UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

Citation for the published paper:

Joel Duncan
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Arizona Quarterly
Volume 72, Number 4, Winter 2016, pp. 77-103
http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/arq.2016.0021

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Frank O'Hara Drives Charles Olson's Car

> The substantive element of artistic modernism draws its power from the fact that the most advanced procedures of material production and organization are not limited to the sphere in which they originate. In a manner scarcely analyzed yet by sociology, they radiate out into areas of life far removed from them, deep into the zones of subjective experience, which does not notice this and guards the sanctity of its reserves.
>
> Theodor W. Adorno

> Sat in the Ford World Headquarters lobby, reading Olson.
>
> Ron Silliman

The Ford Motor Company started production of its Model T in 1908, well before the Great War. Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas drove one through France as volunteers, moving supplies and soldiers. William Carlos Williams drove a Ford around Rutherford, New Jersey, writing poems and delivering babies, while Ezra Pound imagined orchestrating the noises of factory production as music. But it wasn't until after World War II, with the generalization of the Fordist social compact, that the automobile came to define American literature and culture. At the height of the postwar boom, many poets projected themselves into a fantastic future that was nevertheless coupled with death, not least by automobile. For them the car symbolized personal freedom yet also the monotony of production and the social conformity it entailed. From Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and Robert Creeley's "I Know a Man," to Andy Warhol's car crashes in his *Death and Disaster* series, to Gregory Corso's *Gasoline* (1958), and not least the driver in the ditch in George Oppen's *Of Being Numerous* (1968), the automobile serves in this era as the vehicle par excellence of male pathos, carrying the burdens of both personal immediacy and individual finitude.

Arizona Quarterly Volume 72, Number 4, Winter 2016 • ISSN 0004-1610

The regime of postwar capital accumulation that has been termed Fordism did indeed provide for a novel kind of immediacy and freedom—often symbolized by the car—for certain sectors of the labor force.[1] Yet the production of (and for factory workers, the ability to purchase) automobiles required repetitive labor, strictly regulated by minutes and seconds. The conflicted status of the automobile as a bearer of both freedom and alienation emerges in Charles Olson's dreamscape poem "As the Dead Prey Upon Us," anthologized in Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry 1945–1960* (1960). The poet's depiction of his car here melds a preoccupation with masculine authority and autonomy with anxieties about the racial hegemony of Fordism as well as the degradations of commercial culture.

Olson's markings of precise clock time in this and other poems had a palpable influence on Frank O'Hara's "I do this I do that" style, especially in his most anthologized poem, "The Day Lady Died." O'Hara inherited both a poetics of breath and his signature style in part from Olson, but developed his style in ways that interrogated Olson's claims for poetic authenticity. More specifically, when O'Hara marks time in his poems ("It is 12:20 in New York") he is in the shadow of Olson; rather than striving for immediacy by such timekeeping, O'Hara foregrounds how "authenticity" and "immediacy" are always-already mediated by their opposite: in this case, postwar consumer culture and productive relations. In retrospect, it is as though O'Hara's attachment to fated celebrities serves as a metaphor for the inflated prospects of Fordism. Both O'Hara and Olson knew that the fortunes of postwar America were built on the mass destruction of World War II. In view of this, O'Hara writes, "I historically belong to the enormous bliss of American death" (*CP* 326). Of course, death haunts every future. O'Hara's poetry is known for its fascination with celebrity, personality, and the proliferation of cars as well as smaller commodities in postwar New York. But rather than simply affirming the spuriousness of such objects, his attachment to them is full of pathos, dramatizing the insubstantial, and even deathly, quality of individual existence within capitalism.

"PROJECTIVE VERSE"

Olson's "Projective Verse," first published in the relatively staid *Poetry New York*, reprinted as a pamphlet by LeRoi Jones's avant-garde Totem Press, and then canonized in the *New American Poetry*, is by

many accounts the most influential North American poetics manifesto since World War II. Olson declares that his aim is to "get us, inside the machinery, now, 1950, of how projective verse is made" (*Prose* 241). The typewriter, according to Olson, allows for men to take direct control over their means of poetic production:

> It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space pretensions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the convention of rhyme and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work. (245)

With the typewriter, the poet is no longer alienated from his means of production; for the first time he can have an exchange with his reader unmediated by obfuscating materials inherited from undemocratic traditions. A few pages earlier Olson implores his readers:

> I think it [the *process* of the thing] can be boiled down to one statement (first pounded into my head by Edward Dahlberg): ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. It means exactly what it says, is a matter of, at *all* points (even, I should say, of our management of daily reality as of the daily work) get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen. And if you also set up as a poet, USE USE USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER! (240)

As Libbie Rifkin has noted, "There's a certain Fordism in these injunctions, compromised only by their desperate tone" (52). Here Olson becomes the boss of his own assembly line, where the kinetic energy of his poetic construct must hold itself taut so as to ensure its immediacy. As he writes two pages later, "contemporary workers go lazy RIGHT

HERE WHERE THE LINE IS BORN" (242). Olson's poet finds himself *on the line*, then, in several respects. He is putting himself at stake, attesting to his authenticity. This posturing is inscribed in the poem's *line*ation, with the poet's breath as measure. Additionally, as a "contemporary worker" the poet compares his work to that of the *assembly line*, where his poetic utterances are produced by an organic measure rather than regulated time. This last part is crucial: in breaking from traditional meter, the projective poet is also breaking from measured time, but rather than becoming "lazy" this allows him to be all the more "taut."[2]

Olson's line management conceives the typewriter as providing for the writer's physical immediacy; he also lauds the poet's speedy writing as an antidote to conformity. This concept—individual freedom against the regulation of time by the demands of capital accumulation—inheres in the terms of Fordist production. Henry Ford implemented the five-dollar-a day wage in 1914 to stem the flood of automobile workers walking off the job in response to de-skilling, as well as to neutralize the appeal of the Industrial Workers of the World, who had started organizing in his plants (Braverman 103). As Harry Braverman comments, "Conceding higher relative wages for a shrinking proportion of workers in order to guarantee uninterrupted production was to become, particularly after the Second World War, a widespread feature of corporate labor policy, especially after it was adopted by union leadership" (103). Higher wages for relatively unskilled work for a privileged section of the labor force was a crucial aspect of the postwar social compact, during which "living standards rose, crisis tendencies were contained, mass democracy was preserved and the threat of inter-capitalist wars kept remote" (Harvey 129). As David Harvey puts it, Fordism was "a total way of life. Mass production meant standardization of product as well as mass consumption; and this meant a whole new aesthetic and commodification of culture" (135). While Fordism was constituted by "a division between a predominantly white, male, and highly unionized work force and 'the rest'" (Harvey 138), the privilege afforded white men as breadwinners in the postwar boom was inextricable from their reduction to mere moving parts on the assembly line.[3] The flip side of the social conformity demanded by both assembly-line production, and the reproduction of the Fordist social compact, is the driver spinning out of control and crashing. As with Olson's typewriter, the automobile

comes to be associated with existential freedom in the literature of this period; through figures such as James Dean and Jackson Pollock—who were particularly relevant for O'Hara—the automobile also becomes associated with the death and disaster of the very white men who were the icons of the boom.

"AS THE DEAD PREY UPON US"

Olson's complex mediation of Fordism in his poetics begins with his relationship with his father, whose failure to resist the Fordist modernization of the postal service spurs Olson's attempt to harness it in his poetry. Olson narrates the crisis of his youth in Worcester, Massachusetts during the interwar period in "The Post Office" (1948), which revolves around his father's resistance to, rather than embodiment of, speed. In 1920 the elder Olson took off work for a trip with his son to Plymouth to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the Pilgrim landing, using vacation time that his bosses had revoked at the last minute in retaliation for his organizing activities. His father's acts of defiance ensured a bitter and continuing workplace struggle until his death at the age of fifty-two. "What he was after, what all the legislation he pushed was directed against, was the speed-up" (*Prose* 45). "He was opposition. He was fighting for pride in work which is personality. It is that simple" (46). In a fascinating passage Olson outlines the forces responsible for his father's plight, and then descends into the dialect of minstrelsy:

> Behind his bosses were the postal inspectors. Behind them [Postmaster General] Burleson. Behind Burleson the huge forfeit of pro-duction. It is old George Harris' proposition: bishops eats elders, elders eats common peopil, they eats sich cattail as me, I eats possums, possums eats chickins, chickins swallers wums, an' wums is content to eat dus, an' dus is the aind uv hit all.
>
> Only hit ain't. The dus is the kulchur daid on the groun'. For example. My father was old fashion. He had notions having to do with courtesy, modesty, care, proportion, respect. He had them confused with his work. (230)

Through invoking the character George Harris—the inventive, righteous, and put-upon slave from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)—Olson compares his father's struggle against the Fordist

restructuring of the postal service to the condition of American slaves fighting for emancipation.[4]

Olson's identification of his father's condition with that of other minorities in America recurs in *The Maximus Poems*:

> my father a Swedish
> wave of
> migration after
> Irish? like Negroes
> now like Leroy and Malcolm
> X the final wave
> of wash upon this
> desperate
> ugly
> cruel
> Land this Nation
> which never
> lets anyone
> come to
> shore
> (496–97)

The tragedy of the inaccessible American shore is evident in the family tragedy he dates from his father's heroic determination to take him to Plymouth:

> my father
> And I
> on the same land like Pilgrims
> come to shore
> he paid
> with his life dear Love to take me
> to Plymouth
> for their
> tercentenary
> (496)

The blocked passage of this celebration of American founding, which only allows immigrants to come to shore if they pay for it with their life,

is reflected in the elder Olson's resistance to the post office's speed-up. This idea provides the opening identification of this section of *Maximus*: "I have been an ability—a machine—up to / now" (495). Olson's machine ability is like a lantern projecting "lantern-slides [. . .] and the lantern always getting too hot / and I burning my fingers—& burning my / nerves" (495). The machine that the elder Olson fought a losing battle not to become is here the poet's inherited vocation, the use of which repeats his father's trauma with a difference: the machine, in its danger, provides access to the "now" of expression. The machine becomes the poet's ability rather than the enforcement of an external constraint.

When Olson comes to have what he called in the first lines of "Letter 22" of *Maximus* "Trouble / with the car" he carries forward this motif of machinery as traumatic vocation (100). In "As the Dead Prey Upon Us" he offers a dreamscape in the land of the dead, where his deceased mother is the centerpiece. The second verse paragraph of the poem reads:

> I pushed my car, it had been sitting so long unused.
> I thought the tires looked as though they only needed air.
> But suddenly the huge underbody was above me,
> and the rear tires
> were masses of rubber and thread variously clinging together
> as were the dead souls in the living room
> (*NAP* 27–28)

In this passage Olson's car becomes a figure of poetic self-possession. He had thought his machine only needed air, not unlike his breath, which the typewriter is meant to animate on the page. His dreamscape becomes an allegory of the car's underbelly—which is as much the poet's unconscious—as workshop of the world.

"The dead" in "As the Dead Prey Upon Us" are themselves the proletarian underbelly of capital accumulation, whereas their "living labor," in being objectified in commodities, has become so much "dead labor" (to use Marx's phrase), now preying on the living.[5] These dead, gathered in the poem's opening stanzas around Olson's mother in the living room, "are desperate with the tawdriness of their life in hell."

> I turned to the young man on my right and asked, "How is it,
> there?" And he begged me protestingly don't ask, we are poor

poor. And the whole room was suddenly posters
and presentations
of brake linings and other automotive accessories, cardboard
displays, the dead roaming from one to another
as bored back in life as they are in hell, poor and doomed
to mere equipments.
(28)

Olson's dead are as much the cogs of production as soulless consumers. This whole scene takes place while a movie is being projected in the room, with "some record / playing on the victrola" (28), both of which are markers for Olson of a deadening commercial culture. Olson hated what in *Maximus* he refers to as "mu-sick," such as commercial jingles, and "the trick / of corporations, newspapers, slick magazines, movie houses" (14); he decried that "all had become billboards" and "even silence, is spray-gunned" (6). As Stephen Fredman has shown, Olson "links Pound's emphasis on the vernacular and on melopoeia to the disastrous ascendency of consumerism in contemporary America:

(o Statue,
o Republic, o
Tell-A-Vision, the best
is soap. The true troubadours
are CBS. Melopoeia

is for Cokes by Cokes out of
Pause
(*Maximus* 75 cited in Fredman 85)

Paradoxically, Olson seeks to win autonomy from commercial culture through the self-possession machinery can afford, whether that of the typewriter or the automobile. And as if to illustrate the contradiction of masculine self-possession through Fordism, Olson's car is falling apart.

The subtle sexual inversion in this poem, where Olson's masculine solidity seems to be unraveling until its embodiment—the car—is on top of him, echoes the preoccupations of Olson's preceding poem in Allen's anthology, "The Lordly and Isolate Satyrs." This poem vaunts

the masculine self-possession of a motorcycle gang, where the machine becomes a phallus, again coupled to breathing:

> Except for the stirring of their leader, they are still
> catching their breath. They are almost like scooters the way
> they sit there, up a little, on their thing. It is as though
> the extra effort of it tired them the most. Yet that just there
> was where their weight and separateness—their immensities–
> lay.
> (26)

This is a poem about "ambiguous Fathers," which Rachel Blau DuPlessis has convincingly read as consistent with Olson's gender politics, in terms that translate to "As the Dead Prey Upon Us": "So this motorcycle gang is an amalgam of hypermasculinity, homosociality, male display, and outright phallicism as knowledge" (112). In "The Lordly and Isolate Satyrs" the poet is in awe of the sexual prowess of the members of the motorcycle gang, substantiated in their straddling of their machines. While their breath may have gotten away from them for a moment, they are "catching" it. In "As the Dead Prey Upon Us" the poet is suddenly beneath his machine, which he can't get started—signaling an anxious recognition that his own "air" (or breath) isn't going to be enough to get the job done.

Olson's phallicism unravels in "As the Dead Prey Upon Us," leading him to bolster his materials by extraneous means. A primitive vehicle suddenly appears in the poem, with a striking racial identity:

> O the dead!
> And the Indian woman and I
> enabled the blue deer
> to walk
>
> and when it got to the kitchen,
> out of our sight,
> it talked
> Negro talk.
>
> It was like walking a jackass,
> and its talk

was the pressing gabber of gammers,
of old women

We helped it walk around the room
because it was seeking socks
or shoes for its hooves
now that it was acquiring

human possibilities
(28–29)

The poet, along with his Indian woman, is successful in this instance of getting this jackass of a deer moving, which, when it finds itself in the kitchen, begins talking "Negro talk." It is difficult to know how to parse the racial, and even animal, politics of these lines. Is "Negro talk" to be seen as an evolution of the deer's abilities, suggesting a hierarchy of being from animal, Negroes, to whites? And is the "blue deer" itself a marker of black culture, through jazz and the blues? The indentation of these lines toward the right-hand margin signals their connection with a third register running throughout this poem, which combines the narrative of his broken-down car and the dreamscape with his mother. It continues on the same page:

Walk the jackass
Hear the victrola
Let the automobile
be tucked into a corner of the white fence
when it is a white chair. Purity
is only an instant of being.
(29)

The poet's mother, who he has already told us he often finds asleep "in a rocker / under the lamp" becomes associated both with this white chair and the "old women" of the previous passage (28), whose speech is like that of the deer. In her fragile though stately repose in whiteness, the mother embodies the purity of a primary "instant of being," at once distinguished yet inseparable from the tawdry dream-reality surrounding her. The threadbare-ness of her purity demands, it would

seem, a racial qualification so as to distinguish her as much from the dead as from animals and from blacks performing menial labor such as kitchen work.

Olson's use of black dialect in "The Post Office" can now be more clearly appreciated as double-edged. He is not only providing an identification between George Harris and his father as exploited men, but is also performing an aural blackface that leaves little question over who has the authority to inhabit the voices of others. The anxiety undergirding Olson's negative identification with blacks and his family can be parsed through the difference between an animal that he helps enable to walk, which then starts talking, and his machine that breaks down on top of him. The blue deer, while clearly subordinate to the narrator and the Indian woman, is not only "uppity" in learning to speak and acquiring footwear but also has, it would appear, a more organic connection to "the kulchur daid on the groun'." This deer, in short, has not broken down as Olson's own means of transport has—a machine which needs more than air, and is revealed as artifice and threadbare, compared to the at once natural and grotesque deer.

The automobile for Olson is—as with the motorcycles of "The Lordly and Isolate Satyrs"—a vehicle for masculine self-possession. But if the poet's authority must be located in a machine it is always-already absent from him. His valorization of the typewriter is likewise a symptom of this loss of manly authority, which the machine is meant to reinstate. As Rifkin suggests, there is something "desperate" about this reliance on machinery, which demands continual authorial vigilance concerning its operation. Olson's reliance on whiteness as contrasted to animal blue and blackness in "As the Dead Prey Upon Us" has a similarly desperate quality, asserting the autonomy of his and his mother's repose from both mass culture (the victrola, the projector, car advertisements), exploitative production (the dead), and racial inferiors (the blue deer). That the latter might themselves have a claim to organic authenticity without reliance on machinery is a source of vexed attraction for Olson, who in this poem relegates them to the kitchen, while he and his automobile sit *in* (rather than conventionally *on*) the white fence, in a white chair.

The last line of *The Maximus Poems* registers another death, this time of his wife, in a car crash:

> my wife my car my color and myself (635)

Rifkin offers a magisterially tragic reading of this line:

> Read skeptically, this is a consumer's dirge, its emptiness the payback for a life lived on the right side of the gender, race, and class divide. A more generous reading lingers on the loneliness of this most public of poets' final stand. Culminating but not necessarily encompassing, "myself" is a term in a series whose unbroken commonality is loss. (66)

The authoritative—and in many respects proprietary—self-possession Olson sought to elaborate thus was premised on and contained its opposite: the absence of individuals' inherent worth in Fordism. That the self-possessed individual was conceived of as essentially white and male leaves little wonder that its others (women and blacks) could only provide versions of inherent authority threatening that of white men, who were already threatened with becoming mere moving parts. That Olson sought organic authority in machinery becomes, then, an attempt to translate the privileged position of white men as breadwinners in Fordism toward poetic ends. The phallic breath that only the typewriter can register is the particular property of men such as Olson, a property that is the vehicle of their self-declared organic poetic utterance, freed from the measures of "pro-duction."

"THE DAY LADY DIED"

There is a striking, and until now unrecognized, crossover between Olson's use of time signals in "As The Dead Prey Upon Us," and those for which O'Hara became famous. Olson's poem includes the lines:

> I shall get to the place
> 10 minutes late.
>
> It will be 20 minutes
> of 9. And I don't know,
>
> without the car,
>
> how I shall get there.
> (29)

This passage should spark recognition in the dedicated O'Hara reader. O'Hara's most anthologized poem, "The Day Lady Died," which also appeared in *The New American Poetry*, begins:

> It is 12:20 in New York a Friday
> three days after Bastille Day, yes
> it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine
> because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton
> at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner
> and I don't know the people who will feed me
> (264–265)

The similarities between these passages, in their reliance on time signals, trains or cars, and the pathos of an unknown outcome, are fairly self-evident. What is most interesting, though, is their difference: in O'Hara's poem his lack of knowledge about his hosts borders on the ridiculous. Are we really to believe that the author of *Lunch Poems* doesn't know who will feed him?[6] Perhaps O'Hara, in the opening stanza of his most famous poem, is aping Olson's inability to start his heroic car in "As the Dead Prey Upon Us," while all this poet of Manhattan has to do is take the train.

"As the Dead Prey Upon Us" was first published in 1957, so O'Hara could well have read it before composing "The Day Lady Died" in 1959. On April 12, 1956 O'Hara wrote to Kenneth Koch that he was reading Olson while in Cambridge for the Poets Theatre. O'Hara had befriended John Wieners there, whom he mentions in his letter immediately before parodying Olson:

> I've also been reading some of Charles Olson's
> things, which are more attractive than most, tho' ve / ry and
> quite sad making
>
> Ez.
>
> it seems to me.
> (Schneiderman 14)

In his biography of O'Hara, Brad Gooch shows that "following his exposure to Wieners' emulation of Olson, and his own mimicry of 'projective verse' in 'To a Young Poet,' O'Hara began to use an open field more consistently" (302). Directly after writing his poem "To John Wieners"

on May 12, 1956, O'Hara began spreading his lines across the page in an open field, rather than sticking to the left-hand margin (*CP* 247). Three poems later in the *Collected Poems* (1961), which is chronologically organized by date of composition, we have his seminal "In Memory of My Feelings" (252–257). O'Hara started marking precise time in his poems the same month he wrote to Koch about Wieners and Olson, which also happens to be when Olson was composing "As the Dead Prey Upon Us."

O'Hara could have read instances of Olson's time signals in earlier work, such as the *Maximus Poems 1–10*, published in October 1953:

> they whine to my people, these entertainers, sellers
>
> they play upon their bigotries (upon their fears
>
> these they have the nerve
> to speak of that lovely hour
> the Waiting Station, 5 o'clock, the Magnolia bus, Al Levy
> on duty (the difference
> from 1 o'clock, all the women getting off
> the Annisquam-Lanesville,
> and the letter carriers
>
> 5:40 and only the lollers
> in front of the shoe-shine parlor
> (14–15)

Olson here decries the despoliation of a moment in time by "these entertainers / sellers." His sentiments about popular culture are far from O'Hara's, but for both poets time signals become inseparable from the movements of buses, trains, cabs, and cars. It is as though O'Hara becomes, in "The Day Lady Died," one of Olson's "lollers / in front of the shoe-shine parlor."[7]

O'Hara's "I do this I do that" style emerges in August of 1956 with "A Step Away from Them," four months after he had written to Koch about Olson. The whole conceit of this poem is that it is written during O'Hara's lunch hour, in which cars reflect back to him the tawdriness of work: "It is my lunch hour, so I go / for a walk among the hum-colored cabs." This hum-drum imperative to enthusiasm is of a different

order than Olson's heroic struggle; this contrast is evident in the tone of O'Hara's invocation of the typewriter on the back cover of *Lunch Poems* (1964): "Often this poet, strolling through the noisy splintered glare of a Manhattan noon, has paused at a sample Olivetti to type up thirty or forty lines of ruminations." Rather than inscribing a vigilant autonomy from commercial culture, O'Hara's casual typewriter is itself for sale. While in "Projective Verse" Olson affirms his poetry as a site of traditional working class labor ("the ear is purchased at the highest—40 hours a day—price" [241–242]), O'Hara's harried poetry is by contrast produced during his leisure time, which is full of shopping. In his mock-manifesto "Personism" (1961), O'Hara is also irreverent about using the male body as prosodic measure as Olson does in his manifesto, where "*Any* slackness takes off attention, that crucial thing, from the job in hand" (243). O'Hara jokingly highlights the sexual posturing of Olson's admonishment not to be slack when he writes, "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" (emphasis added, *CP* 498).[8] For O'Hara the commonplace and the commercial are fantastic; rather than embrace an exclusionary tradition of masculine authority located paradoxically in exploited labor, he takes it all in (and is taken in by it all): cabs, workers, loafers, and billboards, leading to the poem's crescendo in "Everything / suddenly honks: it is 12:20 of / a Thursday" (*CP* 257–258).

This coupling of the automobile and precise time doesn't seem incidental. In terms of the assembly line, both the car and the minute measurement of time bespeak alienation as much as immediacy. Olson's car troubles are already couched in a litany of complaints about commercial encumbrances and the dead remains of exploited labor. His physical immediacy is won through his epic struggle with a commercial machine. O'Hara's reenactment of this process in his own register emphasizes the comedy of the modernist topos of man vs. machine, which for O'Hara has already become a mainstay—rather than a radical critique—of modernity. As Mutlu Konuk Blasing notes, "when the connection between the values of aesthetic novelty and technological progress becomes increasingly clear, achieving a critical distance from a technology-driven culture requires a critical distance from modernist aesthetic values as well" (12). Instead of being frivolous, O'Hara's

self-deflating enthusiasms suggest a serious criticism of Olson's contradictory bids for authenticity through machinery and personal autonomy from commercial culture.

Let us return to the rest of "The Day Lady Died":

> I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun
> and have a hamburger and a malted and buy
> an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets
> in Ghana are doing these days
> I go on to the bank
> and Miss Stillwagon (first name Linda I once heard)
> doesn't even look up my balance for once in her life
> and in the GOLDEN GRIFFIN I get a little Verlaine
> for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do
> think of Hesiod, trans. Richard Lattimore or
> Brendan Behan's new play or *Le Balcon* or *Les Nègres*
> of Genet, but I don't, I stick with Verlaine
> after practically going to sleep with quandariness
>
> and for Mike I just stroll into the PARK LANE
> Liquor Store and ask for a bottle of Strega and
> then I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue
> and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and
> casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
> of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it
>
> and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
> leaning on the john door in the FIVE SPOT
> while she whispered a song along the keyboard
> to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing
>
> 7/17/59
> (265)

The pathos of the personal experience enshrined in this poem is entwined with the fate of its accumulated commodities, whose fleetingness mirrors both Lady Day's life and the poet's walking through Manhattan on his lunch hour. O'Hara's curatorial work at the Museum of Modern Art was no assembly line, but his lunch hour was nevertheless

the privileged locale of many of his poems, which bear the markings of their production's finitude. As David Herd has observed in reference to "A Step Away from Them," "the whole poem is framed, from one point of view, by the constraints of the working day. It is the poet's lunch hour. He has to get back. The clock is ticking" (83–84). The end of lunch is a small death for this poet qua poet, which in "The Day Lady Died" is freighted with a more dramatic and literal death, that of Billie Holiday.

Following Geoff Ward, Herd asserts that O'Hara's walking makes him a flâneur (84). In a crucial sense, though, Walter Benjamin's description of the flâneur's stroll departs from O'Hara's practice in this poem:

> An intoxication comes over the man who walks long and aimlessly through the streets. With each step, the walk takes on greater momentum; ever weaker grow the temptations of shops, of bistros, of smiling women, ever more irresistible the magnetism of the next streetcorner, of a distant mass of foliage, of a street name. Then comes hunger. Our man wants nothing to do with the myriad possibilities offered to his appetite. (*Arcades* 417)

Benjamin's flâneur is attempting to commune with "vanished time," a collective rather than a private past (*Arcades* 416). O'Hara's leisure, by contrast, is not merely circumscribed, he also has a shopping list. Nevertheless, Michael C. Clune claims that "the apparently random, trivial choices of the speaker (buying a strap for his watch, picking out a charm [in "A Step Away from Them"]) conceal a powerful and utopian claim" (64). For Clune, O'Hara dramatizes how our spontaneous purchases create a "virtual collective," free from the ideology of the liberal individual motivated by interior reasoning (66). How the absence of interiority is utopian is unclear, as this virtual collective sounds much like the commodity fetishism described by Marx, where "it is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things" (165). Clune's model doesn't account for the preoccupation with death that pervades O'Hara's oeuvre. The poet's attachments are personal and essential but also wholly impersonal and contingent. It is this dialectic, where the life of commodities provides for personal experience—the

possibilities of which it continually forecloses—that O'Hara confronts with such deadly pathos.

O'Hara's consistent enjambment in "The Day Lady Died" sets up a relationship between the act of reading and the poet's reeling through Manhattan. Distinguished here by monetary transactions, especially shopping, it is as though each purchase on the poet's lunch hour is a little breath cast into the void, where each line falls away as soon as it arises; the poet's marking of personal time, which the poem's opening verse paragraph jokingly, hauntingly, clocks, does just the same. For O'Hara, the time of life is made both profound and inconsequential through its incommensurability with the void of death, which defines the individual as well as material objects as necessarily transient. But as with the poetic line, the unknown of the beyond is generic. Instead of taking a heroic posture, the poet remarks on the unknown of dinner instead: "and I don't know the people who will feed me."

Marjorie Perloff has written expansively on O'Hara's elegy for Lady Day, noting both its foregrounding of "the meaningless flux of time" and how O'Hara traces "a process so immediate, so authentic, that when we come to the last four lines, we participate in his poignant memory of Lady Day's performance" (181–182). But, as with other critics, she offers little insight into how contingency *and* immediacy are intertwined here. Making this connection requires foregrounding the status of commodities in the poem. These commodities, supposedly knowable entities that inform us "what the poets / in Ghana are doing these days," are inherently fleeting—in both their novelty and personal relevance. If O'Hara seems flippant it is because the objects he confronts are themselves frivolous. As Adorno puts it in *Aesthetic Theory*, "The abstractness of the new is bound up with the commodity character of art. This is why the modern when it was first theoretically articulated—in Baudelaire—bore an ominous aspect. The new is akin to death" (21). O'Hara both ironizes and embraces the perpetually new. His poems are a whirlwind of enthusiasms and exclamation marks, setting a tone that has become all but ubiquitous today. At the same time the perpetually new threatens to overwhelm the personality that could be so enthusiastic in the first place. O'Hara's enthusiasm, then, becomes a kind of death drive, revealing the tendency of a never-ending array of new styles to eviscerate themselves and the personalities of their enthusiasts.

As if in recognition of the fleetingness of life, commodities, and the poem, Miss Stillwagon "doesn't even look up my balance for once in her life." The poet doesn't have to stop for longer than a balanced line to check his credit, which he nevertheless balks at as an accurate measure of his life. O'Hara shows how individual existence *is* contingent in capitalist society, so that the bid for immediacy through the happenstance measure of time reveals a lack of inherent quality, rather than heroic self-revelation. Time might tell us what the isolated self is, O'Hara's sly joke on Olson seems to be saying, but that self exists only in its passing, as an ephemeral quantity in a sea of even more spurious objects and facts.

Mark Silverberg shows how "O'Hara and his colleagues position different types of neutral or ironic practices against various forms of 'authentic' speech (the projective) and naturalized sincerity (the confessional)" (47–48). This "neutrality" becomes its own justification for Silverberg, with its most salient content being queer identity: "It is now much easier to see O'Hara's commitments as a species of (what would become) a postmodern micropolitics of the local and particular. His commitments were to movie theaters, bars, and public washrooms" (50). But what was at stake in these commitments to provisional selfhood? Does O'Hara find a satisfying resting place in superficial play, and does he merely affirm provisional identity?

Contrary to such assessments of O'Hara, which in effect foreground his status as a minor poet of style and particularity, the life of commodities provides no ultimate comfort for the Prince of Camp. Rather, "The Day Lady Died" enacts, through the happenstance of its objects, a deep anxiety about the stability of selfhood.[9] While Olson is at pains to delineate an authentic experience outside the reproduction of capital, to be affirmed in such places as the human body and the extension of breath in an open field poetics, O'Hara's enthusiasm for the objects and lives he accumulates in his poems is subtly, but crucially, circumscribed. O'Hara may well be searching for thrills, but as with Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series, these thrills are inextricable from crashing and death. He writes in "Art Chronicle": "In a capitalist society fun is everything. Fun is the only justification for the acquisitive impulse, if one is to be honest" (5). O'Hara also told Edward Lucie-Smith in October of 1965, "Enthusiasm for art, after all, is always involved with any number of interesting attitudes. Everybody wants to have a jewel. . . . The basic

human motive is acquisitive" (15). The objects and names O'Hara acquires in his poems *are* genuine loves, yet he is flippant about their often idiosyncratic significance. It is precisely his desire for the objects and people surrounding him that makes their contingency so haunting.

The nature of this contingency must be fully comprehended through an appreciation of the expanded role that commodities have in the rhythms of consumption, production, and the representation of personal experience in postwar America. Such an appreciation wouldn't end with O'Hara's domesticity, and would instead recognize how his "affirmative skepticism" (Altieri 98) is at once a deep skepticism about the affirmation of personal experience in a world where joy is inseparable from "the acquisitive impulse." We would then be able to hear the depth of O'Hara's sardonic refrain in "Ode to Joy": "We shall have everything we want and there'll be no more dying" (*CP* 281). While reaching for "a space free of the scarcity and sacrifice that have always constituted the tragic dimension of the economic" (Clune 65), O'Hara recognizes this horizon as itself being constituted by capital. In taking the promise of self-fulfillment through acquisition to its logical end, his poems accumulate dead selves. Such death is of course racialized for O'Hara as well. "Rhapsody," written two weeks after "The Day Lady Died," is a poem "linking 53rd with 54th / the east-bound with the west-bound traffic by 8,000,000s," and has the poet "declining the challenge of racial attractions / they zing on (into the lynch, dear friends)" (*CP* 326). Holiday's tragedy is inseparable from the tragedy of American white supremacy, which O'Hara skirts by providing a pastiche of patriarchal modernism.

What O'Hara did with the time signal in his poems became, despite him, the marker of a new kind of immediacy when Ted Berrigan wrote *Sonnets*, published in 1964, the same year as O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*. Berrigan muses on his relation to O'Hara:

> It turns out that when Frank was writing his poem and saying it is 4:16 a.m. in New York City, he meant that it wasn't 4:16 a.m. at all. It was a flashback. Whereas when I wrote my poems, whatever time I said it was, that's what time it was. So, I wrote an entirely different kind of poem than he did, and not

> only that, but in the language of the critical periodicals, I actually extended a formal idea of his into another area, actually extended his formal idea into another place. (43)

In writing pastiches of O'Hara's style the same year that *Lunch Poems* was published, Berrigan emphasizes the mediation and conventionality of the time signal, while paradoxically claiming that his own pastiche is more immediate than the original. For Berrigan, O'Hara, and perhaps Olson as well, the time signal was a marker, at least in part, of alienation. Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire is instructive here:

> The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less do these impressions enter experience (*Erfahrung*), tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour of one's life (*Erlebnis*). Perhaps the special achievement of shock defense may be seen in its function of assigning to an incident a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its contents. (*Illuminations* 163)

O'Hara, through his marking of time, might well be warding it off, rather than attempting—as Berrigan presumes—to inscribe its supposed immediacy. As O'Hara muses in "My Heart," "I'd have the immediacy of a bad movie, / not just a sleeper, but also the big, / overproduced first-run kind" (*CP* 231). Filtering life through commercial cinema—likewise time—paradoxically protects experience from over-exposure. Authenticity for O'Hara, rather than residing in the poem, lives decidedly beyond it. In the case of "The Day Lady Died" breathing—in a figuration that is of course Olson's—provides for its continuance with its readers. The lines stop when everyone is out of breath, we take a new one at its end; life is not in the poem, but in our carrying it on.

Unlike all the objects and times accumulated in O'Hara's frenzied stroll through Manhattan, Holiday—in accordance with elegiac convention—is nowhere named in the body of the poem. Instead, we are left with O'Hara's representation of an image from a newspaper—"a NEW YORK POST with her face on it"—which raises the question of the nature of the life behind its telling. The absence of Holiday's name suggests that her life was not appropriable in the way a bottle of Strega

is. The space O'Hara provides Holiday—a black woman plagued by her country's racism, and performing illegally (LeSueur 194) when O'Hara heard her "whisper a song"—stands in strange contrast to Olson's deer speaking in Negro dialect. The latter must be packed away as one of a number of spurious commodities, in part to disarm its claim to authenticity. While we might wonder at the authenticity Holiday's tragedy instantiates for O'Hara, she is nevertheless the acknowledged catalyst for the poet's own sense of presence here, defined by absence and loss.[10]

O'Hara was explicit about his debt to Olson in conversation with Lucie-Smith:

> It seemed to me that the metrical, that the measure let us say, if you want to talk about it in Olson's poems or Ezra Pound's, comes from the breath of the person just as a stroke of paint comes from the wrist and hand and arm and shoulder and all that of a painter. So therefore the point is really to establish one's own measure and breath in poetry, I think, than—this sounds wildly ambitious since I don't think I've done it but I think that great poets do it—rather than fitting your ideas into an established order, syllabically and phonetically and so on. (17)

Such a conception of non-metrical measure, which was central to the New American Poetry, provided O'Hara with the means of substantiating his flux in experience through a syntax reeling beyond stable resting places. This mutable frisson, borne by the rush of postwar commodities, affirms not the "established order" but its happenstance. The poet's investment—with or without money in the bank—in the spurious life of commodities produced for profit, calls forth the ultimate cessation of breath, life, and the poem. For both Olson and O'Hara the poem was a go-for-broke event: the ground for projective experience.

While contrasting O'Hara's poetics of camp with Olson's projective authority has become all but *de rigueur* in readings of O'Hara, no one has suggested before that O'Hara may well have inherited his time signals from Olson.[11] Such an inheritance is striking in its own right, especially as it opens up questions of the relationship between assembly-line production and the so-called "everyday" in Fordism. Moreover, recognizing O'Hara's critique of Olson saves us from reading his poetry as simply committed to the immediacy of the quotidian, as so many of his critics

do. By drawing out O'Hara's fascination with and pastiche of Olson's jargon of authenticity, as well as O'Hara's preoccupation with death, we find a poet investigating the grounds of his art, rather than evincing what Robert von Hallberg derisively called a professionalized "range of style," which "had nothing to say about the relationship between art and society" (105). Perhaps critics have been right, then, to view O'Hara as a flâneur—the figure (for Benjamin) seeking a collective inheritance beyond the displays in shop windows. As O'Hara's contemporary, Susan Sontag, put it: "Camp is the answer to the problem: how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture" (288). But for O'Hara, in contrast to Olson, there is no return to authentic experience removed from commerce. In his own way Olson recognizes this, as physical immediacy is always to be won through a machine, such as the typewriter. When that machine breaks down, as the automobile in "As the Dead Prey Upon Us" does, the poet's psychological composure unravels as well. O'Hara is instead, like the proliferation of commodities in postwar New York City, always reeling. His own originality is imbricated with that of his loved objects, which are precarious, fleeting and which, as in "The Day Lady Died," portend death.

In 1961 O'Hara's "Song" appeared in *Floating Bear*, the small magazine edited by Diane DiPrima and Leroi Jones:

> Did you see me walking by the Buick Repairs?
> I was thinking of you
> having a Coke in the heat it was your face
> I saw on the movie magazine, no it was Fabian's
> I was thinking of you
> and down at the railroad tracks where the station
> has mysteriously disappeared
> I was thinking of you
> as the bus pulled away in the twilight
> I was thinking of you
> and right now
> (*CP* 367)

This Whitmanesque personal address is at once wholly impersonal: the poem's "you" is whomever O'Hara is thinking of and writing to—a face on a movie magazine, or Fabian. Indeed, as Donald Allen's note to

the poem informs us, Fabian was only added to the poem after O'Hara crossed out "Eddie Fisher," the most successful pop singles artist of the first half of the 1950s, who also has his own TV show (548). That the railroad station has "mysteriously disappeared" only to be supplanted in the poem by the bus pulling away evokes the preponderance of motor vehicles in postwar America. The poet nonchalantly passes by the Buick repair shop, and the first line break leaves it ambiguous whether it is him or his addressee that is "having a Coke in the heat." Do we see him? Another breathless finality closes "Song": "I am thinking of you / and right now." We pause, we inhale: now is no longer what it was, reminding us in Olsonesque fashion that the end of the poem is at once the end of a present context or "energy-discharge" (*Prose* 240). The bus disappears, but now Frank is still thinking of you, for as long as you are carrying his present on. This present is—rather than being timed like an assembly line—an undying gift. As Olson has it in the final line of "As the Dead Prey Upon Us": "The automobile / has been hauled away."

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NOTES

1. The term "Fordism" is used here as it was developed in the 1960s "by a number of Italian Marxists (R. Panzieri, M. Tronti, A. Negri) and then by the French regulation school (M. Aglietta, R. Boyer, B. Coriat, A. Lipietz) as a name for the model of economic development *actually* established in advanced capitalist countries after World War II" (Lipietz 230).

2. The use of gendered pronouns here and elsewhere in this essay is not simply generic; Olson's poet is figured as peculiarly masculine. Importantly, this didn't prevent female poets such as Joanne Kyger, Anne Waldman, Susan Howe, and Kathleen Fraser from putting "Projective Verse" to their own uses, not least through the typographical experimentation enabled by the typewriter. (I am indebted to my anonymous reader for pointing this out, and to Stephen Fredman for identifying the above poets.)

3. While black workers entered northern factories in unprecedented numbers during and after World War II, few achieved the purchasing power of white workers; the latter also benefited from discriminatory federal housing policy. As Thomas Sugrue writes in his study of Detroit, "Black workers were disproportionately concentrated in poor-paying secondary sector jobs (in service work, for example) or in the worst 'subordinate jobs' in the primary sector (unskilled, janitorial, and assembly work)" (92).

4. For another fascinating moment of Olson identifying with the history of slavery, in his poem "Glyph" (1951), see Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (1998), 87–94.

5. "Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks" (Marx 342).

6. For more confusion on this point see Joseph LeSueur's recollection of the day in question, 192–193.

7. Paul Blackburn carries on this imaginary lineage in "Shoeshine Boy" (1963), which links the time signal to the subway, Wall Street, and pretty girls. See Edith Jarolim (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Paul Blackburn* (New York, Persea Books, 1985), 289. This poem was brought to my attention by Tobias Hunter in his paper "'The Possibility of Song': Paul Blackburn's Longue Durée Poetics of the Quotidian" at the Annual Meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association, Seattle, Washington, March 28, 2015.

8. I am indebted to Ed Luker for this tight reading of the slack in "Personism," as well as for noting the difference between Olson's work and O'Hara's leisure.

9. Both Andrew Epstein in *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (2006) and Geoff Ward in *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets* (1993) have paid attention to this anxiety, but neither has linked it to the status of commodities in O'Hara's poems, nor to how O'Hara's provisional self is forged, in part, through the marketplace.

10. For a stunning contrast between Walt Whitman's and O'Hara's invocations of race see Blasing 61–63.

11. Aside from the examples already given (Gooch and Silverberg), see Daniel Belgrad (1998), 254; Andrew Epstein (2006), 79; Perloff 16.

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