

Frank O'Hara's Poetics of Personism and His Urban Poems

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Abstract

Personism represents the concentrated expression of the poetics and artistic sensibility of Frank O'Hara, a representative poet of the New York School. This essay summarizes three key elements of O'Hara's poetics as expressed in Personism: the emphasis on personal experience, interpersonal interaction, and the influence of music and painting. It then analyzes how these principles shape O'Hara's urban poems. This approach provides a multifaceted understanding of O'Hara's urban poetry, highlighting how his poetics mirror the vibrant and fragmented experience of city life.

Keywords: Frank O'Hara, Personism, urban poetry, poetics, New York School

Frank O'Hara (1926-1966) is a prominent figure in the mid-20th-century New York School of poets, known for his unique and vivid urban poetry. His work captures what John Ashbery described as "the life of the city and of the millions of relationships that go to make it up hum through his poetry" (as cited in O'Hara & Allen, 1995, p. x). In addition to his poetry, O'Hara also wrote several essays to express his poetics, the most famous of which is

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“Personism: A Manifesto”. Personism serves as a concentration of O’Hara’s poetics and artistic style, and is key to understanding the aesthetic and emotional texture of his urban poetry.

Scholarly interest in O’Hara’s poetics has emerged from multiple perspectives. For example, a significant emphasis has been placed on visual interpretation, given the poet’s profound fascination with both European and American avant-garde painting, particularly Abstract Expressionism. Marjorie Perloff’s seminal work, *Frank O’Hara: Poet Among Painters* (1998), stands as a foundational text in this domain, drawing parallels between O’Hara’s engagement with visual arts and his accomplishments in poetry. Similarly, Moramarco (1976) argued that O’Hara and John Ashbery exhibited a sustained affinity with contemporary painting in their poetic expressions, stemming from their collaborations with other artists. Another key area of scholarship centers on O’Hara’s exploration of “city poetics” and its intersection with urban studies. Smith (2000) discussed themes of gay repression, escalating consumerism, and race riots in O’Hara’s urban poems, while Gray (2010) read the poet through an ecocritical lens, focusing on the interplay of urban and pastoral motifs.

In more recent scholarship, O’Hara’s Personism has been re-evaluated as a distinct and radical poetics. Sullivan (2018) framed O’Hara’s Personism as a “poetics of persistent personhood” that resists the lyric reading strategies of O’Hara’s time. Building on this reading, Sullivan (2022) employed queer phenomenology to analyze how O’Hara’s poetics insists on embodied, historical presence against abstraction. While these studies have enriched our understanding of O’Hara’s aesthetic influences and social engagements, few have systematically examined how the poetics of Personism — as a manifesto and method — permeates the formal and thematic dimensions of his urban poems. This essay addresses that

critical gap by analyzing how the core principles of Personism manifest in O'Hara's representations of city life. In doing so, it offers a comprehensive account of how Personism informs both the style and substance of his urban poetics.

1. "You just go on your nerve": Personal Experience and Poetic Immediacy

In the editor's note to *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, Allen (1995) remarked that Frank O'Hara "tended to think of his poems as a record of his life" (p. v). This autobiographical orientation is central to Personism, a poetic approach that privileges immediacy, spontaneity, and the vivid recording of lived experience. Rejecting the notion of poetry as "elaborately sounded structures", O'Hara (1995) instead advocated for direct, instinctive expression drawn from the rhythms and textures of everyday life. His assertion, "You just go on your nerve" (p. 498), embodies this ethos, emphasizing intuition over formal constraint and raw experience over refined abstraction.

O'Hara's focus on the personal and the present can be seen as a response to the impersonal, often esoteric tendencies of modernist poetry, particularly its emphasis on impersonality and myth. In contrast, Personism re-centers the poet's subjective presence, insisting that poetry should emerge organically from the particulars of the self in motion through the world. Within the broader context of mid-20th-century American poetry, O'Hara's poetics challenges dominant literary norms by reasserting the importance of immediacy, emotional authenticity, and personal engagement.

This commitment to spontaneity and self-expression is vividly embodied in O'Hara's urban poems, which often feature vivid snapshots of his life in the city, capturing the pulse and energy of the metropolis. The bustling cityscape becomes both a literal backdrop and a

metaphorical catalyst for the articulation of fleeting personal experiences. The poem “The Day Lady Died” unfolds as a personal narrative, with O’Hara recounting the events of a day in New York City. In this poem, he weaved daily things with a sudden, deeply emotional encounter with history — the death of jazz icon Billie Holiday. The use of first-person narration and exact time, such as “12:20”, “Friday”, and “1959” gives an immediacy to the poet’s account, drawing the reader into his lived moment. The poem opens with an account of the poet’s daily activities — “go get a shoeshine” and “go straight to dinner” (O’Hara & Allen, 1995, p. 325)— but culminates in a poignant recollection of Holiday’s performance:

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
while she whispered a song along the keyboard
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing. (p. 325)

Here, the poet noticed Holiday’s photo in a New York Post and learned she had passed away. The shift from casual narration to emotional expressions illustrates O’Hara’s ability to elevate the personal into the poetic. His sensory and emotional memory collapses the distance between past and present, inner feeling and outer event. The interplay of specificity and spontaneity—hallmarks of Personism—invites the reader to witness an unfiltered emotional response, rendered in language that feels both immediate and unpremeditated.

The poem, then, does more than mourn Holiday; it becomes a testament to how personal moments are shaped by, and give shape to, collective cultural memory. It also reflects O’Hara’s capacity to resonate autobiographical details with historical events, embodying what Ashbery describes as O’Hara’s “almost exclusively autobiographical” poetic mode, “even at its most

abstract, or even when it seems to be telling someone else's story" (as cited in O'Hara & Allen, 1995, p. x).

Ultimately, the urban landscape in O'Hara's poetry functions not merely as a setting but as a dynamic and intimate space through which emotional experiences are filtered and recorded. His Personist poetics transforms everyday city life into art, where the poet's immediate impressions of joy, loss, memory, and sensation are preserved with vivid intimacy. In this way, O'Hara's urban poems exemplify his broader commitment to poetic immediacy and personal presence, capturing the fleeting textures of life with emotional clarity and artistic spontaneity.

2. "The poem is at last between two persons": Dialogic Intimacy in Urban Space

In his poetic manifesto, O'Hara famously wrote that "the poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages" (O'Hara & Allen, 1995, p. 499). This reimagining of the poem as a site of intimate interaction, rather than merely an autonomous text, is central to his poetics. In this view, the poetry is no longer a static artistic creation but a brief yet emotionally charged moment shared between the poet and the addressed person. O'Hara thought that this interaction in Personism fundamentally alters the relationship between the poet, the poem, and a specific individual.

In exploring its significance, the concept of Personism is associated with the tradition of epistolary poetry, in which the poetry serves as a direct communication channel. O'Hara's claim that Personism involves addressing a poem to one person, "thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity," emphasizes the raw, emotional vitality he sought to preserve in his work (p. 499). The choice to quote the term "life-giving vulgarity"

illustrates O’Hara’s intent to maintain a sense of unfiltered emotion in the poem, connecting directly with the addressed person.

This dialogic impulse is vividly reflected in O’Hara’s urban poems, where personal connection is inscribed within the textures of city life. The bustling city life serves as a background for the dynamic relationships and personal interactions that define his poetics. In the poem “Steps”, O’Hara’s address to an unnamed “you” unfolds as a playful and intimate confession:

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

and even the traffic halt so thick is a way

for people to rub up against each other. (O’Hara & Allen, 1995, p. 370)

The first lines, written in colloquial style, establish an informal and conversational tone. The use of “I” and “you” presents a moment of connection between two individuals, anchoring the poem in personal interaction. The line “you there still” evokes a sense of constancy and enduring presence, while the speaker’s desire for closeness and companionship is stressed by the declaration, “all I want is a room up there / and you in it” (p. 370). Even the city’s traffic becomes a metaphor for connection, “the traffic halt so thick is a way / for people to rub up against each other” (p. 370). It suggests a subtle understanding of urban life, where congestion becomes a metaphorical vehicle for people to seek intimacy amid the bustle and hustle of the

city.

This emphasis on interpersonal connection amid urban life also permeates “Having a Coke with You”. In this poem, a simple act of sharing a Coke becomes a symbolic moment of connection in the urban context. The speaker begins: Having A Coke With You,

is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye, Biarritz,

Bayonne

or being sick to my stomach on the Travesera de Gracia in Barcelona

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

partly because of the fluorescent orange tulips around the birches

partly because of the secrecy our smiles take on before people and statuary (O’Hara &

Allen, 1995, p. 360)

These opening lines are rich in sensory details and geographic references, evoking a lively interplay between memory, perception, and affection. The mention of European cities such as San Sebastian and Hendaye constructs a cosmopolitan frame, but the speaker ultimately privileges the immediacy of shared presence over distant glamour. The use of the second-person pronoun, “you”, personalizes the narrative, creating a direct connection between the speaker and the addressee. The imagery, like orange shirts, yogurt, and tulips, suggest that love, for O’Hara, resides in the ordinary and ephemeral.

In both poems, O’Hara’s poetics of Personism resists abstraction and stylization in favor of direct human engagement. The urban environment —crowded streets, traffic, cafés, shared routines— becomes a living space for spontaneous, emotionally charged interaction. The

poet's language remains casual and improvisational, reflecting Personism's preference for sincerity over formalism. These poems illustrate how O'Hara positioned intimacy not outside of modern life, but within it, woven into the fabric of city noise, congestion, and immediacy.

Through such moments, O'Hara redefines poetic connection as something relational rather than rhetorical. His Personism stance collapses the distance between poet and reader, and between speaker and subject, making the poem itself a space of encounter. In this way, O'Hara's urban poems exemplify how interpersonal experience—rooted in physical, emotional, and spatial proximity—becomes a central site of meaning in his poetic world.

3. “It's all art”: Music, Painting, and Intermedial Poetics

An important aspect of O'Hara's poetics of Personism is its deep engagement with other art forms, particularly music and painting. As a music enthusiast and art critic, O'Hara was immersed in avant-garde artistic culture. He frequently listened to composers such as John Cage and Morton Feldman, whose experimental approaches to sound and silence paralleled his own desire for spontaneity and immediacy in poetry (Ashbery, as cited in O'Hara & Allen, 1995, p. ix). This aesthetic influence is evident in his declaration: “I don't even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff” (O'Hara & Allen, 1995, p. 498). Rather than relying on formal poetic devices, O'Hara sought to evoke the immediacy of music—felt before it is interpreted, embodied rather than intellectually dissected.

Similarly, O'Hara's affinity for painting, particularly Abstract Expressionism, profoundly shaped his poetics. In his manifesto, he claimed that “abstraction in poetry involves personal removal by the poet” (O'Hara & Allen, 1995, p. 498), echoing the emphasis on subjective detachment and gestural spontaneity found in the works of artists like Jackson

Pollock (Sweet, 2000). Ultimately, the interplay between poetry and other artistic media becomes a hallmark of O'Hara's aesthetic. His rejection of traditional poetic structure, his embrace of abstraction, and his preference for intuitive expression reflect a hybrid poetics that is visual, auditory, and linguistic all at once.

This intermediality is particularly visible in O'Hara's urban poetry, where the city becomes both subject and canvas. In "Song", for instance, the poet employs a fragmented, interrogative structure that mimics both musical cadence and visual rhythm:

Is it dirty

does it look dirty

that's what you think of in the city

does it just seem dirty

that's what you think of in the city

you don't refuse to breathe do you. (O' Hara & Allen, 1995, p. 327)

The repetition and enjambment in these lines create a syncopated rhythm akin to jazz improvisation, capturing the chaotic, pulsing energy of urban life. The question "you don't refuse to breathe, do you" (p. 327) becomes a refrain, grounding the poem in a sensorial immediacy that resists polished lyricism. The interplay between music and poetry becomes particularly explicit in the lines, "run your finger along your no-moss mind / that's not a thought that's soot" (p. 327). The act of running one's finger along the mind suggests a sensorial engagement similar to the experience of listening to music. The metaphorical shift from "thought" to "soot" emphasizes the influence of the city's dirt on the mental landscape, creating

an auditory and visual resonance. Thus, O'Hara's "Song" intertwines the auditory and visual elements of poetry, utilizing music as a lens to magnify the multifaceted nature of urban life.

In O'Hara's "A Step Away from Them", the impact of abstract expressionist painting is demonstrated in the poet's vivid and spontaneous portrayal of urban life. The poem unfolds as a sequence of seemingly disconnected observations: "hum-colored cabs," "laborers feed their dirty / glistening torsos sandwiches," and "Neon in daylight is a / great pleasure" (O'Hara & Allen, 1995, pp. 257–258). These images accumulate like brushstrokes, producing a layered and dynamic portrait of New York City. Much like a Pollock painting, the poem resists linearity in favor of gesture and motion. Amid the noise and chaos, O'Hara isolates moments of fleeting beauty, transforming them into aesthetic experience. The city becomes a canvas, and the poem a medium through which the poet registers life's fleeting textures.

In both poems, O'Hara merges the auditory with the visual, creating a poetic language that resonates with the freedom and vitality of contemporary art. His urban poems, shaped by the principles of Personism, do not merely describe the city but also perform its multiplicity. By channeling the spontaneity of music and the abstraction of painting, O'Hara cultivates a hybrid aesthetic that reflects the energy, disorder, and intimacy of modern urban life. His poetry thus stands as a testament to the interpenetration of art forms and the power of intermedial expression in shaping the modern poetic voice.

This essay has examined how O'Hara's Personism, as a distinctive poetic philosophy, animates his urban poems. Through the lens of personal experience, interpersonal dialogue, and artistic influence, O'Hara's poetics break down the barriers between art and life, self and other, the intimate and the public. His poetry renders the city not just as a backdrop but as a

participant in poetic meaning-making, a site where private emotion and collective culture coalesce. In embracing immediacy, spontaneity, and intersubjectivity, O'Hara reimagines the role of the poet as both recorder and active participant of lived experience.

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