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Naming Things: Frank O'Hara and "The Day Lady Died"

Micah Mattix

Frank O'Hara's "The Day Lady Died" (1959) is one of his most recognized and difficult poems because of the way O'Hara uses simple statements to name the things and events of his lunch hour. Most critics who have attempted to provide an explanation of such simple language in a poem have argued that it is formulated in reaction against what was considered to be poetic language in American poetry in the 1940s and 50s. It will be argued, however, that more than a mere negative endeavor, O'Hara's naming of the things and events of his lunch hour in "The Day Lady Died" is both an attempt to provide an authentic elegy and a statement of the value of the experience of things and the value of art in evoking and organizing past feelings.

One of the most distinctive elements of Frank O'Hara's work is his naming the things and events of his day to construct a poem. In such poems, O'Hara begins by placing the poet and the poem at a specific time and place and proceeds to name the things and events of a period of time, most frequently his lunch hour, in an immediate and concrete way. The poet buys lunch, looks at sales, walks here, goes there, does this and does that. There is often a dramatic turn in such poems, either at the end or in the middle, where the poet reflects on a subject larger than, but yet still a part of, the everyday events he is recounting.

O'Hara's catalogues of names and events, however, have proven difficult for the critic attempting to explain their poetic value. As Marjorie Perloff writes, these poems "hardly seem to qualify as *poems* at all" (xiii). A number of poets and critics have understood this element of O'Hara's style, rightly or wrongly, in negative terms. According to this perspective, O'Hara's naming things is a reaction against a restrictive concept of what did and what did not qualify as poetic language in America in the 1940s and 50s. In his introduction to the *Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*

(1971), for example, John Ashbery claims that O'Hara's poetry is "anti-literary and anti-artistic," writing that, "it ignored the rules for modern American poetry that had been gradually drawn up from Pound and Eliot down to the academic establishment of the 1940s" (vii). While Ashbery makes this remark in relation to O'Hara's so-called surrealistic poems, referring to his debt to "Apollinaire and the Dadaists, to the collages of Picasso and Braque," it is clear from the rest of the introduction that the remark applies to the whole of O'Hara's work (vii). Paul Carroll, one of the first to claim that O'Hara was a serious poet, writes that O'Hara's "The Day Lady Died" (1959) while full of "unpoetic" names and events, "trivia and ugliness," is a work of art because of its originality and "nerve" in rejecting and undermining the view that a poem needs to contain things such as symbolic allusions and ambiguity (373, 378). For Carroll, the poem is "about the excitement of the man writing as he decides to include all of those 'unpoetic' existential places, names and events" (378).

Ashbery and Carroll's understanding of O'Hara's naming have shaped much of the current criticism on this element of his style. However, while it is perhaps correct in part to state, as Ashbery and Carroll have, that O'Hara's naming things came in reaction to what O'Hara himself calls "an awful lot of dicta [. . .] about what was good and what was bad," the literary value of O'Hara's naming is not found in this negative reaction alone (*Standing* 12). After all, almost every major poet over the past two hundred years has been leveled with the charge at one point or another of using unpoetic, even ugly language. As Kevin Stein has argued, the "anti-literary" in O'Hara's work has a clear literary basis. For Stein, O'Hara's view that "the individual self matters" and that experience "weaves the very fabric of self-hood" contributes both to the so-called "anti-literary" style and "literary appeal" of poems such as "A Step Away from Them" (1956) and "The Day Lady Died" (358-9).

In part following Stein's approach, I will argue that naming things in O'Hara's work is not a mere negative reaction. Rather, it is both a means of expressing his experience in as authentic a form as possible and an affirmation of the value of our experience of things and events in response to the seeming meaninglessness and boredom of life. To name things in a poem – and, in particular, in "The Day Lady Died" – is to give them a new momentary solidity. It is a means of restoring, as well as transforming, the initial but faded experience of the thing named, and a statement of the value of art in postponing the fear of death.

“The Day Lady Died” is a poem about the day in which O’Hara discovered that the jazz singer, Billie Holiday, had died. It is an elegy of the most sensitive kind in that O’Hara is neither presumptuous nor sentimental. He does not presume to either sum up her life or impart some ultimate meaning to her death. Such efforts would, in the end, only be reductive and, therefore, do injustice both to her life and to her death. Rather he eulogizes how she affected him and others. When she sang, she was like a great work of art: she took one’s breath away.

O’Hara avoids sentimentality in saying this, however, by making this statement indirectly. He does not mention Billie Holiday by name. Rather, he plays on her nickname, “Lady Day,” in the title, and refers to her for the first time in the poem itself by referring to “a NEW YORK POST with *her* face on it” (my emphasis).¹ In the final section of the poem, there is his most direct reference to her when he writes:

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
 leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
 while she whispered a song along the keyboard
 to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing

The last lines of the poem are truly mimetic, as Marjorie Perloff has pointed out, in that they imitate the feeling of shock and loss at discovering that someone you know has died (181). When this last line is read, we not only literally stop breathing, but in this moment before the poem ends, the previously oblique references to Billie Holiday are revealed, thus imitating the original moment of surprise, or shock.

The breathlessness in which we participate in this final line, furthermore, is a metaphor for the breathlessness we feel when we come in contact with great works of art. It is only after Billie Holiday has been identified that O’Hara’s references to “the poets of Ghana” and Jean Genet’s *Les Nègres* as works of art that represent Africans in a postcolonial world take on a second significance as metaphors for Holiday’s whispering. In short, by both avoiding direct references to Holiday and using works of art as metaphors to foreshadow the ultimate significance of Holiday’s music, which, in turn, only becomes clear at the end of the poem, O’Hara avoids the vulgarity of over extravagant expression of

¹ All references to “The Day Lady Died” are from Frank O’Hara. *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*. Second edition. Ed. Donald Allen. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, 325.

emotion that endangers all elegies and threatens to make them into insincere or sentimental pieces. Naming the things and events of his lunch hour allows O'Hara to use the small shift in tone and in language in these final lines to its fullest effect, and he develops his most striking metaphor of the poem in the penultimate line. This small shift expresses a feeling of loss and admiration in an authentic and, therefore, effective way.

Yet, "The Day Lady Died" is not only a poem about Billie Holiday: it is also a poem about things and about art. What makes it such an excellent poem is not so much its so-called "minus effect," but rather that in the process of naming things, O'Hara creates an excellent, authentic elegy and says something about our relationship to, and the value of, things and art. First, he affirms the value of the experience of all things – both the everyday and the extraordinary – in response to the seeming meaninglessness of life. To experience things is to affirm being, and to name things in a poem is to affirm things as entities and the self as an entity in the midst of them. Both the experience of everyday things and the experience of something out of the ordinary affirm that there is an "I" in the midst of such experiences, and are, therefore, valuable. In the poem, then, O'Hara contrasts and mixes the boredom and the excitement that the experience of everyday and extraordinary things produce in a way in which both are valued for their affirmation of being and shown, furthermore, to be interdependent.

While O'Hara's style in this poem creates a sense of excitement and exhilaration, there are sections that disclose an underlying fear of boredom that the "I" of the poem attempts to escape. On the one hand, the opening lines of the poem can be read with a certain amount of enthusiasm. There is a certain sense of excitement in going to eat with people whom you do not know in that you do not know what to expect. After all, it is three days after Bastille Day and anything might happen. However, on the other hand, there is a sense in which, in this first section of the poem, we observe an "I" that is surrounded by experience that is repetitive and predetermined. His evening is as predetermined as a train schedule. He will "get off the 4:19 in Easthampton / at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner." His experience seems to be controlled by the external and impersonal will of others, which he passively accomplishes. He does not eat; rather, people whom he does not know feed him. The feeling of *ennui* with his current experience is so acute that he finds himself entertaining what he knows to be false, romantic notions of things

such as revolutions: it is, he remarks, "three days after Bastille day." In the end, this only accentuates his feeling of boredom, which, in turn, can be seen in the simple rhyming of "1959" and "shoeshine."

In the following three sections of the poem, O'Hara maintains this tension. He shows how ordinary things can, at the same time, produce feelings of excitement and of boredom and repetitiveness. He discloses, however, that art is able to renew and transform our experience of the everyday. Art removes the dullness that comes from the repetition of experience. It makes our experience of common objects seem new again. It reorganizes our experience in a form that gives pleasure and that is more suitable to our consciousness than our experience of things and events without art.

In the next three sections of the poem, a feeling of freshness in his experience of things is combined with a feeling of repetitiveness. His experience of things seems to be new and different. He buys *New World Writing*, for example, to see what the poets in Ghana, as opposed to the poets in New York, Paris or London, "are doing these days." Rather than buy gifts for his hosts that evening, he buys gifts for his friends: a Verlaine for Patsy and a bottle of Strega for Mike. And when he goes to the bank, "Miss Stillwagon" does not even look up his balance "for once in her life." His use of the word "even" in this line not only draws attention to the fact that this is, indeed, out of the ordinary, but also to the fact that the experiences preceding it are perceived as equally new.

Yet, these acts are also suspiciously repetitive. He buys a bottle of Strega for Mike without thinking, as he probably has done a number of times before. While he is unsure of what to buy Patsy at first, in the end, the choice is between different works of "high art" and, therefore, is revealed as being as equally predetermined as the bottle of Strega for Mike. While the choice between a Verlaine and something else *is* a veritable quandary, in this case, it only leads to sleepiness because, it seems, it is a quandary he has experienced all too often. Finally, while the fact that Miss Stillwagon does not look up his balance at the bank is indeed new, the trivial nature of this new event underlines the ultimate normalcy of his day.

The mixing of the everyday and the more out of the ordinary events in the first four sections of the poem is a microcosm for the contrast O'Hara makes between his day as a whole and his learning of Lady Day's death in the final section. At the end of the fourth section, the poem has come full circle. The poet has returned to where he came

from, “to 6th Avenue / and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre.” The first four sections, therefore, constitute a whole, which O’Hara separates from the final section. The dramatic moment in the final section is contrasted with the relative normalcy of the rest of his day. The intensity of this final moment, however, is not a way of annulling the value of his previous experiences, but an affirmation of them. The news of Holiday’s death recalls memories of hearing her sing in the penultimate line. Before O’Hara recounts these memories, however, he reminds us that he is “sweating a lot by now” because he has just finished his shopping on a hot day in New York. By doing so, he mixes the present and the past into one present moment, which, in turn, allows the final phrase “and I stopped breathing” to be read as an expression of his present and past state. He also reveals that the context or ground of everything extraordinary, in this case, the memory of Holiday’s singing, is the ordinary. Without the everyday the extraordinary would have no meaning. In this sense, what makes O’Hara interesting is that he reveals that the “breathlessness” of learning that someone has died, for example, or of some existential shock, is as much an affirmation of existence as shopping or smoking as long as one’s experience of these things feels fresh and new.

“The Day Lady Died” is not only a poem in which O’Hara affirms the value of the experience of things, but also one in which he underlines the value of art in restoring – though only momentarily – the initial but faded experience of the things named. The problem with things and our experience of them is that they are only momentary. O’Hara himself noted this fact in his journal at Harvard in 1949:

The fragility of things terrifies me! However belligerent the cactus, ash from casual cigarette withers its bloom; the blackest puddle greys at the first drop of rain; everything fades fades changes dies [sic.] when it’s meddled with; if only things weren’t so vulnerable! We’re all children playing naked in the sun! (*Early Writing* 109)

Both things and our experience of them fade, which, in turn, is a reminder of our own inevitable vulnerability to death. As Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky argues, art provides us with a new “unfamiliar” experience of things (18). In his “Statement for *The New American Poetry*,” O’Hara makes this same point when he writes:

It may be that poetry makes life's nebulous events tangible to me and restores their detail; or conversely, that poetry brings forth the tangible quality of incidents which are all too concrete and circumstantial. Or each on specific occasions, or both all the time. (*CP* 500)

Furthermore, art also reorganizes our experience of things in more "sensible" terms. "Against death," O'Hara writes in his journal in 1948, "art is the only barrier, in that it is a recreation in sensible tempo of the components of life's fugue" (*Early Writing* 106). It both organizes that which has no organization and, as an external organization of unorganized qualia, provides a certain context for both present and future experience.

"The Day Lady Died" is a statement of this value of art to both renew our experience of things and reorganize them. O'Hara does not contrast the everyday events of the first four sections with the extraordinary event of listening to Billie Holiday sing, but with the memory of listening to her sing. While the "NEW YORK POST with her face on it" informs him of Holiday's death, it also evokes the memory of listening to her sing (*CP* 325). It is, in many ways, a metaphor for art. The *New York Post* evokes a past experience, an experience that O'Hara will never feel again directly because Holiday is now dead. As the *New York Post* allows him to relive a past, and, perhaps, unrepeatable, experience, so art stirs our memory and allows us to experience things again in a new way. In this sense, the *New York Post* does for O'Hara what "The Day Lady Died" does for us. As we read the poem, we experience again in a new way what it feels like to learn that someone we admired had died. And, in this sense, "The Day Lady Died" is a statement of the reality of shared experience, the feeling of loss, love or injustice, for example, upon which all art depends. Art makes our experience of the world feel new again, while, at the same time, affirming the reality of human experience – both the everyday and the extraordinary – as the ground of its existence. This is what O'Hara is getting at when he writes in 1959, referring to the work of Pasternak, that "art and life walk hand in hand" (*Standing* 45).

Art not only renews our experience of past things, but also presents our experience in more "sensible" terms. As Frost writes in "A Boundless Moment" (1923), when confronted with phenomena we do not understand (which, in Frost's poem, is a tree that appears to be blossoming in winter), we may choose the terms in which we wish to experience, or not experience that phenomenon. Frost writes, for example, that we

need to merely “assume in March / Such white luxuriance of May for ours” (233). The act of writing, therefore, as well as of naming, is the act of choosing (or, in Frost’s terms, “assuming”) how to see and deal with that which we experience but do not understand.

Confronted with death in “The Day Lady Died,” which is, in many ways, the ultimate conundrum, O’Hara chooses to write of the day in which he learned of Holiday’s death as a means of eulogizing her life and her voice. In this process, he affirms his own present existence rather than his own inevitable future death by writing of his present day and the objects of his day, which are, in turn, a testimony of his being. “We must have the courage,” O’Hara writes in 1949, “to choose and to choose the nebulous possible positive rather than the definitive negative,” which, of course, is death (*EW* 109). That O’Hara calls life “the nebulous possible positive” shows that the decision to affirm being in writing is never definitive, but conditional and temporal. It must, therefore, be repeated – one reason, perhaps, that O’Hara was such a prolific writer.

Another reason for writing poetry, O’Hara claims, is that the experiences that other artists have named in their work are not the ones that are important to him. In “Memorial Day 1950,” for example, he writes that he “named several last things / Gertrude Stein hadn’t had time for” (*CP* 17). The things named by other artists, O’Hara claims here, have not been entirely covered by previous artists. Or, as he implies in “To the Poem” (1952), they are not the experiences that he wants to remember or explore, or they are not presented in the work of art in a way that suits his experience of them. He writes, therefore, in the same poem:

Let us do something grand
just this once Something

small and important and
unAmerican Some fine thing (*CP* 175)

O’Hara is interested in these “unAmerican” things in his work: both things that are foreign (such as “a little Verlaine,” “Brendan Behan’s new play,” or “Les Nègres / of Genet”) and things that have been forgotten by the nation, such as “the bland and amused / stare of garages and banks, the hysterical bark of a dying dog” (*CP* 325, 93).

This act of naming things that are important to him is not only an individual act, but a communal one as well. The experiences that are important to the poet may also be important to others, and, in naming them, the poet affirms a relationship with others, even if this relationship only exists through a poem. Naming things, therefore, far from a purely aesthetic endeavor, is a communal act, where the poet names “the nebulous possible” positives that are important to him and others.

This communal aspect of naming things can be seen, for example, in “Personal Poem” (1959), where O’Hara writes of lunch with LeRoi Jones (Imamu Amiri Baraka):

we go eat some fish and some ale it’s
cool but crowded we don’t like Lionel Trilling
we decide, we like Don Allen we don’t like
Henry James so much as we like Herman Melville
we don’t want to be in the poets’ walk in
San Francisco even we just want to be rich
and walk on girders in our silver hats (CP 336)

It is in naming the things that are important to them (here, the work of Donald Allen and Herman Melville instead of that of Lionel Trilling and Henry James) that O’Hara and Amiri Baraka define their friendship. This is one of the great values of naming things, for O’Hara, in his work. In “Poem (Khrushchev is coming on the right day!)” (1959), he writes, for example, “Tonesco is greater / than Beckett, Vincent said, that’s what I think,” and in “Mary Destil’s Ass” (1961), he writes,

I was walking along the street
of Cincinnati
and I met Kenneth Koch’s mother
fresh from the Istanbul Hilton
she liked me and I liked her
we both liked Istanbul (CP 340, 401)

Poetry, for O’Hara, should be an act of communication. This is what he seems to be saying in “Personism: A Manifesto,” which he wrote shortly after “lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959”:

Personism has nothing to do with philosophy, it’s all art. It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it! But to give you a vague idea, one of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love’s life-

giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet's feeling towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person. (*CP* 499)

While much of "Personism" is written in a tone that is tongue in cheek, as can be seen in the above quote, O'Hara often did address his poems to another person. His claim, here, therefore, that poetry should be an act of communication is part of what underlies the importance and value of naming things in his work.

The artist, O'Hara claims in 1949, attempts "to give his time what it needs":

caught in the flood of destruction which is our historical milieu, he wonders where to place his sandbag most efficaciously; if his judgment is wrong, at least he stood on the levee, at least he used his judgment, at least he had a sandbag. (*Early Writing* 97)

Naming things, far from a purely negative endeavor, is a communal act where the poet names the "the nebulous possible" positives that are important to him and make up his experience, and that are also important to others. It is one of O'Hara's most valuable sandbags, and to understand its literary value in terms of a reaction against what was defined as poetic language is to miss the larger significance of O'Hara's poem.

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