

Brad Gooch: On "A Step Away from Them"

"A Step Away from Them" follows O'Hara in handheld camera fashion, wearing his trademark seersucker Brooks Brothers jacket with a volume of poems by Pierre Reverdy stuck in its pocket, as he heads on his lunch hour west and then downtown from the Museum, past construction sites on Sixth Avenue, through Times Square where he stops for a cheeseburger and a glass of papaya juice beneath the Chesterfield billboard with blowing smoke, and then back uptown to work. In the writing of the poem O'Hara left a record for history of the sensations of a sensitive and sophisticated man in the middle of the twentieth century walking through what was considered by some the capital of the globe. Using a deceptively flat pedestrian voice—"it's my lunch hour, so I go for a walk among the hum-colored / cabs"—O'Hara discovered a new kind of pleasure in writing a more public poetry. As Allen Ginsberg later told an interviewer, "He integrated purely personal life into the high art of composition, marking the return of all authority back to the person. His style is actually in line with the tradition that begins with Independence and runs through Thoreau and Whitman, here composed in a metropolitan spaceage architecture environment. He taught me to really see New York for the first time, by making of the giant style of Midtown his intimate cocktail environment. It's like having Catullus change your view of the Forum in Rome."

O'Hara was fired by the challenge of finding the good in the bad, the poetic in the mundane, the ancient and divine in modern New York. His tendency, like Whitman's, was to mythologize its daily life. In "A Step Away from Them" even construction workers--staples of the midtown terrain--are made to seem mysterious and glamorous and tropically sexual:

First, down the sidewalk where laborers feed their dirty glistening torsos
sandwiches and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets on. They protect them from
falling bricks, I guess.

Likewise the growing Puerto Rican population of the city was assimilated in the poem--this latest in a series of mass migrations of ethnic groups having just peaked in 1953: "There are several Puerto / Ricans on the avenue today, which / makes it beautiful and warm." O'Hara had first sounded this theme a month earlier when he and John Button sat on a fire escape composing a collaborative letter to Schuyler written in gay slang about the recent fire at Wanamaker's Department Store to which O'Hara contributed the line, "And the Porto Ricans seem to be having such a swell time in the street outside." Kenneth Koch grounds the line to a recent incident of heckling from a group of Puerto Rican boys. "We were walking up Sixth Avenue going to Larré's to lunch," recalls Koch. "It was a really hot day. There were these Puerto Rican guys on the street who made some remarks which made me angry. I said, 'Shit. Damn it.' Frank said, 'Listen. It means they think we're attractive.'" O'Hara's libidinal fantasies and poetic fancies were equal and intertwined enough that he could see what he wanted to see, or needed to see, on the lunch hour streets.

Part of the novelty of O'Hara's poem--published a year later in *Evergreen Review*--was that nothing seemed made up. Reporting his stop at a greasy spoon, Juliet's Corner, O'Hara

follows with "Giulietta Masina, wife of / Federico Fellini, è bell' attrice," The association had surfaced because of his viewing La Strada a few weeks earlier. "John Button and I saw one of the all time great movies the other day, La Strada and man, was it ever!" he reported to John Wieners, then at Black Mountain College. "It has Anthony Quinn, Richard Basehart (what a nice last name) and someone named Giulietta Masina who is a genius, she's the End. Also the director, Federico Fellini, seems to have a few insights into the soul not often granted by the Heavenly Hiders." O'Hara's adoration of Masina reached its peak a few years later when he met her at the home of the Italian countess Camilla McGrath, who translated as O'Hara--his hero worship always to the far side of theatrical--fell to his knees in front of the actress and gushed, "You are not simply a great artist, you are a fact of our lives!"

The true subject of the poem, though--like that of the equally ambulatory "The Day Lady Died" three years later--was revealed in its title. In "A Step Away from Them," written the day after Jackson Pollock's funeral in the Springs, O'Hara was feeling keenly the proximity of the line of death over which his three friends had so recently walked, or slid:

First, Bunny died, then John Latouche, then Jackson
Pollock. But is the earth as full as life uses full, of them?

His reactions were not morose or baleful. Rather, the closeness of death, the personal awareness of decay and change, of "the Manhattan Storage Warehouse, / which they'll soon tear down," only made him feel more alert to his surroundings. He began to seize on moments, and street markers, and tiny objects such as wristwatches, with a new intensity in a poetry increasingly celebrating the dailiness of everyday. It was a poetry in which, as he put it in a later essay on Edwin Denby's dance criticism, "attention equals Life."

O'Hara had learned his lesson during his recent stay in Cambridge. New York was the place for his poetry and life. Settling with a newly energized commitment into his job at the Museum, where he would remain until his death, O'Hara also settled more deeply into his poetry. Writing "In Memory of My Feelings" and "A Step Away from Them" during the first six weeks of his return, he laid out the two productive directions of much of his work over the next three years. "In Memory of My Feelings" leads toward the abstract emotion and large scale of the Odes (published in 1960), and "A Step Away from Them" leads toward the smaller, more intimate "I do this I do that" poems, which most directly influenced the "second generation" of New York School poets who began showing up at O'Hara's door in the early sixties.

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