Frank O'Hara's Open Closet

TERRELL SCOTT HERRING

Once we agreed to be seen, we also agreed to being policed.
—Leo Bersani, *Homos*

[H]ow to be open *but not violated, how* not to panic.
—Grace Hartigan

IN 1962 FRANK O'HARA POSED FOR HIS GOOD FRIEND ELAINE de Kooning. Like most abstract expressionist works, her painting of him contains thick drips and exaggerated brush strokes that cannot help calling attention to themselves. Nevertheless, O'Hara's slender physique takes center stage. Crisply dressed in a button-down blue shirt and starchy white slacks, left hand on hip and right hand hanging at his side, the poet stares at his audience with blithe indifference. Or so we must imagine, since de Kooning painted over the face at the last moment: "Frank was standing there. First I painted the whole structure of his face; then I wiped out the face, and when the face was gone, it was more Frank than when the face was there" (qtd. in Lehman 166). While O'Hara may be conspicuously displayed for our viewing pleasure, de Kooning suggests, he is also nowhere to be found. The more visible the poet becomes, the greater his invisibility; the greater this invisibility, the closer we get to the essential O'Hara. While critics such as James E. B. Breslin have noted O'Hara's capacity to be "at once transparent *and* opaque" (224), I want to read such a strategy as a riposte to the pre-Stonewall silencing of homosexuals, as an attempt to rethink the value of becoming incognito. Showing all but disclosing nothing, de Kooning's painting encapsulates

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Frank O'Hara's poems "Poem" ("Lana Turner has collapsed!") and "Personal Poem," on pages 419–20 and 423, are copyright © 1964 by Frank O'Hara and renewed. They are reprinted by permission of City Lights Books.

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the closeted openness integral to O'Hara's personal poetics.[1]

Visibly invisible, O'Hara's poetic project begins to make more sense when we return to the social and literary fields of the late 1950s and early 1960s, a field marked by the not-entirely-coincidental ascendancy of New Criticism, confessional poetry, and the closet. On a macro level, throughout the mass media homosexuals were frequently cast as supreme threats to national security. Vilified as un-American, thousands of gays and lesbians were purged from culture industries and government agencies following World War II. Likewise, on a micro level, "gays suffered from unpredictable, brutal crackdowns. Men faced arrest primarily in bars and cruising areas such as parks, public restrooms, beaches, and transportation depots, while women generally encountered the police in and around lesbian bars" (D'Emilio 49). Given the ubiquity of this surveillance, there is little wonder that, according to Robert J. Corber, "the fifties have come to embody the disciplinary regime of the closet" (191).[2]

Inadvertently or no, literary movements such as New Criticism and confessional poetry also contributed to sharper distinctions between public and private (sexual) life. There is now a general consensus that New Criticism involved almost scientific literary analysis, fervent devotion to Arnoldian culture, and commitment to the transhistorical nature of a work forever detached from the author's intent. By the late 1950s, these imperatives grounded a supposedly national curriculum. What was initially a conservative response by the southern Fugitives to the pressures of modernization became, after the passage of the 1944 GI Bill of Rights prompted an influx into American universities of students not educated in classics, the dominant mode of critical inquiry in United States English departments.[3] A uniform literary public, however fictive, fast crystallized.

This democratic program, we might recall, was also based on a distinction between public and private. Through the New Critics' emphasis on an objective truth that any reader could uncover with the proper analytic tools, the ideal poem essentially became public property. In the influential piece "The Intentional Fallacy," for instance, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley repeatedly acknowledge the public nature of the organic poem: "The poem belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public" (1016). While the poet's biography would appear to affect the poem's dynamics, one should not confuse "personal and poetic studies," because "the paradox is only verbal and superficial that what is internal is also public." Since the influence of the poet's interior self is discarded, "what is external is private or idiosyncratic; not a part of the work as a linguistic fact" (1018). In this revision of the impersonal aesthetic articulated by T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (itself a reaction against Romanticist conceptions of the poem), the depersonalized poem becomes a thing, a linguistic commodity that no one—and everyone—owns.

Such a poetics explicitly insists that the private, intimate moments of poets' lives must be forgotten once poets publish their work in the literary public sphere. Thus, the searing, painfully honest autobiographical pieces that poets like W. D. Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath, and Robert Lowell wrote throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, while apparently discrediting the New Critical ethos, instead functioned as prototypical texts for interpretation. Whatever truth value confessional poems had, they were read as meticulously crafted artifacts that exemplified the irony and paradox structuring the ideal New Critical poem. A literary lion by 1958, Lowell could brazenly claim, "I myself am hell," an affirmation of his status not only as a confessional poet but also as a prime example of the transhistorical nature of language open to the public (90). Crossing temporal, spatial, and even geographic boundaries, the poet's Blue Hill and hell conflate; Lowell and Milton's Satan share the same textual plane. And as seventeenth-century England and cold war America conjoin in one skunk hour, the poem, in turn, becomes the intellectual property of the reader. According to this logic, a

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community of scholars free from the particular constraints of race, gender, and class now forms: the poem develops into a meeting place in which private selves transfigure into public property.

The "pain" that confessional poetry affirms "always produces logic, which is very bad for you," wrote O'Hara in his 1959 "Personism: A Manifesto" (498–99). Marjorie Perloff notes that, at a moment in United States literary history when "Eliot thus reigned supreme, and the prevailing mode was that of neo-Symbolism," O'Hara often maintained that the New Critics' darlings had "a deadening and obscuring and precious effect" on American poetry (10, 9). Committed to an avant-garde aesthetic that goes as far back at least as Whitman and Baudelaire, O'Hara would spend a literary career attempting to debunk this critical hegemony that the confessional poets and the New Critics had achieved.[4] When asked about his impression of Lowell, for example, O'Hara brazenly replied, "I don't think that anyone has to get themselves to go watch lovers in a parking lot necking in order to write a poem. [. . .] They should feel guilty. Why are they snooping? [. . .] And then if you liken them to skunks putting their noses into garbage pails, you've just done something perfectly revolting" (qtd. in Lehman 347).

This dismissive remark tells much about the bellicose literary scene he and Lowell helped mold; but I am more interested in why O'Hara insists that a snooping and spying Lowell simply reveals too much. Dismayed by the "emotional spilling over" that characterized many confessional poems and unimpressed by the "persona of New Criticism" (Breslin 231), O'Hara views such self-revealing public poetry as a loss of the poet's and the subject's privacy.[5] In O'Hara's humble opinion, the preeminent confessional poet flouts New Critical tenets for all the wrong reasons. Intruding on his subject's right to be let alone, Lowell engages in a "revolting" practice and should be censured for lack of propriety.

O'Hara's disdain for such personal exposure seems surprising coming from someone who, throughout his literary career, was quintessentially open—immediate, chatty, visible, and candid about his sexual preferences. To address this paradox, my argument evolves in five stages. Focusing on the logic of personism, I first explore O'Hara's ambivalent relation to a calcified poetics of impersonality. Concentrating on the rise of the mass public sphere, I argue that O'Hara does not simply discard the New Critical creed of public poetry; instead, he completely revises it in a cultural milieu that was intent on identifying—to regulate—the homosexual body. Through personism, that is, O'Hara strategically manufactures an alternative public sphere in which public individuals paradoxically meet as private persons. Second, I turn to a reading of "Poem" ("Lana Turner has collapsed!") to substantiate this claim, focusing on how personism creates an intimate artistic space through which impersonal identifications can occur. Third, I show that these identifications may not be entirely successful and that O'Hara was well aware of this. Personism's apparent impossibility, however, allows us to imagine the personal poem as a fantasmatic object. Here I suggest that O'Hara's program can best be seen as a utopian fantasy, one that strives to connect private citizens through the medium of public print. Fourth, by analyzing O'Hara's "Personal Poem," written to his lover Vincent Warren, I contend that personism has significant consequences for the function of supposedly private fantasies in artistic practice, as well as for the often obscure link between intimate sex acts and public discourse. And, finally, I conclude by returning to O'Hara's reinterpretation of the New Critical ethos to show that his poetics presented a unique mode of addressing shifts in privacy and sexual identity that were fast taking place in postwar America's (literary) public spheres. Overall, this discussion reveals how one unconventional poet personally resisted unpredictable, brutal crackdowns while carving out anticonfessional literary arenas. To put the matter another way, O'Hara's imper-

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sonal personism teaches us, according to his friend Grace Hartigan, "how to be *open* but not violated, how *not to panic*" (qtd. in Perloff 141).

[I]

Several of my claims are broached in O'Hara's tongue-in-cheek "Personism: A Manifesto." Parodying the earnest polemics of writers such as Charles Olson and Robert Bly, the manifesto buoyantly advances a novel form of public self-abstraction. Acutely aware of the value of the impersonal aesthetic in American and European letters, O'Hara states, "Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody knows about, interests me a great deal, being so totally opposed to this kind of abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry." According to O'Hara, impersonality traditionally implies the erasure of the poet's self through the adoption of an alternative voice that masks the poet's identity, "a personal removal by the poet." Joyce's artist-priest paring his fingernails, Eliot's analogy of the shred of platinum, and Flaubert's amoral writings are prime examples of this technique. O'Hara partly affirms this Flaubertian creed: "But how can you really care if anybody gets it; or gets what it means, or if it improves them. Improves them for what? For death? Why hurry them along?" In accordance with these modernist giants, he then states that personism "has nothing to do with philosophy, it's all art. It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it!"

This self-abstraction, however, differs from that of other "impersonal" writers not in degree but in kind. Like the New Critics, Eliot and Joyce were dedicated to an autonomous artistic medium that spoke an alternative language to the masses. *The Waste Land* and Joyce's Homeric Dublin attempted to connect an arcadian past with a debased, morally bankrupt present by stretching the limitations of inherited artistic forms. But for O'Hara there is no distinction between the language found in the poem and the language of everyday life. In fact, modern technology, urbanization, and an ever-evolving vernacular are developments that should be celebrated and incorporated into the poetic tradition: "While I was writing [a personal poem to Vincent Warren] I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born." Similar to a telephone conversation, which permits the absent person one is talking with to appear as a presence, personism "puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages."

For O'Hara, personism is a Whitmanesque record of a day in a life, a record that connects individuals through print. Like Whitman, whom the New Critics abhorred, O'Hara strives to fashion an alternative poetics by "project[ing] actual physical presence in a literary text" (Moon 5). Whether one's hours are filled with gossip, a walk to the movies, or a lunch date with LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), the poem attempts to relay to the reader the poet's public and private lives. But unlike Whitman's deeply intimate connections to a community of anonymous readers, O'Hara's personism is personal in form but impersonal in content. Since "one of [personism's] 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 feelings towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person," a depersonalization that intrinsically disavows any connotations of intimacy is achieved.

Although situated as an object between two interconnected individuals, the poem simultaneously operates as a medium of communication. And since it uses the language of everyday public interaction, the poem becomes a self-contained literary public sphere that connects the poet to at least one reader through a poetics that may seem intimate but is far from it. What appears as a private conversation between two people (who may or may not be lovers) is

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transformed through the public dynamics of the poetic medium. An intimate tête-à-tête transfigures into a public discourse that appropriates the language of mass communication—a process, I will show, exemplified in works such as "Poem" ("Lana Turner has collapsed!") and "Personal Poem." For this reason, O'Hara wryly stresses, personism "may be the death of literature as we know it. While I have certain regrets, I am still glad I got there before Alain Robbe-Grillet did."

And just as a public sphere traditionally links two or more people through an impersonal language—the communal we that structures public discourse—the personal I of O'Hara's poetry inevitably becomes abstract as well. Thus, personism "does not have to do with intimacy or personality, far from it!" As O'Hara says of his poems, "They're just ideas. The only good thing about it is that when I get lofty enough I've stopped thinking, and that's when refreshment arrives." In the manifesto's focus on public self-abstraction, then, a depersonalization can be obtained only when one inserts the personal self into the public sphere (which is also the personal poem). The end product, to build on the philosopher Candace Vogler's terminology, is an impersonal intimacy, an intimacy that dissolves the self while allowing love to flourish (329).[6] One stops thinking, and the poet and the poem are gratified.

Furthermore, while erasing boundaries of the self, personism also effaces boundaries that separate art from reality: "Poetry being quicker and surer than prose," O'Hara confidently states, "it is only just that poetry finish literature off." In spite of his immodest claim, this dissolution of the traditional literary public sphere is not entirely O'Hara's doing. In fact, it might be more productive to see "Personism: A Manifesto" and O'Hara's adjacent writings as symptomatic of a crisis in literary production rather than as the origin of it. As Jürgen Habermas suggests in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*:

> The bourgeois ideal type assumed that out of the audience-oriented subjectivity's well-founded interior domain a public sphere would evolve in the world of letters. Today, instead of this, the latter had turned into a conduit for social forces channeled into the conjugal family's inner space by way of a public sphere that the mass media has transmogrified into a sphere of cultural consumption. The deprivatized province of interiority was hollowed out by the mass media: a pseudo-public sphere of a no longer literary public was patched together to create a sort of superfamilial zone of familiarity. (162)

In Habermas's metanarrative, a culture-debating public insidiously became a culture-consuming public. Individuals no longer met to discuss hot topics such as Chartist reform but instead complacently enjoyed the "impersonal indulgence in stimulating relaxation" to be found in drive-ins, book-of-the-month clubs, and yellow journalism, or what we now call *USA Today* (170). And since citizens have lost interest in debating ideas ("I've stopped thinking, and that's when refreshment arrives"), "the culture of harmony infused into the masses per se invites its public to an exchange of opinion about articles of consumption and subjects it to the soft compulsion of constant consumption training" (Habermas 192).

While this schema has been justly criticized for idealizing rational discourse, for excluding minority voices, and for neglecting to account for the multiple public spheres that emerged throughout the twentieth century, I find persuasive Habermas's basic claim that the classic public sphere now functions as a postliterary culture industry.[7] So would have O'Hara: "I like the movies too. And after all, only Whitman and Crane and Williams, of the American poets, are better than the movies." But unlike Habermas, O'Hara does not yearn for an idyllic age of reason. And unlike the New Critics, he celebrates poetic form's now inextricable connection to consumerism and to the society of spectacle. "As for measure and other technical apparatus, that's just common sense: if you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you." In effect, the personal poem is presented as a culture

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industry unto itself. In a hyperconsumer capitalist economy that supposedly privileges mind-numbing entertainment, the poem must compete with other forms of leisure to catch the reader's attention. Deriding the difficulty that Eliot and the New Critics advocated, O'Hara maintains that the poem must be an easily digestible—and popular—treat for its readership: "Forced feeding leads to excessive thinness (effete). Nobody should experience anything they don't need to." And since the literary public sphere has lost its cultural capital to the movies, pulp fiction, and brand-name labels, poets must advertise their work as if it, too, were a commodity: "What can we expect of Personism? (This is getting good isn't it?) Everything, but we won't get it."[8] Appropriating the strategies of the mass media, O'Hara thus invites his reader to experience the pleasures of a new and improved impersonal aesthetic that, like a trademark, will allow the reader to become part of a community without "distracting him into feeling about the person." One is invited to experience, in Michael Warner's terms, the joys of mass subjectivity.

Indeed, "Personism: A Manifesto" nicely accords with Warner's observations on the changes that have taken place in post–World War II United States public spheres following the rise of a media-saturated culture. In "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," Warner argues that "the appeal of mass subjectivity [. . .] arises largely from the contradiction in [the] dialectic of embodiment and negativity in the public sphere. Public discourse from the beginning offered a utopian self-abstraction, but in ways that left a residue of unrecuperated particularity" (384). Accordingly, the anxious disembodiment (or impersonality) that individuals experience once they enter any public sphere and become a we is tempered by a lingering desire to return to the forsaken body.[9] For their part, mass media attempt to alleviate this unease. As Warner puts it:

> The public sphere is still enough oriented to its liberal logic that its citizens long to abstract themselves into a privileged public disembodiment. And when that fails, they can turn to another kind of longing, which [. . .] is not so much to cancel out their bodies as to trade in for a better model. The mass public sphere tries to minimize the difference between the two, surrounding the citizen with trademarks through which she can trade marks, offering both positivity and self-abstraction. (391–92)

This complex movement between "positivity and self-abstraction," Warner suggests, is found primarily in the American public's infatuation with mass disasters that destroy bodies (plane crashes, train wrecks, school shootings) and with minor disasters of the celebrity body (movie stars' weight gains or drug arrests or, for O'Hara, Lana Turner's collapse). The endless curiosity these figures generate stems from the mass public's need to identify with a fractured body that somehow makes individuals find their own depersonalization less prominent (394–95). As conceived by O'Hara, the poem, a novel literary sphere, is a quasi-intimate object whose connecting of impersonal individuals parallels the operations of this mass public sphere. Individuals join through the object, or commodity, that is the personal poem; the poem, "Lucky Pierre style," obligingly provides a body for the disembodied poet and reader to identify with. This exchange is, in turn, a disaster, "the death of literature," which is also a cause for celebration. All parties involved are then left "gratified" by the positivity of the textual object and by the abstraction that experiencing it induces; one body, in short, is replaced by another.

[II]

POEM

Lana Turner has collapsed!
I was trotting along and suddenly
it started raining and snowing
and you said it was hailing
but hailing hits you on the head
hard so it was really snowing and
raining and I was in such a hurry
to meet you but the traffic

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was acting exactly like the sky
and suddenly I see a headline
LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!
there is no snow in Hollywood
there is no rain in California
I have been to lots of parties
and acted perfectly disgraceful
but I never actually collapsed
oh Lana Turner we love you get up
(O'Hara 449)

Warner's comments point to the ever-pervasive fetish of the celebrity body—its protean appearances, its desires, and, inevitably, its downfall—in the mass public sphere. Nowhere is this more apparent than in O'Hara's elegiac occasional poem to Lana Turner. In a letter written to Donald Allen, Bill Berkson notes that O'Hara wrote "Poem" in 1962, "on the Staten Island Ferry en route to Wagner College, where he read mano / mano with Robert Lowell." Commemorating the embarrassing fall that Turner experienced after a night of one too many drinks, O'Hara's poem was well received by Wagner College and prompted Lowell to state before his reading that he hoped the audience would not be displeased with some poems that were not written in haste (Lehman 349–50). Though Lowell disparages O'Hara's instantaneous writing, this immediacy—a characteristic of not only the work's conception but also its overall tone—is integral to O'Hara's transformation of the literary public sphere. In "Poem" O'Hara deploys tabloid techniques to create a community of impersonal observers who gather over a fallen star.

Frequently featured on the covers of gossip magazines and newspapers throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, Lana Turner's public and private lives were ample fodder for tabloid readers. Thanks to films such as *The Bad and the Beautiful* (1952), *Peyton Place* (1957), and *Imitation of Life* (1959), Turner had become one of Hollywood's hottest commodities, her sultry image one of the most-requested pinup posters for heterosexual men and her steely attitude a constant source of gossip in gay male subcultures.[10] Platinum blond, discovered in a soda shop, and adept at playing femmes fatales, Turner was notorious for not only her stunning beauty but also her slew of failed marriages and her bad-seed persona. In 1958, for example, she infamously gave a riveting performance at the murder trial of her fourteen-year-old daughter, Cheryl. Cheryl's stabbing of Turner's gangster husband, Johnny Stompanato, made headlines for months during and after the trial. Largely because of her mother's tearful monologue at the trial's conclusion, Cheryl was acquitted of manslaughter; but Turner's status as a bankable bombshell quickly fell after the sordid sexual details of her marriage to Stompanato were revealed during the proceedings. Relegated to schlock B movies and bit parts on soap operas such as *Falcon Crest*, Turner went into a slow downward spiral that was meticulously recorded in the mass media, her drunken antics no exception. Subsequent headlines such as "LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!" solidified this fall from cinematic grace. She became a body with which the impersonal mass public could personally connect.

Like O'Hara's elegies for James Dean and for Billie Holiday, "Poem" operates through various levels of mass subjectivity and presents the reader with a disgraced body to mourn. Though Lowell scoffed at O'Hara's technique, the movement of "Poem" is intricately structured through the frame of chiasmus, a trope by which the order of the terms in the first of two parallel clauses is reversed in the second. In his attempt to repair the ruins of this destroyed star, O'Hara commences "Poem" by implicitly connecting himself to the star's body in the opening lines. Lana Turner has collapsed, but O'Hara is upright, blithely "trotting along." Likewise, his intimate association with her fall parallels another descent that the poet experiences, that of the rain and snow. Just as the realization that "Lana Turner has collapsed!" incites disbelief and shock in the poet, so too does the confusing mixture of hail, rain, and snow; the surprise that the poet receives from reading the headline mirrors the sudden downpour of bad weather. And, like Turner, the poet has lost his bearings as well:

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and suddenly
it started raining and snowing
and you said it was hailing
but hailing hits you on the head
hard so it was really snowing [. . .]

The discomfiting effects of the traffic, which "was acting exactly like the sky," reinforce this confusion. In a perverse twist on John Ruskin's pathetic fallacy, the streets and the sky mimic Turner's fall; it is as if her disastrous slip were a harbinger of another calamity. Moreover, this disconcerting mixture of traffic, snow, rain, and celebrity also taints the poet's address to the "you." The speaker is going to "meet you," yet the "you" says it is hailing. These references are logical only if "you" mentioned hailing before or after the journey or if they designate two persons.

Once the speaker encounters the headline, this aporia is displaced. Turner's collapse prompts a passing thought about the West Coast climate. Unlike in New York, with its dismal weather, "there is no snow in Hollywood / there is no rain in California." But the sunny paradise that is the land of a thousand stars is marred by Turner's fall. Her faux pas then enables the speaker to regain his composure. Though both may act "perfectly disgraceful" at parties, the speaker's antics cannot compare with Turner's publicized inebriation. The narrator maintains stability; Turner topples over. But these distinctions between the star and the poet are finally sutured in the poem's apostrophic last line: "oh Lana Turner we love you get up." The I-you binarism that has governed the poem up to this point changes into a collective "we" that mourns the star's dissolution and yearns for her to rise, phoenixlike. Thus, in an intensely personal poem, the speaker renounces "I" for a more communal "we" by the poem's conclusion. And the anxiety that this impersonality might produce is assuaged, in an imitation of Christ's life, through the body of Turner risen again.

The poem as a whole strives to achieve a unity that will salvage the disaster of her collapse. Through chiasmus, the flux that governs the poem's narrative is stabilized by the repetition (and reversal) of key phrases such as "suddenly," "snow and rain," and "collapsed." Following the climactic encounter with the newspaper, the poem inverts the action that came before:

Turner's fall
Speaker's walk
Snow
Rain
New York
LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!
California
No snow
No rain
Speaker's composure
Turner's rise

This chiastic structure suggests that New York and California can be united through a newspaper headline. While Turner's disgraced body succeeds in connecting a disembodied mass public through print, O'Hara's "Poem" does likewise by coopting the conventions of gossip magazines. Turner's and O'Hara's intimate moments are made public through media and art, and while O'Hara tries to salvage Turner's fading glory in his last line, this personal resurrection dissolves into an impersonal "we." The public persona once again becomes private, and, with luck, Turner, O'Hara, and the poem are correspondingly gratified.

But recalling O'Hara's insistence in his manifesto that his poems operate as alternative public spheres, "too new, too vital a movement to promise anything," we can take the dynamics of "Poem" one step further and posit that O'Hara's poem becomes a site of mass subjectivity unto itself. Though he chances on the headline only midway through "Poem," the poet initially adopts this impersonal voice in his statement that "Lana Turner has collapsed!" The poem then becomes a piece of news that he is relaying to the mass public; like a newspaper, "Poem" ("Lana Turner has collapsed!") is an object that the reader can take anywhere, since it is

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composed in transit. We must ask, however, what type of reader would choose to buy this poem. According to Warner, since public discourse inevitably leaves "a residue of unrecuperated particularity, both for its privileged subjects and for those it minoritized" (384), "Poem" may be in search of a localized public though it uses the techniques of mass subjectivity. While personism enables the poet to connect impersonally with individuals, O'Hara's "universal" works often were written for particular men: personism "was founded" on "August 27, 1959, a day in which I was in love with someone (not Roi, by the way, a blond). I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person." Given O'Hara's admiration for William Carlos Williams and for Williams's belief that the poem should function as a material "thing" in the social realm, it follows that individual men (or, potentially, knowledgeable women) meet and attract each other through the circulation of the personal poem, a stimulant to desire akin to a tight pair of pants. What may appear as a monogamous relationship between two persons is now made promiscuous through the mass subjectivity that the poet advances.[11]

Consequently, the personal poem is nothing less than a node in the homoerotic bonds that structure the writing and reception of the work; it is a cruising ground on which gay men come together through impersonal intimacy. And since "Poem" ("Lana Turner has collapsed!") fetishizes a gay icon, its content works to attract a readership familiar with homosexual semiotic codes. What was once the property of a mass public is now reclaimed for a particularized, more restricted audience. And just as the mass public sphere functions on the level of disembodiment—a locale in which the individual subject is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere—O'Hara's particularized literary public sphere allows the poet and his queer readership to be collective and individual, abstract and particular, private and public, in New York and in California, all at the same time. In this poetically open closet, gay presence is simultaneously gay absence.

[III]

Yet while "Poem" ("Lana Turner has collapsed!") is but one example among the many poems that make up personism, O'Hara freely claims that the program is still inchoate: "What can we expect of Personism? (This is getting good, isn't it?) Everything, but we won't get it. It is too new, too vital a movement to promise anything." This undelivered promise, however, is not to be mourned. With its circuitous relays between abstraction and particularity, visibility and invisibility, the local and the national, the incipient movement ideally outlines an original mode of connection that enables poet and reader to be overt while escaping surveillance. These interactions, I suggest, could also be construed as fantastic forms. In their classic essay "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," the psychoanalysts Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis argue:

> Fantasy, however, is not the object of desire, but its setting. In fantasy the subject does not pursue the object or its sign: he appears caught up himself in the sequence of images. He forms no representation of the desired object, but is himself represented as participating in the scene although, in the earliest forms of fantasy, he cannot be assigned any fixed place in it. [. . .] As a result, the subject, although always present in fantasy, may be so in a desubjectivized form, that is to say, in the very syntax of the sequence in question. (26)

Similar to the depersonalization that takes place once an individual enters any particularized public sphere, fantasy enables the subject to occupy multiple positions in its framework; the I is effectively made impersonal through the "desubjectivized form" that the individual assumes in the fantasy's scenario. And while this process appears to happen in the individual realm of psychic reality, critics such as Tim Dean have suggested that fantasy is inextricably entwined with the social: "Fantasy offers itself as an indispensable concept for discussing subjectivity and sociality together, without reducing one to

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the other" (*Beyond Sexuality* 260). Though it may seem as if the individual's fantasies are intimate, private moments, the particular desires that structure any fantasy's scene are fundamentally public. As Warner claims:

> Even the most refined or the most perverse among us could point to his or her desires or identifications and see that in most cases they were public desires, even mass-public desires, from the moments that they were that person's desires. This is true not only in the case of salable commodities [. . .] but also in other areas where we make symbolic identifications in a field of choice [. . .]. (386)

Private acts of identification or desire, such as writing a personal poem to the beloved, are then inevitably braided within the social fabric; what appears an intimate discourse is always already made public through the discursive conventions of language. And since words are now "libidinally invested" (Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* 256), speaking becomes an erotic gesture that links people through vocalized desire. Through personism's evasive frankness, that is, bodies no longer matter so much. In O'Hara's literary public sphere, the reader gets off on another kind of thing—the personal poem, the impersonal voice.

[IV]

PERSONAL POEM

Now when I walk around at lunchtime
I have only two charms in my pocket
an old Roman coin Mike Kanemitsu gave me
and a bolt-head that broke off a packing case
when I was in Madrid the others never
brought me too much luck though they did
help keep me in New York against coercion
but now I'm happy for a time and interested

I walk through the luminous humidity
passing the House of Seagram with its wet
and its loungers and the construction to
the left that closed the sidewalk if
I ever get to be a construction worker
I'd like to have a silver hat please
and get to Moriarty's where I wait for
LeRoi and hear who wants to be a mover and
shaker the last five years my batting average
is .016 that's that, and LeRoi comes in
and tells me Miles Davis was clubbed 12
times last night outside BIRDLAND by a cop
a lady asks us for a nickel for a terrible
disease but we don't give her one we
don't like terrible diseases, then
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 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
I wonder if one person out of the 8,000,000 is
thinking of me as I shake hands with LeRoi
and buy a strap for my wristwatch and go
back to work happy at the thought possibly so
(O'Hara 335–36)

Though "Personal Poem" was written for O'Hara's on-again, off-again lover Vincent Warren, it was soon published in the poetry magazine *Yugen* and subsequently reprinted in *Lunch Poems* (1964). Like any published poem, "Personal Poem" became public property that any reader could possess. And like "Poem" ("Lana Turner has collapsed!"), "Personal Poem" presents the reader with a journey that connects the speaker to other individuals—LeRoi Jones and Warren—through a communal "we," albeit "Personal Poem" terminates in a private, though publicized, "I." "Personal Poem" also strives to achieve impersonal intimacy by using the language of the mass public sphere. Recounting the minute details of a lunch hour spent meeting a friend and gossiping, "Personal Poem," too, adopts the immediacy of a newspaper or tabloid. This impersonal language of the public sphere is, as I have argued, also the language of fantasy.

Various critics have suggested that fantasy was always central to O'Hara's personal poetics. John Ashbery writes in his introduction to O'Hara's *Collected Poems*, "Once when a publisher asked him for a manuscript O'Hara spent

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weeks and months combing the apartment, enthusiastic and bored at the same time. [. . .] Finally he let the project drop, not because he didn't wish his work to appear, but because his thoughts were elsewhere, in the urban world of fantasy where the poems came from" (vii). Likewise, in an insightful essay that examines the public and private dimensions of O'Hara's work, Charles Altieri suggests that "O'Hara's characteristic strategies [are to] escape into fantasy and a possible future, but the escape does not work" (198). And in a discussion of O'Hara's transparent self, Breslin posits that "instead of intricate form or subtle argument, 'Personal Poem' gives us a rapid catalog of reflection, observation, conversation, fantasy" (221).

I want to question this seemingly straightforward distinction between conversation and fantasy in "Personal Poem." Contrary to Laplanche and Pontalis's contention that fantasy "is not the object of desire, but its setting," the personal poem serves fundamentally as a setting that depersonalizes the subject and as an object of desire that entices the reader. And since the poem is analogous to a telephone conversation, the fantasmatic mise-en-scène of the personal poem is intrinsically structured through the everyday language of the public sphere, of live talk. The poem is, in effect, a social fantasy that enables O'Hara to connect with individuals who may be thousands of miles away, such as Lana Turner or, in "Personal Poem," Vincent Warren. And because this imagined communication occurs through the public discourse of the poetic medium, the poet is simultaneously intimate and depersonalized. As Charles Molesworth writes, O'Hara's "self might be, almost always was, the *occasion* of the individual poems, but the poems' focus is rarely on that self as subject matter. [. . .] Unlike Whitman, O'Hara never sings *of* his self; rather, his self is the instrument *on* which the poet sings" (210). Consequently, just as "Poem" ("Lana Turner has collapsed!") permits readers in New York and readers in California to come together through the spectacular body of the star, "Personal Poem" allows individuals to connect through O'Hara's depersonalized voice, to come out without being seen.

But before I pursue further the depersonalizing intimacy that takes place between the reader and the poet, I want to consider the various fantasies that structure the dynamics of "Personal Poem." If the poem is a fantasmatic object—a textual reminder of the poet that the reader can carry anywhere—then O'Hara draws an implicit parallel between personism and "the two charms in my pocket." While the personal poem links two people across the estranging sea of the metropolis, the charm not only connects the poet to his friend Mike Kanemitsu but also conjoins New York City with Madrid. The "bolt-head that broke off a packing case" recalls the speaker's time in Europe, making him "happy for a time and interested." And since the speaker is gratified to possess intimate objects that can ward off "coercion," the charms, like the personal poem, are fantasmatic things that allow him to feel secure. Their magical powers will appease the anxiety that occurs once he enters the public sphere of Moriarty's, a latter-day version of the eighteenth-century salon, where individuals come together as a we to discuss politics or, here, Lionel Trilling.

Before the speaker's entry into this public sphere, another fantasy emerges: "if / I ever get to be a construction worker / I'd like to have a silver hat please." Tired of being a "mover and / shaker" since his "batting average / is .016," the speaker longs to be someone other than a lover with a losing streak, specifically a glamorous construction worker with a silver hat. This fantasy is punctured once "LeRoi comes in / and tells me Miles Davis was clubbed 12 / times last night outside BIRDLAND by a cop." The shock of this violent clubbing is soon mitigated by the presence of a lady who "asks us for a nickel for a terrible / disease but we don't give her one." The two poets immediately decide to forget the lady because "we don't like terrible diseases." LeRoi and the speaker then enter into the fantasy that is the mass public sphere: "we go eat

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some fish and some ale it's / cool but crowded we don't like Lionel Trilling / we decide, we like Don Allen and we don't like / Henry James so much we like Herman Melville." Becoming a we in this disembodying world of letters allows them to displace the reality of urban disasters such as terrible diseases. And by entering the "crowded" mass public sphere, the two poets can even forget their selves: "we don't want to be in the poets' walk in / San Francisco." Instead they long to be somewhere else: "we just want to be rich / and walk on girders in our silver hats." Through this communal fantasy (which is voiced through the language of the public sphere), O'Hara and Jones reveal their desire to become fabulous spectacles. And because spectacle, as Warner argues, is the defining trope of mass subjectivity, in the fantasmatic public sphere everyday reality is seemingly erased. O'Hara and Jones long to trade one body in for another so that they can fantasmatically identify with wealthy aristocrats or construction workers with silver hats. In so doing, the poet embraces a variety of queer subject positions rather than a stable identity—the defining structure of Laplanche and Pontalis's fantasy.[12]

Since the poet can adopt virtually any subject position in "Personal Poem," this structural instability also forces us to reconsider personism as a recollection of lived experience.[13] Like "Poem" ("Lana Turner has collapsed!"), "Personal Poem" presents us with a chipper O'Hara recording a slice of his urban life. He does this; he does that. The present tense and quick shifts in action reinforce this sense of immediacy: "I walk," "I wait," "LeRoi comes," "we go eat," "I shake hands." In addition, the names of O'Hara's friends, such as Mike Kanemitsu, LeRoi, and Don Allen, are mentioned to produce a sense of familiarity; and the names of locales, given without explanation, provide the reader with a feeling of being there: the House of Seagram, Birdland, and the poets' walk in San Francisco. But that which seems to be singular, to be O'Hara's particular experience, is anything but. Because the poem's voice is that of impersonal public self-abstraction, discourse that may appear frank or even confessional—the hallmark of sexual identity, according to Michel Foucault—depersonalizes the poet.[14] Mimicking the mass public sphere, his experience is everyone's and no one's; he becomes an anonymous "one person out of the 8,000,000." Though O'Hara's manifesto states that "[e]verything is in the poems," such closeted openness renders the poet fantastically and fantasmatically incognito. Meticulously recording a deeply impersonal life narrative, O'Hara's loquacious "Personal Poem" produces a strategic silence.

[V]

At a time when the public sphere was becoming increasingly postliterary and gay men and women were increasingly becoming invisible in it, O'Hara's personal poetry points to a critical moment in the transformation of public and private (sexual) identities. In his attempt to renegotiate what could and could not be said in this literary public sphere, O'Hara reinterpreted the dominant literary codes of his day, effectively appropriating the mechanisms of mass media intent on silencing queer voices. Revising the doctrines of New Criticism, O'Hara made his most intimate activities available to the public by recording in the personal poem the minute details of everyday life. To recast Wimsatt and Beardsley, what was external became embedded in his works as a linguistic fact.

But the irony of this personism is that the moment O'Hara speaks himself through the discourse of the (alternative) public sphere, he immediately loses his face—his identity—through the impersonal poetic medium. To return to de Kooning, "[W]hen the face was gone, it was more Frank than when the face was there." Achieving depersonalization through the language of the public sphere, the anticonfessional poet reveals all, only to reveal nothing about himself. The end result is a closeted openness that enables him to fashion a novel community of impersonal individuals who may never meet.

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They instead gather over the object that is the personal poem. And when we recall that O'Hara wrote primarily to and for gay men—friends and lovers—and that the late 1950s and early 1960s witnessed an almost exponential increase in the surveillance of the homosexual body, such a project takes on important political implications.

Through personism, that is, the poet's privacy is assured in the act of coming together through the alternative literary public sphere. And since this defiant, deeply un-American vision is simultaneously a fantasy, entering the personal poem also depersonalizes the reader: individuals connect through the impersonal voice rather than through the personal body. Though the reader finds everything in the poems, this depersonalization structuring public self-abstraction enables the poet and his audience to become a we while maintaining their private selves. If agreeing to be seen, as Leo Bersani has noted, necessitates agreeing to be policed (12), then O'Hara's hide-and-seek, show-and-tell-nothing poetics solves this conundrum, since personism generates nothing less than a lovingly imagined community (a coterie, if you like) of visibly invisible queers. To put this dynamic in New Critical terms, the paradox is not simply "verbal and superficial that what is internal is also public." Far from it: what is superficially public is also private. Personism confirms that individuals may be open, but they are certainly not violated; and O'Hara's ability to walk this linguistic tightrope illuminates his continuing importance as a member of the once marginalized New York school and as a trailblazing gay poet who significantly retailored, rather than rejected, a postwar poetics of impersonality.

Notes

My thanks go to Eleanor Feinberg, Melissa Girard, Jake Bishop, and, especially, Tim Dean for their resolute support.

[1] I base the concept of closeted openness on Valente's exploration of James Joyce's "open closet" (187). For another elaboration on closet logic, see Casarino.

[2] Here I also follow the historian George Chauncey, who contends that the metaphor of the closet was not in circulation until the 1960s (6).

[3] For accounts of the New Critics' institutional hegemony, see Graff; Jancovich.

[4] Perloff cites Baudelaire as one of the poet's primary influences (33). I add that, like the incognito painter of nineteenth-century urban life, O'Hara manages to "be away from home and yet to feel [himself] everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the center of the world, and yet remain hidden from the world" (Baudelaire 140).

[5] While O'Hara's poetry is correctly understood as postmodern, several essays on modernist poetry, community, and privacy inform my thinking about the poet's disdain for confessional poetry. See Grossman; Dean ("Hart Crane's Poetics"); and Cole.

[6] Discussing "depersonalizing intimacies" in her study of Kant, Leo Bersani, Adrienne Rich, and pop psychology books, Vogler argues that, "first, not all intimacies are affairs of the self and that, second, the fact that some intimacies are *not* affairs of the self is what makes people want them" (329). Writing with and against Bersani's call in his *Homos* for ego-shattering *jouissance*, Vogler goes one step further to suggest that talk, as well as sex acts, can lead to self-dissolution, a thesis that influences my ideas on social fantasy and personism.

[7] Habermas's distinction between the public sphere and the mass public relies heavily on the citizen's contributions (or lack thereof) to public debate. In a mass, he argues, citizens are no longer active. Their voices lost, they instead passively accept ready-made opinion (249). For critical revisions of this narrative, see Berlant; Fraser; Ryan; and Clarke. The Black Public Sphere Collective also provides a much-needed critique of Habermas's rather utopian examination of publicness.

[8] In his focus on the personal poem as a digestible commodity, O'Hara foreshadows one of pop art's central tenets. He was unimpressed by Warhol's reproductions, however, and he continued to cultivate relationships with prominent abstract expressionists such as Jasper Johns.

[9] Unlike Warner, who advocates "getting personal" (400), O'Hara does not demand an abrupt paradigm shift in how we think about American public spheres. Rather, he tweaks an abstract model for his impersonal ends. As a poet and as a citizen, he is unavoidably a particularized subject of mass publicity. But through personism, he transfigures himself into a generic site of mass publicity that short-circuits the normative demand for a discernable identity in the first place.

[10] For an overview of Turner's importance to gay male subcultures, see Dyer's discussion of Turner and Judy Garland.

[11] This built-in promiscuity impedes any attempt to make O'Hara's audience legible. While he wrote personal poems to gay and straight men and women throughout his life, we should remember that personism makes the poem—not the person—the primary love object.

[12] In a similar vein, Ferguson gives an instructive reading of O'Hara's multiple identifications by analyzing tropes of the mask in many of the poet's most sexually explicit poems.

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[13] For more on the ways in which seemingly personal poetry can sidestep individual expression of any kind, see Lacoue-Labarthe.

[14] In a well-known formula from *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, Foucault claims that Western civilization's fascination with sexual identity—its obsession with sexual secrets and lies—is based largely on the procedures of the Catholic confessional (58–61).

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