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Volume I, No. 1
Winter, 2008

CIRCLE OF FRIENDS

Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry, by Andrew Epstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).
Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie, by Lytle Shaw (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006).

In the forty years since his death, Frank O'Hara's poetic reputation has grown so significantly, so exponentially, in fact, that today he commands as much scholarly attention as does his famous New York School compeer, John Ashbery, even though his writing career lasted only about fifteen years (compared to Ashbery's fifty-five, and counting). O'Hara's poems are notable for their fluid verse structures and their chatty commentary on New York City's vast cultural offerings: art museum exhibits, opera performances, and movie screenings, in addition to literary events. While these qualities alone might have secured his place in the pantheon of postmodern American poetry (the edifice of which is still under construction), it is O'Hara's social stature in postwar avant-garde communities that looms largest. O'Hara's exuberant style of moving through metropolitan space has enamored various groups of New Yorkers seeking cultural newness. With his high profile and magnetic personality, O'Hara was a hit at uptown locations like the Museum of Modern Art, where he worked as a curator, and at downtown hangouts like the Cedar Tavern, where he and the visual artists he admired (Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline) were known to hold court. For a brief period, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, he seemed to be all things to all artistic-minded people. Blessed with an array of attractive qualities, O'Hara was correspondingly cursed with the social burdens he was forced to shoulder. If it is true, as Ashbery once claimed, that O'Hara had his "French Zen period," writing poems "whose form is that of a bag into which anything is dumped and ends up belonging there," we might wonder whether O'Hara's private psyche, his personal safety zone, eventually suffered the same fate.

Two recently released books contribute fresh, theoretically-informed analyses of O'Hara's social genius. Lytle Shaw and Andrew Epstein belong to a new breed of literary scholars writing about (and occasionally within) the tradition of the New York School, which is by now several generations old. In this context, it helps to know that Shaw, a professor at New York University, and Epstein,
a professor at Florida State, are experimental poets as well as literary critics. Their appreciation of the New York School is nuanced and multifaceted. In the end, it is the social aspect of avant-garde community, more than any issue related to poetics, which drives their projects. Shaw's study of the O'Hara coterie and Epstein's examination of friendship patterns among O'Hara, Ashbery, and Amiri Baraka are of a piece, weaving biographical and historical details into riveting narratives about a dynamic literary community.

Shaw spends the early portion of his book outlining the changing role of coterie in modern poetry. Reviewing scholarship on this subject, he challenges previous appraisals of coterie's insularity, its clubby behavior, preferring to "see coterie as a rhetoric capable of enacting experimental models of kinship, both social and literary." Furthering an argument made by Arthur Marotti – whose landmark book, *John Donne, Coterie Poet*, helped to alter the scholarly study of Renaissance poetics two decades ago – Shaw wants readers to see how an allegorical appreciation of coterie in O'Hara's circle of poets and artists allows us "to re-imagine the social logics that allow group formations in the first place." Of course, the terms were clearly different for gay, liberal, forward-thinking postmodernists like O'Hara, Ashbery, and James Schuyler than they were for Donne, or for the writers coalescing around Ezra Pound or Andre Breton, modernists whose poems, manifestoes, and social dealings were rife with heterosexism and other forms of chauvinism. Shaw's impressive grasp of literary history serves him well in these early chapters, as does his vast knowledge of art history in later sections, especially the final chapter, which with

its long discussion of O'Hara's relationship to Robert Rauschenberg usefully extends O'Hara's connection to Pop Art beyond his friendship with Jasper Johns.

As Marotti and other scholars have noted, coterie poets and artists tend to pass their work on to their friends, usually with little regard for how that work will be received by people outside the group, and often with little thought as to whether it will be published or exhibited. Many of O'Hara's poems, for example, were discovered accidentally in letters and sock drawers. Shaw's reading of "Biotherm," a poem O'Hara addressed to emerging writer Bill Berkson in the early 1960s, proves exemplary in this context, with the critic emphasizing the importance of O'Hara's intimate second-person address to a close friend, but hardly shying away from the "friction" that existed in this and other New York School friendships. Indeed, it is this friction, Shaw says, which "is typical of coterie writing at its most interesting." What New York School poets were searching for, Berkson said in an artbook edition of "Biotherm," was not only a shareable literary adventure, but also "the fluctuating space that two people feel and invent between themselves."

Andrew Epstein's marvelous book, *Beautiful Enemies*, takes the conundrum of literary friendship to a whole new level. The basis of Epstein's tripartite argument – that O'Hara was a social poet who felt the need to distance himself from close friends, that Ashbery was a shy poet who relied on interpersonal exchanges fostered in New York's avant-garde coterie, and that Amiri Baraka was a Greenwich Village-based bohemian turned Harlem- and Newark-based black nationalist who abruptly severed bonds with most of his white friends but clung fast to a select few – is full of ironic twists and intrigue. Literary scholars have been sniffing around this terrain for years, but no one has written so thoroughly, or so lucidly, about the contested nature of friendship in avant-garde circles as Epstein has. Citing Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, John Dewey, and a host of other theorists, Epstein grounds his discussion in pragmatist philosophy, which holds that group solidarity in America relies on flexible attributes like contingency and use-value far more than it does on fixed ideals like constancy or loyalty. To follow Epstein's line of thinking is to believe that "abandonment," every bit as much as success and failure, governs the most interesting American lives.

For Epstein, pragmatism's advocacy of the "fallibilistic," or that which seems highly provisional or revisable, helps to explain the shifting nature of American alliances, including literary coteries. The New York School has been a famous brand for decades, but we should remember that the original members did not come up with the moniker. Neither did they sanction its collective call to arms. Indeed, in an early mock-manifesto he composed with painter Larry Rivers, O'Hara claimed that "schools are for fools." He reiterated this stance a few years later in another mock-manifesto, "Personism," rebuffing the strict principles and mindless adherence plaguing most literary movements while claiming that the (anti-)program he founded during lunch with Baraka is "too new, too vital a movement to promise anything." Ashbery nicely summarized O'Hara's "flux philosophy" in an obituary essay for his friend, explaining that "Frank O'Hara's poetry has no program and therefore cannot be joined." This is not to say that New Yorkers did not try to bond with O'Hara on a personal level, for we know he was feted by society doyennes and followed down the streets by would-be acolytes. Scholars enamored of O'Hara's central place in the New York art constellation inevitably cite lines from Rivers's funeral oration: "Frank O'Hara was my best friend. There are at least sixty people in New York who thought Frank O'Hara was their best friend." Equally revealing, though, are O'Hara's own thoughts about community, including those found in "Sleeping on the Wing" and "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island," poems which show him struggling to retain an "appropriate sense of space," an individual identity apart from coterie's constant clamor.

When O'Hara was fatally wounded by a dune buggy on Fire Island in the summer of 1966, many New York literati, including art world memoirist John Gruen, took it as a signal

that the party was over. O'Hara's early death is now part of his legend, and perceptive readers can find intimations of mortality in his verse. All of us are left to wonder what his stature in the New York School would have been in the late 1960s and 1970s, as Baraka continued to embrace black separatism and Third World Marxism, as Schuyler published his first volume of verse, as Kenneth Koch reached mainstream audiences with his books on teaching poetry to children, and as Ashbery won multiple literary awards and become famous. Epstein's discussion of O'Hara's ongoing "sibling rivalry" with Ashbery (interestingly, both poets were fans of the film East of Eden) hints at the friction many critics have tended to smooth over. Even more fascinating, from my viewpoint, is Epstein's chronicle of the O'Hara-Baraka friendship, for I believe it provides one of the most intimate looks yet at the racial politics of the New York School. In Epstein's insightful and well-written book, the two chapters on Baraka are worth the price of admission.

Academic books do not usually attract large audiences, but these two studies deserve wide readership, particularly among folks who share a love of New York City art and literature, and who form friendships based on that love.

—TIMOTHY GRAY

THE POETICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Join the Planets: New and Selected Poems by Reed Bye (United Artist Books 2005)

With the publication of Reed Bye's *Join the Planets: New and Selected Poems*, United Artist Books has made available in one handsome edition three decades' work from an important poet and professor at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado.

In the second poem of the book—"Some Magic at the Dump"—the reader is introduced to one of the foundations of Bye's poetic practice: the 24/7 act of paying close attention to one's surroundings. Like Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, and the writers of the New York School Bye draws our attention to the shoved-aside and overlooked aspects of daily life, honoring them with a gentle and playful awareness. He forgoes the easy comforts of the conventionally poetic in favor of a sharp-eyed look at the small events that compose our works and days:

> Late September
> gulls flying in
> low sun, I'm driving
> red International
> Charley's ahead in brown van
> We reach Marshall landfill
> at the same moment
> swing in parallel arcs
> & back in

It is instances like this—a simple trip to the dump to drop off some "ash, hackberry, plum and Chinese elm trimmings" reported with casual intimacy and precise detail—that ground Bye's poetry in the ordinary. Names of friends, family, pets and favorite haunts populate many of the poems imbuing them with a homey, lived-in air. As a result, we as readers get the sense that our lives too deserve the same appreciation Bye invests in even the most mundane of tasks. Indeed, by titling his poem "Some Magic at the Dump" Bye suggests that all we need to transform a hum-drum daily chore from dead-time into an authentic experience is to literally come to our senses.