possible tracks is theoretically limitless and it seems as though in some poems O’Hara pushes the possibilities beyond intelligibility. But when the technique works, spontaneity fills the poem like helium, and the poem takes off with pure buoyancy.

The reason O’Hara can be truly aerial is that he genuinely has no metaphysical baggage. No religion, no politics, no ideology, no nothing. It is only partially a joke when he calls these lines “Metaphysical Poem”:

*When do you want me to go*

*I’m not sure I want to go there*

*where do you want to go*

*any place*

*I think I’d fall apart any place else*

*well I’ll go if you really want me to*

*I don’t particularly care*

*but you’ll fall apart any place else*

*I can just go home*

*I don’t really mind going there*

*but I don’t want to force you to go there*

*you won’t be forcing me I’d just as soon*

*I wouldn’t be able to stay longer anyway*

*maybe we could go somewhere nearer*

*I’m not wearing a jacket*

*just like you weren’t wearing a tie*

*well I didn’t say we had to go*

*I don’t care whether you’re wearing one*

*we don’t really have to do anything*

*well all right let’s not*

*okay I’ll call you*

*yes call me*

These relational intricacies are the only metaphysics O’Hara admits, and their probably transiency precludes the sublime relational metaphysics, whether deluded or not, of the Keatsian “holiness” of the heart’s affections. Happiness yes, holiness only maybe. Dismay followed by elation, comfort succeeded by loneliness, getting mad giving way to a shrug, apathy followed by quickening—these are O’Hara’s dimensions and out of them he creates his poetic space. There are ominous sighs in the later poems, sighs especially about America, that make us wonder whether O’Hara could have kept up the verve and bounce and amplitude of his best poems, but even a sad poem wafts up, often enough, a comic energy. An old Russian in America reminisces unhappily,

*…meanwhile back in my old*

*country they are renaming everything so*

*I can’t even tell any more which ballet*

*company I am remembering with so much*

*pain and the same thing has started*

*here in American Avenue Park Avenue South*

*Avenue of Chester Conklin Binnie Barnes*

*Boulevard Avenue of Toby Wing Barbara*

*Nichols Street where am I what is it*

*I can’t even find a pond small enough*

*to drown in without being ostentatious*

*you are ruining your awful country and me*

*it is not new to do this it is terribly*

*democratic and ordinary and tired*

When the democratic and the ordinary get tired for O’Hara, there remains no substratum he can deck with his fantastic tinsel of reference. O’Hara was, as he said himself, “the opposite of visionary” (256), and all he asked was “grace to be born and live as variously as possible” (256). When variety in the real is the only value, the Chameleon is God, that Chameleon that, in the poem called “Etiquettes Jaunes,” O’Hara had been unable to reconcile with integrity. By the time we finish the *Collect Poems* we at least know that that particular ethical problem has disappeared. Integrity, cherishing the variety of the self and the world, persists through O’Hara’s mercurial poems, ebbing and flowing with “the tender governing tides of a reigning will.” “Alterable noon,” he says, “assumes its virtue” (261), and the virtue of the alterable adorns him too as he saunters through the world, a step away, as he truthfully notes, from the variety he records. Guessing, observing, looking, reading, comparing, reflecting, loving, writing, and talking, he takes us through life as though he were the host at a spectacular party. We may regret the equableness and charm of our guide, and wish him occasionally more Apollonian or more Dionysian (the sex poems are not very good, though they try hard and are brave in their homosexual details), but there’s no point wishing O’Hara other than he was. The scale he works in is deliberately, at least by past ideological standards, very small. Klee might be the painter who seems comparable, in his jokes, his whimsical collocations, his tenderness, his childlike naïveté, his sprightliness, his muted levels of significance, his sentiment. In O’Hara, modern life is instantly recognizable, and a modern ethos of the anarchically personal receives its best incarnation yet. If it satisfies some portion of us less than a more panoramic ambition, we are self-betrayed in recognizing the frailty of our own supports. We cannot logically repudiate ideology and then lament its absence (though Stevens made a whole poetry out of just that illogic). O’Hara puts our dilemma inescapably before us, for the first time, and is therefore, in his fine multiplicity and his utter absence of what might be called an intellectual syntax, a poet to be reckoned with, a new species.