

explorations



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REVIEW

Tadeusz Pióro. 2013. *Frank O'Hara and the Ends of Modernism*

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Tadeusz Pióro's illuminating survey of O'Hara's poetry fills a gaping hole in American studies in Poland. While O'Hara's great friend and contemporary New York School poet, John Ashbery, enjoys a vast number of critical discussions, O'Hara criticism seems modest in comparison; until recently its greatest specimen had been Marjorie Perloff's early biographic study *Frank O'Hara. Poet Among Painters*, first published in 1977 and revised in 1998. Since then a number of cross-disciplinary studies devoted to O'Hara's poetry came out, for example Russell Ferguson's *In Memory of My Feelings: Frank O'Hara and American Art*. Moreover, important facts concerning O'Hara's life were revealed in new biographies and memoirs, often written by O'Hara's close friends and acquaintances, for example Joe LeSueur's *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O'Hara. A Memoir*. Last but not least, authors of a few collections of essays tried to reread O'Hara in the postmodern context, for example *Frank O'Hara Now. New Essays on the New York Poet* edited by Robert Hampson and Will Montgomery, or *Frank O'Hara: To Be True to a City* edited by Jim Ellege, which included Mutlu Konuk Blasing's penetrating essay "Frank O'Hara: The Speech of Poetry." Pióro keeps track of O'Hara's posthumous life, and his book presents – and makes use of – more or less a complete record of O'Hara criticism AD 2013.

Pióro's study plays one more important role: O'Hara's poetry has a peculiar meaning in the Polish context as it gave name to "Oharism," a literary movement that originated among the poets affiliated with the Warsaw-based literary magazine *bruLion* in the late 1980s. Oharism – just like O'Hara's poetry in John Ashbery's parlance – "ignored the right of establishment to exist" and thus played a vital role in neutralizing the polarization between the communist propaganda of the totalitarian regime and the anti-communist nationalistic impulses that subordinated the individual freedom to struggle for political independence. O'Hara and other New York School poets helped the younger generation find a non-political stance, suspicious of all power discourses. Pióro's lavish presentation of O'Hara's aesthetic affinities might explain to the Polish critic – and the reader – what made the American poet a cult figure in Poland over two decades ago, allowing him to leave his stamp on a legion of poets, from Andrzej Sosnowski and Marcin Świetlicki to Jacek Podsiadło.

There has been a tendency in the academia – both in criticism and in classroom practice – to treat important poets as exceptional and outstanding luminaries of verse or solitary “strong poets,” singled out from their historical and cultural milieu by their own supernatural force. As the title of Pióro’s study suggests, *Frank O’Hara and the Ends of Modernism* tries to change this perspective. In his introduction, Pióro explains: “[A] reader like myself [is] interested chiefly in how O’Hara functioned within a literary and artistic environment still dominated by the aesthetic ideals of Modernism” (p. 14). Placing O’Hara in a proper historical context – as one of the last poets in a long lineage of modernist writers – enables Pióro to fully appreciate the development of the poet’s debonair style, from the early manifestoes of poetic freedom, such as “Memorial Day 1950,” to the late “Biotherm,” with which O’Hara apparently strove to a new and more indeterminate phase in his own writing. Yet the direction O’Hara’s poetry was to take would remain unresolved, as his life ended abruptly in a freak car accident on the Fire Island when he was just forty.

Pióro’s point of departure is his compelling definition of modernism, based on the one hand on Fredric Jameson, and on the other on Walter Benjamin. Pióro reminds us – after Jameson – that for most of its own life span modernist aesthetics was marginal, coming into cultural prominence as late as the 1940s and ‘50s. The New York School poets were formed by the modernist tradition of avant-garde writing, which tried to “make it new,” and they revived the experimental vein of the 1910s and ‘20s that was ignored in the mid-twentieth century. Pióro takes from Benjamin a conviction that “the modern” is essentially “the time of hell,” inherently linked to a technology of entertainment aimed at reinventing the “newest,” which bears a false promise of overcoming temporality. Thus, in the critic’s perspective, the limits of O’Hara’s Modernism stretch between the enthusiasm of constructivist avant-gardism and the dejection of Baudelairean New York spleen. The rhetoric of excess, which O’Hara employs in his major poems, is in fact a middle ground between the poetry of indeterminacy based on aleatoric gestures – “just letters” – and the more strict verse based on referentiality.

Pióro’s study consists of three chapters, the first of which is a comprehensive study of O’Hara’s poetic manifestoes, additionally examining the rhetoric of presence in his poems. The second chapter deals with the modernist trope of artistic heroism, which the New York School Poets borrowed from high modernist poets and tried to subversively use for new rhetorical ends, destabilizing textual signification. The critic singles out those of O’Hara’s poems that refer to the greatest American visual artists of the 1950s and ‘60s: “Ode to Causality” – an elegy on Jackson Pollock’s death, and “Rhapsody” – a verbal extension of the pop-art compositional technique, very much like Andy Warhol’s. The third chapter starts as a very personal narrative about Pióro’s readings of O’Hara’s poems, focusing on the poet’s masterpieces, such as “In Memory of My Feelings” and “Biotherm,” but finally turns out to be a history of O’Hara’s reception in a nutshell, expertly juggling references and annotations.

What is the study’s greatest novelty and what I understand as Pióro’s most precious achievement is his intriguing vision of Personism not only as a “life story,” but more importantly as a “death story.” This perspective is inherent in the structure of his study, which examines the temporal and existential “ends” of O’Hara’s oeuvre, first analyzing the frantic “French zen” poems from the poet’s formative period and finally giving the reader a glimpse into the would-be future of O’Hara’s writing, stopped by his premature death. In his introduction Pióro quotes Thomas Meyer who observes that after reading the

Collected Poems he had “a definite sense of [O’Hara’s] being on the verge of something else or new when he died” (p. 35). In his conclusion, subtitled “We Create Only As Dead Men,” which is a quote from Morton Feldman, Pióro suggests that O’Hara’s urgency “that rings clear in many of his best poems” is rooted in the poet’s acute sense of his own – and his reader’s – existential situation. In this context, O’Hara’s poetry must be seen as a performance, inscribing the performer – as well as his audience – into a list of the dead. O’Hara, then, can be seen as the very “end” of quite a different tradition than we usually place him in, reaching back through Eliot to the great English poets of the seventeenth century.

Last but not least, Pióro’s book is a great pleasure to read, not only for its eloquence and deep insights, but also as a delightful collection of trivia and hilarious anecdotes about O’Hara, Ashbery, Rivers, de Kooning, Warhol and many other prominent artists. A good example of Pióro’s sense of humor is an account of a party at Larry Rivers’s, which he gives after Brad Gooch: “[D]e Kooning screamed at Warhol: ‘You’re a killer of art, you’re a killer of beauty, and you’re even a killer of laughter. I can’t bear your work!’” (p. 137). Most anecdotes, of course, are about Frank O’Hara, and we get acquainted with the poet as a disquieting presence, whose walk was “light and sassy,” with “a slight twist and a slight bounce,” “casual,” and “confident” (p. 219) – apparently propelled by same energy that produced his poems. *Frank O’Hara and the Ends of Modernism* is a must-read for every O’Hara enthusiast and all those interested in those paths of American literary history that are still under intensive construction.

REFERENCES

Pióro, Tadeusz. 2013. *Frank O’Hara and the Ends of Modernism*. Warsaw: Institute of English Studies.

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