

'Oh! kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas!': Frank O'Hara's Excitement

1.

The highest respect we can accord a work of art is to say nothing about it. Therefore, I have written virtually nothing, until now, about the poems of **Frank O'Hara**, though they have done more to shape my aesthetic and erotic life than any other single influence. Breaking my silence, I want to celebrate one aspect of O'Hara's work: its excited devotion to the state of excitement itself. Excitement, a quality separable from its objects and catalysts, was O'Hara's stock-in-trade; excitement seems a simple matter, although, like most visceral events (breathing, sleeping, eating, shitting), *being excited* can be broken down into a thousand parts, episodes that elude the taxonomist's grasp.

2.

A Frank O'Hara poem begins with a bang. That bang—that crash of self-announcement ("I'm here!")—may be followed by some whimpers, some lists, further bangs, and then an instantaneous disappearance. The poem whose opening bang is lodged most noisily in my memory has no name; its title, in Donald Allen's edition of the *Collected Poems*, is "Poem," and therefore it has, like **Keats**'s negatively capable poet, no identity in itself.

Poem

*O sole mio, hot diggety, nix "I wather think I can"
come to see Go into Your Dance on TV—HELEN
MORGAN!?! GLENDA FARRELL!?! 1935!?!
it reminds me of my first haircut, or an
elm tree or something!
or did I fall off my bicycle when my grandmother
came back from Florida?
you see I have always wanted things to be
beautiful
and now, for a change, they are!*

This poem, its conceptual organization as tidy as a sonnet or a haiku, organizes its excitement into three stages. In the first, excitement's instigators, a blended mass,

aggressively thrust themselves forward: a 1935 film, *Go Into Your Dance*, and its stars, Helen Morgan and Glenda Farrell; a Neapolitan song; hot slang; aristocratic star-speak (Kay Francis saying, "I rather think I can"). In the second stage, a few quick memories (haircut, elm tree, bicycle) pop up, but none of the recollections has a monopoly; all are arbitrary, delightful, interchangeable, and without the lachrymose burden of cathexis, of caring. (The dandy, whether Wilde or Warhol, must prove that he doesn't care.) In the third stage, the excited aesthete summarizes his position; victorious, he kvells, having reached his long-sought, blissed-out peak. Exclamation points and question marks, not merely icing on the cake, emphasize the emotion's possible insincerity as well as its surfeit of sincerity. O'Hara's excitement, breathlessly uttered here in long lines whose speediness announces their credo (a velocity without futurism's militaristic seriousness), depends on the "you" who arrives in the penultimate line ("you see I have always wanted things to be beautiful"). Where did this "you" come from? The performance of excitement is aimed at the "you." The performance of excitement creates the "you." You wouldn't be there if I weren't excited about Helen Morgan and Glenda Farrell and able to say so in combustive clusters of words.

3.

O'Hara's excitement in this poem also depends on a complicated, shifting set of historical eras. Principally what excites O'Hara is the "now"—the instant of a poem's coming into existence. Yet, this "now"—the scene of excitement's performance—relies on time blur, a revolutionary undoing of chronology and teleology. As Walter Benjamin borrowed a superseded architectural form (Parisian arcades) and allowed it to illuminate a radical future, so O'Hara takes artifacts from 1930s culture and propels them forward (via TV's time travel) into the 1950s, his "now." Revivified as reruns, artifacts such as *Go Into Your Dance* can function not as nostalgic oases but as crystallizations of unfulfilled longings—in O'Hara's case, a childhood yearning for a world of sophistication and sexual experience encoded in "New York" and "Hollywood" and "modern art," a world of urbane immanence that comes to fruition for him in the 1950s but has meaning only because it permits reclamation of 1935. Neither 1935 nor 1960 (the year of this poem's composition) is the final resting place of the "now"; a *poetics of speed* has transformative power because it can shuttle quickly between 1935 and 1960, back and forth, and force the two instantaneities to interbreed.

4.

The quick and the "now": O'Hara's poems stage a devotion to the "now," which resembles orgasm's erasure of past and future. I won't assert that his work demonstrates an *orgasmic poetics*, though on the basis of a poem like "You are Gorgeous and I'm Coming" (a thirteen-line acrostic whose second half begins "With the past falling away as an acceleration of nerves"), it would be easy to claim that O'Hara wants nothing more than perpetual climax for the Proustian sake of "repeating the

phrases of an old romance which is constantly renewed by the / endless originality of human loss," a sentiment I call Proustian because, like Benjamin's recycling of arcades, it uses contemporary melancholy to renew the springs of prior artifacts (*if I weren't saturnine today, I wouldn't be able to divine the revolutionary potential of the past*). The quick and the "now" may boil down to the venereal: "Now suddenly the fierce wind of disease and Venus," O'Hara intones with epic grandeur in "Ode to Michael Goldberg ('s Birth and Other Births)," one of his greatest poems. His *very* greatest poem is "Biotherm"; to play the canonizing game, I'll rank it with the other poetic monuments of the twentieth century, and you know exactly which monuments I mean. "Biotherm," though long, is devoted to the quick and the "now"; it begins "The best thing in the world —but I better be quick about it" (as if he might die before he has a chance to explain the full story). "Second Avenue," another of O'Hara's extended masterpieces, memorably shoves the "now" into cohabitation with its supposed enemy, the "past": "Candidly. The past, the sensations of the past. Now!" Isn't "Now!"—that longing for simultaneity and for the rapturous verbalization of it—always venereal? "Second Avenue" ends with enigmatic lines spoken in an unattributed oracular voice, addressed to a "you" who might be the reader or might be O'Hara but is probably the "I/Thou" amalgam after abstraction has burned away coarse subject-object distinctions. These valedictory lines enact not only orgasm but also a paralyzed immobility, a cessation in which I hear echoes of the death wish and of Valhallan/Himalayan push-pull Ab-Ex sublimity: "You've reached the enormous summit of passion / which is immobility forging an entrail from the pure obstruction of the air." Why entrail? No time to answer that question. The point of a poem, or an essay, is to pose questions, not to answer them: as O'Hara put it, in the first lines of the poem "Three Airs," which celebrates simultaneity and uncertainty, "So many things in the air! soot, / elephant balls, / a Chinese cloud. . . ." Whenever O'Hara makes a list of items, he adores them. Otherwise, why list them? Why exclaim "Oh! kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas!" as he does in the first line of "Today" if you don't consider them really beautiful?

5.

I'd hate to fall into the trap of saying that O'Hara is in love with the world. Yes, he's excited about things because they are beautiful—but he also holds that excitement lightly in his hand as a mirth- and tone-bestowing practice, and he is aware that beautiful (or faux-beautiful) things fall away from him, detach themselves, refuse his embrace. Attrition eats away at the tight bond between his "I" and the inevitably maternal world (O'Hara's object relations are in good working order, but they fall prey to hiccups, shatterings, blackouts, and spells in solitary confinement), and he is capable of finding this attrition—or this abandonment—exciting. Another poem called "Poem" (dated November 29, 1957) excitedly begins "To be idiomatic in a vacuum, / it is a shining thing!" Idiomatic is just a few letters away from idiotic. To speak your own idiom, in a vacuum, in a pit where no one else understands your vernacular, is an exalted identity, but the vacuum exacts a price, and the price may include being

considered an idiot. [Emily Dickinson](#) was idiomatic in a vacuum, and look at how long it took for her poems to come (in their unpunctuated glory) to light.

6.

Quick! I need to say a few words about "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday"! And I need to make sure that I return to my main point, which is excitement. Sometimes, however, when I write, I get so excited that I can't organize my thoughts. Excitement is a pleasant sensation, though it's also nerve jangling; excitement, while writing, feels as if some exterior yet introjected force (chef? surgeon? succubus?) were taking my mind and squeezing it to extract the juice. Or excitement feels as if someone (joker? athlete? percussionist?) were treating my mind like a Nerf ball, a lightweight and low-stakes toy, tossing it back and forth, letting it hit the walls and ceiling and vases and other people's bodies.

7.

If excitement's trajectory, in "Poem" ("O sole mio, hot diggity, nix, 'I wather think I can'") breaks down into three stages (explosion, memory, consolidation), the career of excitement, that jetting firework, takes a more dismal route in "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday." O'Hara wrote several poems titled "On Rachmaninoff's Birthday," an occasion he often marked, in part because he wanted to assert the seriousness of a sentimental composer-pianist like the great Russian, whose piano concerti, in particular, are touchstones of theatrically self-aware excitement. One iteration of the Rachmaninoff birthday ode, written in 1953, begins with the aforementioned bang: "Quick! a last poem before I go / off my rocker. Oh Rachmaninoff!" The poem is a sonnet, profoundly unrhymed; its emotional climax occurs in these opening lines. This shudder is stage one of O'Hara's excitement: discovery of the beloved object to which he can speedily return. The object can be addressed and saluted but never described. He can only stand, paralyzed (gelid?) with over-stimulation, at the statue's feet. Stage two is memory; he remembers "Onset, Massachusetts," and imagines that a "fig-newton" (childhood cookie) is "playing the horn." Frontally he salutes childhood's palace of art, its Joseph Cornell-style cabinet of curiosities: "Oh my palace of oranges, / junk shop, staples, umber, basalt; / I'm a child again when I was really / miserable, a grope pizzicato." Childhood's misery has much to do with groping, or the lack thereof; in "[Ave Maria](#)," O'Hara imagines a rosy if politically controversial scenario wherein a kid goes to the movies and is picked up by an adult stranger. But no groping happens to Frank on Rachmaninoff's birthday this year. Stage three of the excitement; he seems to realize that the room is "full of smoke" and that the soup is burning. Campbell's Soup, I hypothesize: the can of condensed memory, linking Warhol to O'Hara, who paid Andy no heed. When the soup burns and O'Hara beholds the return of the repressed ("So it's back," he resignedly observes), he surmises that mental sobriety (a state of Apollonian remoteness from mere excitement?) will never be possible for the "you," who has, as

usual, suddenly appeared in the last line: "You'll never be mentally sober." Rachmaninoff will never be mentally sober; he'll always be an aesthetically retrograde late-Romantic drunk. O'Hara too will never be mentally sober; he'll always be excited, even if the excitement takes the form of *flattened perception*, a tropism toward the depressed, the merely notational, the unelevated. In the late 1950s, O'Hara deliberately forewent the semantically pyrotechnical elevations of "Second Avenue" and other earlier poems and chose, instead, a relatively plain style (the *Lunch Poems* voice), thus enacting, in the development of his poetics, a movement from a congested and spiked excitement to a toned-down ebullience. This movement away from hyperactivity was always in the cards; in "Mayakovsky," written in 1954, he sketched the inevitable disappointment that follows soaring ("I embraced a cloud / but when I soared / it rained") and announced a new quietness. Those quiet lines—"Now I am quietly waiting for / the catastrophe of my personality / to seem beautiful again, / and interesting, and modern"—are O'Hara's news bulletin from the distressed interstice between catastrophe's explosion and the resurrection of a new optimism, a quietness that would become, in 1956, in the many-chambered poem "In Memory of My Feelings," the opening line's depiction of the quiet man (*The Quiet Man* was a 1952 John Ford–John Wayne film) who resembles the perfect Madison Avenue cultural worker, quiet enough (sufficiently an *appreciator of others*) to sprout secret personalities on the fly. The lines are a stealth operation:

*My quietness has a man in it, he is transparent
and he carries me quietly, like a gondola,
through the streets.
He has several likenesses, like stars and years,
like numerals.
My quietness has a number of naked selves...*

Nakedness sometimes needs to keep quiet about itself, but nakedness is, in O'Hara's hands, always exciting. He didn't seem entirely to like Ginsberg's variety of naked poetry, perhaps because it threatened to usurp his own.

8.

When I say *excitement*, I mean sexual, aesthetic, social, political—every kind of excitement under the sun. I want to separate excitement in O'Hara's work from its contexts, to isolate excitement as an affect, a process, almost physiological. Excitement is O'Hara's contribution to the history of lyric (and anti-lyric) ardor. Imagine separating, with a centrifuge, the elements in an O'Hara poem and beholding the excitement itself; you'd see an aura of beautiful shine, a luster, resembling Rilke's excitement but dirtier, just as thing-oriented as Rilke's but cheerier. Who, if I cried out, would hear me, among the angelic orders? Googie Withers would hear me. For years, I've wanted to drop the name "Googie Withers" into an essay, and "Biotherm" gives me leave:

it's a secret told by

*a madman in a parlor car
signifying chuckles*

* Richard Widmark *

* Gene Tierney *

* Googie Withers *

9.

Googie Withers, a good actress, knew that excitement comes not just from hard work. Excitement comes from being lazy and fun loving. O'Hara worked hard, but he also took it easy. His *Collected Poems* are a manifesto of the high aesthetic rewards that accrue from a life—albeit a tragically abbreviated life—of taking easiness as the gold standard. Like Warhol's professed love of easy art (or art that was easy to make), O'Hara's love of easeful production stood in ironic contrast to the uneasy intensity that electrifies his work and complicates its every emotional posture, threading melancholy and ambivalence and the threat of self-loss into the most apparently insouciant exclamations. He revered language but also found it an insufficient reward; poetry, though worshipped, could become the enemy. He loved highfalutin stances, or loved to mock them, but he also seemed to hate metaphoricity and exclamations, which were (contradiction!) his bread and butter.

*how clear the air is, how low the moon, how flat the sun,
et cetera,*

*just so you don't coin a phrase that changes
can be "rung" on*

he defiantly states in "Hôtel Particulier," in rebellion against any poetry that espouses depth, deliberation, and metaphysical certainty. Excitement—the poem begins

How exciting it is

not to be at Port Lligat

or learning Portuguese in Bilbao so you can go to

Brazil

and falls here into the "Having a Coke with You" pattern of preferring what you actually love to what you're supposed to love: *let me be excited about the objects that I choose, not the objects that cultural czars choose for me*. I'll end my brief investigation of O'Hara's excitement by quoting the loss-infused final lines of "Hôtel Particulier"—"is this the hostel where the lazy and funloving / start up the mountain"—and by proposing that this footloose libidinal community, to which O'Hara belonged, is capable of visionary gleams and quests, even though he wouldn't be caught dead using a phrase like *visionary gleams*.