
In this famous "lunch poem," public events, political or otherwise, obviously play much less of a role than in Ginsberg's "America." Indeed, the poem's oppositionality would seem to be all on the level of rhetoric. For Wilbur's highly crafted stanzas, O'Hara substitutes a nervous, short, tautly suspended free-verse line; for Wilbur's studied impersonality, O'Hara substitutes the intimate address, whether to a friend or to himself, he describes in "Personism"; and for Wilbur's elaborately contrived metaphor, his "I" substitutes persons, places, and objects that are palpable, real, and closely observed.

The poet's lunch-hour walk, presumably from his workplace, the Museum of Modern Art on 53rd Street between 5th and 6th Avenues in the direction of Times Square, is full of enticing sights and sounds: cabs hum, laborers in hard hats (whose "dirty / glistening torsos" the gay poet subliminally desires) are eating sandwiches and drinking Coca-Cola, the skirts of girls in high heels (the then proverbial office uniform) "flip" and "blow up over / grates," the myriad cut-rate jewelry shops on 6th Avenue try to outdo each other with "bargains in wristwatches," the huge Chesterfield ad above Times Square blows smoke at the cigarette-friendly pedestrian, a black man, hanging out in a doorway makes eyes at a blonde chorus girl walking by, and the Puerto Ricans on the Avenue are enough to make it, by the poet's dadaesque reasoning, "beautiful and warm." Pleasurable, too, are the absurd contradictions representative of New York life: the "Negro ... with a toothpick, languorously agitating," the "neon in daylight" and "lightbulbs in daylight," the lunchspots with incongruous names like "Juliet's Corner" that serve cheeseburgers and chocolate maldets, the ladies with poodles who wear fox furs even on the hottest summer day, and so on.

But, as James E. B. Breslin noted in his excellent essay on O'Hara, the poet seems to be "a step away," not only from the dead friends (Bunny Lang, John Latouche, Jackson Pollock) he will memorialize later in the poem, but from all the persons and objects in his field of vision. "Sensations," writes Breslin, "disappear almost as soon as they are presented. Objects and people ... remain alien to a poet who can never fully possess them." For Breslin, the poet's malaise, his inability to hold on to things, to move toward any kind of transcendence beyond the fleeting, evanescent moment is largely a function of O'Hara's unique psychological make-up. But since, as Breslin himself suggests, O'Hara's fabled "openness is an admitted act of contrivance and duplicity," we might consider the role culture plays in its formation.

Consider, to begin with, the repeated metonymic displacements of specific metaphors. New York's yellow cabs are compared to bees ("hum-colored"), but their color relates them to the laborers' "yellow helmets," worn to "protect them from falling / bricks, I guess." Yellow helmets, yellow jackets: the poem's brilliance is to connect these disparate items and yet to leave the import of the connection hanging. Is the tentative explanation ("I guess") about "falling bricks" tongue-in-cheek or serious? In the same vein, "skirts" are no sooner seen "flipping / above heels" in the hot air than they are described as "blow[ing] up over / grates," (perhaps an allusion to Marilyn Monroe in The Seven Year Itch), even as the sign high up in Times Square "blows smoke over my head." "Blow," for O'Hara, always has sexual connotations, but "blow up," soon to be the title of Antonioni's great film, also points to the vocabulary of nuclear crisis omnipresent in the public discourse of these years. The muted
and intermittent sounds of skirts flipping, smoke blowing, cabs stirring up the air, and cats
playing in the sawdust give way to the moment when "Everything / suddenly honks: it is 12:40
of / a Thursday." Here sound is illogically related to time: gridlock in the streets, an absolutely
ordinary event in midtown Manhattan, somehow makes the poet look up at the big clock
above Times Square and have the surreal sense that time is coming to a stop. The
connection is momentary (rather like an air-raid siren going off), but it changes the
pedestrian's mood. At 12:40, at any rate, lunch hour has passed the halfway point, and now
thoughts of the dead come to the fore--or were they already there in the reference to the
"sawdust" in which the cats play? The pronoun "I" shifts to the impersonal "one"; "neon in
daylight" is no longer such a pleasure, revealing as it does the "magazines with nudes / and
the posters for BULLFIGHT,"
and the mortuary-like "Manhattan Storage Warehouse / which
they'll soon tear down," the reference to the armory in the next line linking death with war.

By this time, the "great pleasure" of the poet's lunch hour has been occluded by anxiety. Not
the fear of anything in particular: O'Hara's New York is still a long way from the crime and
drug-ridden Manhattan of the nineties. On the contrary, the poet's anxiety seems to stem from
the sheer glut of sensation: so many new and colorful things to see--new movies starring
Giulietta Masina, new Balanchine ballets for Edwin Denby to write about, new editions of
Reverdy poems, new buildings going up all over town. Colorful, moreover, is now. associated
with persons of color: the poet, exoticizing the Other, takes pleasure in the "click" between the
"langurously agitating Negro" and "blonde chorus girl" (a sly parody of the scare question
being asked with regularity in the wake of the Desegregation Act of 1954, "Would you want
your daughter to marry a Nigra?"), and he observes playfully that "There are several Puerto
Ricans on the avenue today, which / makes it beautiful and warm." Yet--and here the contrast
replicates the juxtapositions found in Look or Colliers--for every exotic sight and delightful
sensation, there are falling bricks, bullfights, blow outs, armories, mortuaries, and, as the
name Juliet's Corner suggests, tombs. In this context, ironically, the actual death references in
the poem ("First / Bunny died") function almost as overkill.

The "glass of papaya juice" of the penultimate lines sums it up nicely. Papaya, now sold in
every large city supermarket, was a new commodity in the fifties; the recent Puerto Rican
émigrés (who, for O'Hara, make it "beautiful and warm") were opening juice bars all over
Manhattan. Papaya juice was considered not only exotic but healthful, the idea of drinking fruit
and vegetable drinks that are good for you being itself a novelty in this period. The juice bar
O'Hara frequents on the way "back to work" makes a wonderful contrast to the hamburger
joint where he had lunch. Cheeseburger & malted: this all-American meal, soon to be
marketed around the globe by McDonald's, gives way to the glass of papaya juice--a new
"foreign" import. But the juice the poet ingests is also contrasted to the heart which is in "my
pocket" and which is "Poems by Pierre Reverdy." The heart is not in the body where it
belongs but in a book, placed externally, in the poet's pocket. And again it is a foreign vintage.

In the postwar economy of the late fifties, such new foreign imports created an enticing world
of jouissance. But what is behind all those pleasurable "neon in daylight" surfaces and
desirable "dirty/ glistening torsos" that attract the poet? For O'Hara, there is no anchor, even
as the heart is no longer the anchor of the self. If, as a slightly later poem begins, "Khrushchev
is coming on the right day!", "right" refers absurdly, not to any possible political rationale, but,
with wonderfully absurd logic, to the fact that the September weather is so invigorating, with
its "cool graced light" and gusty winds, and the poet so ecstatic in his new love affair with
Vincent Warren, that surely it must be a good day for Khrushchev's visit! The public sphere
thus becomes a cartoon backdrop against which the poet's "real" life unfolds. And yet that life,
as we see in "Khrushchev" as in "A Step Away from Them," is everywhere imbricated with race and gender politics, with thoughts of dispersal ("New York seems blinding and my tie is blowing up the street / I wish it would blow off") and death. Apolitical? Intentionally, yes, but very much itself a construction of the postwar moment.


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