Son of Russell Joseph O’Hara and Katherine Broderick, Francis Russell O’Hara was born on June 27, 1926 in Baltimore, Maryland and grew up in Grafton, Massachusetts. At the age of fifteen he discovered his passion for music and began to study piano at the New England Conservatory in Boston, from 1941 to 1944. After graduating he enlisted in the Navy and served as a sonarman in the South Pacific during World War II.

On his return from the war, O’Hara began to study music in Harvard University, giving him “his first access to a community based on experimentation in both art and lifestyle.” There he also had the opportunity to meet poet John Ashbery, who introduced him to the arts community in New York,\(^1\) which led him to change his major; therefore he graduated from Harvard in 1950 with a degree in English. A year after he received his MA from The University of Michigan and in that same year he moved into an apartment in New York.\(^2\)

Moving to New York’s is what “provided the foundation for O’Haras´s life”\(^3\); there he got a job in the Museum of Modern Art, first as a clerk but his passion for art made him progress until he became the curator of the museum. When he began to work there, O’Hara also began to take writing seriously and in 1952 the Tibor De Nagy Gallery published his first collections of poems: *A City Winter*, illustrated by Larry Rivers. The next year the same gallery published both his collection *Oranges* and a homonymous exhibition of paintings by Grace Hartigan based on O’Hara´s poems.

\(^{1}\)Terence Diggory *Encyclopedia of the New York School Poets* p. 354
\(^{2}\)http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/164
\(^{3}\)Terence Diggory, Idem.
From his first collection of poems his style was already evident; we can
distinguish in him influences, forms, and themes that explore sonnets of the
English Renaissance, influences of surrealism and modern French poetry as
Rimbaud´s prose poems and Stèphane Mallarmé⁴. The voice within his poetry is
straightforward, mentioning by name many of his friends and also works of arts.
This directness, in words of Terance Diggory, “help[s] to compose the theme of
friendship that supplies and important thread of continuity throughout his work.”⁵
But not only were his personal relations, his friendship and romances used as
themes in his poetry, it is also in this first collection of his poems that he develops
another of his major themes; the city, that is also evident in the title of his
collection.Frank O´Hara was immensely attracted by New York and his experience
of city life that is more evident in Oranges: 12 Pastorals - poems that are
meditations about the city through the idealization of nature in the pastoral
tradition- and the major city poem in Second Avenue written in 1953 but published
until 1960.⁶ O´Hara´s poetry developed into a new genre that he himself named as
“I do this I do that” because they follow a seemingly random itinerary through the
urban scene.⁷

As a member of the New York School, created in 1960, Frank O´Hara´s life
was always closely related to arts; his poetry was highly influenced by it, specially
painting. Not only was O´Hara, in many occasions, in charge of art exhibitions and
also of criticizing works of art periodically for the ArtNews magazine, but also he
himself draw images to accompany his poetry, and translated images into words,
something Ira Sadoff called “painterly problems.”⁸ The plasticity of his images and
the “freshness” of his verses were the perfect canvas to do it.

Brad Groooh, Frank O’Hara’s biographer, described his poetry as “friendly
but puzzled” ⁹, their structure, themes, and images were not ordinary, and “the

⁴ Idem
⁵ Idem.
⁶ Idem.
⁷ Idem.
⁸ Ira Sadoff. Ch.9 “The Mobile Architecture of Frank O’Hara’s poetry” in History Matters: Contemporary
Poetry on the Margins of American Culture.
⁹ Quoted by Terence Diggory in Encyclopedia of the New York School Poets p. 354
most insightful commentary by distinguishing O’Hara’s work”\textsuperscript{10} was Kenneth Rexroth’s describing it as an “abstract expressionism”. O’Hara’s experience in writing “personal poems” led him to create the concept of “personism” in which he states that “It puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person, […] and the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages”\textsuperscript{11}.

This idea was developed in a mock manifesto in 1959 called Personism: A Manifesto, in which O’Hara shows also his peculiar way of expressing himself against the conventions. In it he also defends his poetry saying that “too many poets act like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat, and potatoes with drippings (tears). I don’t give a damn whether they eat or not.”\textsuperscript{12} Also he affirms that his poetry is not about philosophical issues, instead, it has to do with art, and only with that and with common sense. He affirms also that “I don’t even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff,” \textsuperscript{13} because all these devices could interfere with his idea of writing, which is “address[ing] itself [the poem] to one person (other than the poet himself) […] sustaining the poet’s feelings towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person.” \textsuperscript{14} Thus, in many of his poems we could realize he was addressing not only his friends but in many cases his lovers, which shows how intimate they were with him.

His sexuality, another mayor theme in his poetry, is at the same time present and secrete; sometimes “transparent” and sometimes “opaque,” as James E. B. Breslin describes it. In his book about O’Hara’s life, Gooch spent many of his pages dealing with his sexual life, and it is not due to morbid fascination but because the poet had a very active sex life, and among those men were “straight m[e]n[…] of the same period”\textsuperscript{15}. As he himself established in his manifesto, many of his poems were only directed to his lovers, and in words of Terrell Scott Herring “with the literary movements as the New Criticism and confessional poetry […]

\textsuperscript{10} Kenneth Rexroth in The New York Times, quoted by Terence Diggory.
\textsuperscript{11} Personism: A Manifesto online: http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmId/20421
\textsuperscript{12} Idem.
\textsuperscript{13} Idem.
\textsuperscript{14} Idem.
\textsuperscript{15} David Bergman Gay American Autobiography: writings from Whitman to Sedaris
contributed to sharper distinctions between public and private (sexual) life.”\textsuperscript{16} In many occasions the public speech of his poems contrasts with the private speech of his love poems.

In one of his last collections of poems called “Biotherm (for Bill Berkson)” not only is the addressee of his poems evident but also, as Terence Diggory assures, the poems were “a series of curiously fragmented and impersonal poems titled with some form of the corporate abbreviations F.Y.I. (for your information).”\textsuperscript{17} O’Hara did not directly address the poem to Berkson because he did not want to publicly reveal his friend’s bisexuality. It is more than evident that O’Hara’s manifesto presents then a paradox: not only does O’Hara openly present himself in his poems as a “private person,” but also his poems create an “intimate artistic space through which impersonal identifications can occur,”\textsuperscript{18} which provides him with the opportunity to transmit to the public sphere “supposedly private fantasies in artistic practice”\textsuperscript{19}.

Finally O’Hara died of a ruptured liver, the day after being struck by a dune buggy on the Fire Island beach in the morning of 24 July, 1966. The eulogy for the poet was written by painter Larry Rivers, who was a longtime friend and lover.

➢ Analysis

A Step Away from Them

It’s my lunch hour, so I go
for a walk among the hum-colored
cabs. First, down the sidewalk
where laborers feed their dirty
glistening torsos sandwiches

\textsuperscript{16} Terrell Scott Herring \textit{Frank O’Hara’s Open Closet} p.415
\textsuperscript{17} Terence Diggory.
\textsuperscript{18} Terrell, p. 416
\textsuperscript{19} Idem.
and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets on. They protect them from falling bricks, I guess. Then onto the avenue where skirts are flipping above heels and blow up over grates. The sun is hot, but the cabs stir up the air. I look at bargains in wristwatches. There are cats playing in sawdust.

On to Times Square, where the sign blows smoke over my head, and higher the waterfall pours lightly. A Negro stands in a doorway with a toothpick, languorously agitating A blonde chorus girl clicks: he smiles and rubs his chin. Everything suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of a Thursday.

Neon in daylight is a great pleasure, as Edwin Denby would write, as are light bulbs in daylight. I stop for a cheeseburger at JULIET'S CORNER. Giulietta Maina, wife of Federico Fellini, è bell' attrice.
And chocolate malted. A lady in foxes on such a day puts her poodle in a cab.

There are several Puerto Ricans on the avenue today, which makes it beautiful and warm. First Bunny died, then John Latouche, then Jackson Pollock. But is the earth as full of life was full, of them? And one has eaten and one walks, past the magazines with nudes and the posters for BULLFIGHT and the Manhattan Storage Warehouse, which they'll soon tear down. I used to think they had the Armory Show there.

A glass of papaya juice and back to work. My heart is in my pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy.

“A Step Away from Them” is an irregular poem, composed by five blank verse stanzas with several enjambments, and overlay metaphors as "the hum-colored/ cabs" and the laborers “yellow helmets” that shares not only the color but also the connection with the abstract concept of bees, of hard work and constant movement. The metonymic resource used in lines as “the sidewalk/ where laborers feed their dirty/ glistening torsos,” “skirts are flipping/ above heels and blow up/ over
grates” helps him dealing with, though not so directly, a sexual and sensual implication of the images that are presented; another example (not of metonymy but of a sensual connotation) “are the several Puerto/ Ricans on the avenue [that day], which/ makes it beautiful and warm.”

The poem itself is a good example of his city poems and also of his “I look” perspective; for example, in the first stanza it is clear that the poetic voice is giving us his own perspective: “It’s my lunch hour, so I go/ for a walk among the hum-colored/ cabs.” (lines 1-3). Although we could say it is a closed one -not only because he is establishing the day “Thursday” and the hour “12:40,” but also because the space seems to be reduced; first we have the description of what could be any street but at the beginning of the second stanza the poetic voice points out that we are seeing Times Square through his perspective. In this manner he manages to give us the sense of movement and also that many things are happening at the same time.

The feeling of a zooming effect, from any street to Times Square, increases when the poetic voice walks and makes a “stop for a cheeseburger at JULIET’S CORNER/ [.]. And chocolate malted,” which further increases the feeling of diminishing of space, and the awareness about the fact that we contemplate only “his” perspective; the depiction of New York through his eyes finally reduces the space to the maximum when a “close up” to the pocket of the poetic voice, where he carries the “Poems by Pierre Reverdy,” which is the last scene in the poem.

The “seemingly random itinerary through the urban scene” that Ira Sadoff mentions is a constant through the poem. Since the beginning of the poem it seems as if we were walking side by side with the poetic voice, appreciating the same “glistening torsos” of the laborers with his “yellow helmets / on.” His descriptions, as I have already mentioned, make us contemplate what he sees in the same way he sees it. I.e. The “glistening torsos” of the laborers seems to be seductive and sensual, but they are like that because the poetic voice depicts them in that way.

The detailed but brief descriptions of the scenes help also to complete the sense of moving of the poem. Lines like “skirts are flipping/ above heels and blow
up over grates” or “[t]here/ are cats playing in sawdust” of the first stanza along with the change of visual perspectives creates a moving painting.

On the second stanza, the poetic voice continues to give us details of what he sees while he walks but suddenly these descriptions are broken up by the sound of a honk, and the external perspective changes giving way to the internal thoughts of the poetic voice. Again we have another reduction of space.

The first lines of the third stanza “[n]eon in daylight is a/ great pleasure, as Edwin Denby would/ write, as are light bulbs in daylight” are the introduction to what I have mentioned about the inner thoughts of this voice; also, we have for the first time in the poem the reference by name of certain characters related to O’Hara, -even if this relation is not necessarily personal- as for example the poet and dancer critic Edwin Denby, as well as Giulietta Masina. This stanza also emphasizes the contrast between what it supposed to exist in a different context; the neon lights in daylight and perhaps there’s also an implied relation with the cinematographic industry, with Masina, and the dance environments, with Denby, that “accentuates a darkness present even at noontime.”20 Lowney affirms that in this fragment of the poem O’Hara is not only describing but actually reflecting about mortality, that is the reason for which he mentions his dead friends in the fourth stanza, Bunny, John Latouche and Jackson Pollock, and also makes the question “[b]ut is the/ earth as full as life was full, of them?”.

However, as in the previous stanza where the sound of the horn interrupts the description of events, the movement and actions done by the “Puerto/ Ricans on the avenue” stop O’Hara´s reflection of death. Instead of that, the poetic voice describes the magazines that one of those men is seeing, the “nudes,” the “bullfight” and the imminent destruction of the “Manhattan Storage Warehouse” depicts also movement and a subtle relation with O’Hara´s previous thought.

The last stanza, composed by just three lines is the poet´s come back to his job after drinking a “glass of papaya juice”. The mentioning of this particular exotic drink and the previous references to a “Negro” watching blond girls and the “Puerto Ricans” show us that the poetic voice’s perspective is most likely highly individual

20 John Lowney, in http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/ohara/stepaway.htm
and subjective, focalized only on what he is seeing at his lunch hour, yet, he is describing New York’s society, its development and also the relation between what “belongs,” as the cheeseburger and chocolate malted, and the arrival of new things, exotic ones, that are mixing every day.

Summarizing, “A Step Away from Them” belongs to the Lunch Poems collection, published in 1964; the lack of the rhetorical devices makes the author’s dislike for them evident, as confirmed by his own declaration on it in his manifesto. The theme of the city, especially New York, is also present together with his “I look” perspective which leads us through the streets to the reflection of mortality and also about social issues.

Homosexuality

So we are taking off our masks, are we, and keeping our mouths shut? as if we’d been pierced by a glance!

The song of an old cow is not more full of judgment than the vapors which escape one's soul when one is sick;

so I pull the shadows around me like a puff and crinkle my eyes as if at the most exquisite moment

of a very long opera, and then we are off! without reproach and without hope that our delicate feet

will touch the earth again, let alone "very soon."
It is the law of my own voice I shall investigate.

I start like ice, my finger to my ear, my ear to my heart, that proud cur at the garbage can
in the rain. It’s wonderful to admire oneself
with complete candor, tallying up the merits of each
of the latrines. 14th Street is drunken and credulous,
53 rd tries to tremble but is too at rest. The good

love a park and the inept a railway station,
and there are the divine ones who drag themselves up

and down the lengthening shadow of an Abyssinian head
in the dust, trailing their long elegant heels of hot air
crying to confuse the brave "It's a summer day,
and I want to be wanted more than anything else in the world."

This poem is composed by eleven couplets, but unlike the previous poem
“Homosexuality”, this one has several rhetorical devices, such as simile: “I pull the
shadows around me like a puff,” anaphor: “without reproach and without hope,”
anadiplosis: "my finger to my ear, my ear/ to my heart,” personification “14th Street
is drunken and credulous,” etc. The thematic duality, that of the public and private
life, is reflected in the construction of the poem through couplets, related to the
period in which the poem was written (Hazel Smith located the writing of the poem
during the immediate years of the postwar, at the beginnings of “the political aims
of the gay rights movement,”yet the publication of the poem took place in 1970,
posthumously) and also about the poetic voice own life, the secret one and the
public one.

The first two lines of the poem question, in an ironic tone, the decision of
“taking off” their masks and show themselves as they are, although the piercing
glances of society make them remain in silence. The poet himself used to read out

21 Dong-Yeon Koh Larry Rivers and Frank O’Hara: Reframing male sexualities. P. 89
loud this poem to his friends, both homosexuals and heterosexuals, just to see their reaction\(^{22}\) and not only do the question in the poem seem ironic and critical, but likewise the fact that the poem was just known by few people and were published after his death, just as many of other of his poems that deal with his homosexuality.

The second pair of lines establishes an unconformity about the decision of showing themselves to society as what they really are, because of the wrong reasons; that is to say, to prove to them that they are not doing anything dreadful. “The song of an old cow” and “the vapors” reinforces the old idea that homosexuality was an illness, and that believing so themselves was worst that what society could say of them.

The poetic voice’s counterargument is to embrace the shadows of his secrecy; in order to enjoy the privacy of darkness. The tone of what he is saying, and the question with which the poem begins are similar to the response of an argument between a couple; the main conflict is that one of them considers to come out of the closet and the poetic voice seems to disagree with the idea. The fight is so intense that it causes their rupture, as could be seen in line 7, as the last words of the poetic voice on the matter: “then we are off!” This rupture is also irreconcilable, especially so in a short period of time: “let alone, ‘very soon’” and yet there are neither reproaches between them, nor hope of being together again.

The discussion brings up the poetic voice’s inner conflict of being free of his mask, and his indignation of trying to force him to get out of the closet drives him to appreciate in a reflective manner his own real position about his new status; “It is the law of my own voice I shall investigate”. The following lines lead us to the inner thoughts of the poetic voice through all the process of deliberation; first he remains in a cold position “I start like ice,” and then halts hearing the arguments of those around him: “my finger to my ear,” to focus only what his lonely hart has to say about: “my ear to my heart.”

The final result is the reiteration of his position “It’s wonderful to admire oneself/ with complete candor”, because for the poetic voice the “'tallying up” of his

\(^{22}\) Idem.
"merits" seems to be enough to enjoy the secrecy of his sexuality. Those merits began in the militia, specifically in the area of the latrines, where no one could see him, then by enjoying night life on the “14th Street” and “53rd,” and meeting people in parks, the railway station, etc. What starts as a reflection about what his feeling are ends with a rogue remembrance of his sexual partners including “the divine ones,” “Abyssinian” men that “drag themselves up and down” with “their long elegant heels of hot air” and ends up in a reflection of what he really wants of life: “It’s a summer day,/ and I want to be wanted more than anything else in the world.”

Summing up, the poem is an approximate view of O’Hara’s stand on the matter of his sexual life; he is not ashamed of being gay because he knows that his opinion of himself is more relevant than what society might have to say.

For discussion:

- Analyze and compare the relation of perspectives in both poems, the addressee of each one and the sensation of public and private at the same time.
- What do you think is O’Hara’s position about racism? Relate the answer in the first poem with the phrase: “Would you want your daughter to marry a Nigra?” (Desegregation Act, 1954) and “A/ Negro stands in a doorway with a/toothpick, languorously agitating/ A blonde chorus girl clicks: he/ smiles and rubs his chin.”
- What do you think is the main reason for which the second poem has more rhetorical devices than the first one?
- Do you consider that the progression of ideas in the second poem is successful? Explain
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