

2007

## Frank O'Hara and the Turn to Friendship

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### Recommended Citation

Lee, Benjamin (2007) "Frank O'Hara and the Turn to Friendship," *Criticism*: Vol. 49: Iss. 2, Article 5.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol49/iss2/5>



B E N J A M I N L E E

## Frank O'Hara and the Turn to Friendship

*Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry*, by Andrew Epstein. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. Pp. xiv + 359. \$45.00 cloth.

*Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie*, by Lytle Shaw. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006. Pp. x + 332. \$39.95 cloth.

A couple of bright new books on Frank O'Hara and the New York School of poets underscore two notable trends in scholarship on twentieth-century U.S. poetry and culture. The first of these trends is fairly easy to describe. Since his stunning death in 1966—struck by a beach buggy late at night on Fire Island—O'Hara has been transformed from an influential though little-known poet and supporter of experimental art into a full-fledged member of the literary canon. Donald Allen's *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (1971) and Marjorie Perloff's *Frank O'Hara: Poet among Painters* (1977) were early and indispensable steps in the rise of popular and scholarly interest in O'Hara, which continued apace throughout the 1980s and '90s, fueled in part by the invention of queer theory and the growing influence of cultural studies. O'Hara's poems captured a number of movements that scholars were keen to describe, flitting easily across the great divide between high art and popular culture, meditating cleverly on the practice of everyday life in the postindustrial city, and addressing both the pleasures and difficulties of articulating queer desire in the public sphere. By now we have a biography, several tributes and essay collections, and recent books on O'Hara and the New York School marketed to broader audiences.<sup>1</sup> "I'm so grateful to you!" O'Hara might have exclaimed to his growing audience in the new millennium, with his characteristic combination of self-deprecating ambition and joy.<sup>2</sup>

Lytle Shaw's *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* and Andrew Epstein's *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* confirm O'Hara's position as a charismatic and irresistible figure in discussions of postwar American poetry. They underscore a second trend as well, at once more intriguing and more difficult to

evaluate: the turn to “coterie” and “friendship” as the central terms in discussions of aesthetics and agency in twentieth-century literary cultures. It seems striking that these two quite different studies of the art and social imaginary of O’Hara’s circle should both favor this particular level of intimacy and collaboration, which hovers ambivalently between individual and community. It’s true, of course, that O’Hara’s own poetic meditations on friendship and collaboration can be said to justify these approaches, and one might add that O’Hara’s popularity makes particular sense in an era of text messages and social networking. This is, after all, the poet who claimed to have invented his own poetic philosophy when, one day after lunch with a friend and while writing a poem for a lover, he realized that “if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem.”<sup>3</sup>

And yet there is more at work here than just O’Hara’s own interest in thematizing intimacy, or his prescience as a commentator on the fusion (and confusion) of social, creative, and professional lives in the twenty-first century. Epstein’s and Shaw’s arguments signal a subtle but perceptible reorientation in our thinking about individual subjects and the impingements of the dominant culture. These arguments suggest that we turn to intimate communities—groups of friends and close-knit literary allies—as a way of grounding our thinking about the self in social context, or about individual agency in relation to larger systems. They substitute friendship and coterie, forms of commonality just above the autonomous and individually creative, for the broader communities (literary or subcultural; those coalescing around experiences of race, class, gender, or sexuality) that have recently exerted such force in studies of twentieth-century American poetry and culture.

Indeed, “community” becomes a keyword for both Epstein and Shaw, a term they use to distinguish themselves from previous critics of postwar American poetry. These critics focused on small, local collectives (such as Beat, Black Mountain, and San Francisco Renaissance poets) and emphasized experimental poetry’s importance in creating “a sense of community during a period of consensus and conformism.”<sup>4</sup> Epstein and Shaw share with such critics a commitment to considering O’Hara’s work as socially situated, and yet they seem skeptical about the sorts of literary, bohemian, or identity-based communities that these previous critics found galvanizing, if not without their tensions and flaws.<sup>5</sup> In Epstein this skepticism is more definitive, as his pragmatist approach leads him quite consistently to privilege “the individual as a distinctive, kinetic agent whose needs trump the demands and identity of the collective” (*Beautiful Enemies* 9). In Shaw, coterie suggests a new strategy for describing the sort of nonessentialist, negotiated, and unstable community that previous critics had already endorsed. Coterie becomes “community’s evil twin,” allowing us to deconstruct the “tacit standards” that support oppressive or normalizing communities and to replace them with our own “fluid and experimental way[s] of conceptualizing literary and social linkage” (*Frank O’Hara* 16, 37).

In the interest of accuracy, it is important to note that Epstein's elegant book is not strictly speaking a book on Frank O'Hara. Taking his lead and borrowing his title from Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose essay on "Friendship" urges us to think of each of our friends as "a sort of beautiful enemy, untamable," and "devoutly revered," Epstein offers us a study of the "troubling yet generative clash between friendship and nonconformity" in postwar American poetry (*Beautiful Enemies* 3). More specifically, he offers a subtle and meticulously researched account of the literary, personal, and philosophical dynamics of the New York School, and of O'Hara, John Ashbery, and Amiri Baraka in particular. Yet it is O'Hara who ties the three together. The biographical details and textual echoes of his intense and complicated friendships with both Ashbery and Baraka do as much to connect Epstein's readings of the three individual poets as do the book's pragmatist theoretical frame and steady focus on "*friendship* as a psychological, philosophical, or aesthetic category (a subject of tremendous interest to the poets)" (8). Epstein's arguments throughout tend to feel more intimate than Shaw's, in part because he is willing to attribute to poems a set of immediately biographical textures that Shaw prefers to work through theoretically, presenting "the concept of coterie," for example, "as a seam between the empirical and the rhetorical" (*Frank O'Hara* 16). It is during his final meditations on the extended poetic and intertextual dialogue between Ashbery and O'Hara (the two poets share the final chapter and long stretches of the conclusion) that Epstein's book uncovers most poignantly the thematic and paradoxes of friendship among rivals.

And yet if Epstein's prose feels more intimate, it is Shaw's—as it moves ambitiously through poems and poetic statements by O'Hara, to his collaborations with painters, to his art criticism and even the internal documents he produced as a curator at MOMA—that remains faithful to the New York School's sense of "the social field" as "a site of flux," and to the notion of avant-gardes as collective movements, striving to transform the work of aesthetic experiment into a kind of shared social practice (*Frank O'Hara* 73). Thus, for instance, in the extended close reading that sits at the heart of *The Poetics of Coterie*, "In Memory of My Feelings" becomes "a metacommunal poem," and O'Hara's circle is imagined not simply as an intimate community of artists and queer poets but also as a community that emerges through the poems themselves, which allow one to think through the "competing social frameworks" that give shape to constantly shifting notions of the self (*Frank O'Hara* 113). Epstein's pragmatist analyses, on the other hand, tend to favor radical individualism over any and all social groupings, including the intimate coupling of friendship. Epstein moves subtly but consistently to transform analyses of "friendship's discontents" and "pleasures" into claims about an individual poet's "misgivings about the notion of a communal avant-garde project" (*Beautiful Enemies* 195). His nuanced and often illuminating accounts of poems and prose by Ashbery, Baraka, and O'Hara remain deeply invested in destabilizing the notion of avant-garde as collaboration and replacing

it with a portrait of experimental artists who are socially situated, and even affiliated with radical communities, and yet never wholly committed to avant-gardism as a collective endeavor.

As these remarks indicate, no ultimate consensus emerges in these two books about sociability and avant-garde poetry. Though they both approach the poetry and enforced conformities of postwar U.S. culture through the lens of small collectivities and experimental couples (Ashbery and O'Hara, O'Hara and Baraka, O'Hara and the painter Grace Hartigan), neither book manages to formulate a single, authoritative answer to the questions posed by O'Hara's distinctive and complicated vision of poetry's relationship to the social. In these studies, as elsewhere, the space of friendship and coterie remains fraught with the same kinds of theoretical difficulties and disagreements as other studies of the clashes or gentle encounters between subjectivity and the public sphere. And yet both Epstein and Shaw offer us the pleasures of their own timeliness and intelligence. Both exhibit a shrewd sense of the new directions O'Hara criticism might take in the years to come (an expanded sense of O'Hara's dialogue with pragmatism, for instance, or of his work as an art critic or his Cold War-era fascination with Russian literature), and both offer compelling new readings of individual poems. I plan to return in particular to Shaw's readings of O'Hara's "Cornkind" and "In Memory of My Feelings," and to Epstein's reading of O'Hara's "Joe's Jacket's" and his quite unforgettable take on Ashbery's "Street Musicians." These books should quickly find their place in an expanding field of O'Hara criticism, adding depth and detail to discussions of the New York School's cultural force and its deft imagination of a whole range of individual and collective—indeed, of *collaborative*—freedoms. As for O'Hara, whose poems remain so powerfully public and private, depressed and ambitious, solitary, utopically expansive, and just plain entertaining, he will no doubt continue enjoying his moment in the sun.

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### Notes

1. Though this is by no means a comprehensive list, central texts in O'Hara studies include Donald Allen, ed., *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet among Painters* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), reprinted by University of Chicago Press in 1998; James E. B. Breslin's chapter on O'Hara in *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945–1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Bill Berkson and Joe LeSueur, eds., *Homage to Frank O'Hara* (Bolinas, CA: Big Sky, 1988); Jim Elledge, ed., *Frank O'Hara: To Be True to a City* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990); and Brad Gooch, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (New York: Knopf, 1993). In the last decade, David Lehman's *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (New York: Doubleday, 1998) and Joe LeSueur's *Digres-*

sions on *Some Poems by Frank O'Hara* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003) have reached both academic and nonacademic audiences. The fact that *PMLA*'s recent special issue "On Poetry" included an article on O'Hara is another sign of continued interest among academics; see Michael Clune's engaging "'Everything We Want': Frank O'Hara and the Aesthetics of Free Choice," *PMLA* 120, no. 1 (January 2005): 181–96.

2. Allen, ed., *Collected Poems*, 307.
3. *Ibid.*, 499.
4. Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), x.
5. Epstein and Shaw situate their arguments about poetic "community" in relation to, among others, Davidson, *San Francisco Renaissance*; Maria Damon, *The Dark End of the Street: Margins in American Vanguard Poetry* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Alan Golding, *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995); Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Libbie Rifkin, *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-Garde* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000); and Daniel Kane, *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).