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“Between the Poet and the Person”: Dilemmas of Friendship in Contemporary Poetry

Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. xvi + 359 pp. \$45.00.

In the speech Larry Rivers gave at Frank O’Hara’s 1966 funeral, he said: “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.” He later rooted this impossibility in O’Hara himself, calling the poet “a dream of contradictions.”¹ Andrew Epstein cites Rivers’s eulogy at the outset of his fascinating reading of the artistically generative conflicts between self and friendship in O’Hara’s life and work, an analysis that forms the core of *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry*. From O’Hara’s death on, friends, lovers, critics, and scholars have all helped to contribute to the myth that the poet actually achieved the proliferated intimacies Rivers describes—that, in O’Hara’s words, he managed to be “everything to everybody everywhere” (qtd. in *Beautiful Enemies* 117), without personal consequence and in the breezy mood that buoys his most famous poems. Epstein’s skepticism, bred of a much more sophisticated understanding of the relationship between O’Hara’s poems and friendship “as subject matter, biographical factor, philosophical riddle, or textual consideration” (87), offers a sobering, and deeply humanizing, alternative to what

1. Bill Berkson and Joe LeSueur, eds., *Homage to Frank O’Hara* (Bollinas, CA: Big Sky, 1978) 138.

Rivers himself warned would be a tendency to “deify” the man many consider the timelessly vital center of the multigenre, multigenerational explosion in the New York art world of the fifties, sixties, and seventies. Against the prevailing image of O’Hara as a radiantly charming, if sometimes bristly, cultural socialite, Epstein posits an intellectual deeply ambivalent about intimacy in relation to individual autonomy, dependent upon but forever turning away from the scores of people who counted him as their “best” friend.

Epstein’s revision of O’Hara is emblematic of the bracingly corrective and inspiring nature of *Beautiful Enemies* as a whole. Epstein’s book doesn’t seek to be encyclopedic—his main focus is the poetry and interlocking friendships of O’Hara, John Ashbery, and Amiri Baraka, examined through the lens of Emersonian pragmatism—but his sharply faceted readings set in motion a feeling of kaleidoscopic possibility, of shifting scholarly configurations yet to be explored. Among other contributions, *Beautiful Enemies* enters the emergent field of social poetics as a useful curb to purely celebratory treatments of postwar avant-garde poetry as a site of “community formation,” reads an O’Hara now truly popular for his friendly occasional poetry against that grain, and makes the case for Baraka’s centrality to the so-called New York school in a way that both challenges the group labels we’ve been using since Donald Allen’s *New American Poetry* (1960) and provides a tantalizing lure to return to Baraka’s oft-overshadowed early career. Although it is not the first recent work to explore the connections between pragmatism and postwar American poetry, Epstein’s book does so with the combination of intellectual lucidity and psychological affinity that, one imagines, helps to inspire the relationship between philosophy and art—and philosophers and artists—to begin with.

While not in a completely linear trajectory, contemporary poetry scholarship has evolved, over the last three decades, from a primary focus on lyric subjectivity, through identity-oriented and historicist accounts of the work of various groups, to studies that, as Epstein puts it, “look more closely, analytically, and sociologically at the importance of community,” particularly for postwar avant-garde and experimental poetry (7). While useful as an umbrella term for the range of activities and institutions through which poets share work and build careers and canonicity, “community” has not been

sufficiently theorized from the inside. Solidarity is an obvious necessity among groups of poets who operate outside of establishment institutions. Most commentary on avant-garde community has been concerned with defining and celebrating the radical position of a given collective—the fixity of whose identity is more often a product of scholarly exigency than actual affinities—within the large-scale field of culture production, rather than with probing its internal dynamics. Even those studies that have looked critically at relationships within groups have tended to do so without a consistent theoretical apparatus; the work of uncovering primary materials such as letters and ephemeral publications is enough of a challenge: to read them in a more than evidentiary or at best homological fashion in relation to poems has not, as yet, seemed possible.

Beautiful Enemies takes an elegant next step. By specifying friendship as the object of scrutiny, Epstein is able to narrow his social focus to the dyadic relationships that form, in intriguingly unstable ways, the bedrock of “community,” and that play themselves out textually in the collaborative and epistolary materials that postwar poets produced in abundance, as well as in poems whose concerns appear to be more solitary. Across the board in literary studies, friendship has received surprisingly little attention; the most common model in this field still tends to revolve around plot and character in the Victorian novel. Epstein’s approach is at once more historical and more immanent: he is concerned to investigate the ways in which, “for postwar avant-garde poets, *poetry is the continuation of friendship by other means*” (15). These means can range widely, from dedication and the naming of friends in poems, for which O’Hara is especially known, through sampling a friend’s lines or assuming their style in more or less overt ways, to even more subtle gestures of affinity and distinction, such as working through common poetic influences, as Epstein shows Ashbery and O’Hara doing with Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, respectively.

The most material way in which poetry acts as an extension of friendship is of course collaboration, a practice engaged in on a regular basis by both poets and visual artists in the New York scene. Often produced on a common page, typewriter, or canvas, collaborations have been taken to be the definitive embodiments of the communitarian ethos of this scene and the postwar avant-garde in

general. Epstein is uniquely alive to the tensions legible in these poetic continuations of friendship, and this attentiveness, along with his assiduous scholarship, yields results that should change the way the works, their creators, and their milieu are viewed. An unpublished poem-letter from Ashbery and O'Hara to Kenneth and Janice Koch (found among Koch's papers) provides one example of this rich terrain. The poem is a mostly jokey, absurdist exercise; exchanging lines in rhyming *abab* quatrains, the poets initially submerge their identities in the good-natured humor of it all. At the midpoint of the poem, though, we find these lines, to which Epstein pays special attention: "Kenneth, I John am drunk but Frank is not drunk. / Janice, explain to us all the differences between us" (37). What emerges here—the desire for distinction, the fear of its absence—is a generative engine of creative production across the cultural field. As Epstein notes, such anxieties have been acknowledged only in diachronic, Bloomian models of influence (10). Among readers of avant-garde cohorts, especially, the inability to see conflict in contemporary relationships is rampant, itself worthy of study. Epstein's careful parsing of what he calls the "ongoing tug-of-war between [the avant-garde's] demand for group solidarity against a hostile larger society and its simultaneous commandment that its participants must be anarchic rebels who resist conformity and convention" in apparently lighthearted works like the O'Hara-Ashbery collaboration sets the stage for masterful readings of such canonical poems as Ashbery's "The Skaters" and O'Hara's "In Memory of My Feelings," as well as for Epstein's reevaluations of these dynamics in the poets' careers at large (39).

Epstein identifies two "defining contexts" for the "tug-of-war" manifest in the postwar avant-garde: the environment of cold war "containment" culture and its anticonformist reactions, and the central pragmatist antinomy between "self-reliant" individualism and a fundamental belief in the social character of the human subject. His analysis of the impact on avant-garde poets of discussions about conformity and "the crisis of the individual" in publications as varied as *Life* and *Commentary* and in best-selling books such as David Riesman's *Lonely Crowd* is smart and persuasive, and would be even if the title of Riesman's book didn't appear in O'Hara's 1957 poem "John Button Birthday." If to be "avant-garde" in the tradi-

tional, collectivist sense courted producing an upended version of the groupthink culture that was being enforced with repressive rigor by the government, then it isn't hard to understand why an African American and two gay male poets would resist even "anti-Establishment" alignments, however desperately they might desire the solace of like-minded others. Epstein shows how poems like "John Button" "evoke[] friendship's delicate balance between the nonconformist spirit of its participants and a sense of camaraderie and union" (52). His work reveals the myriad means through which daily social decisions with implications for privacy, livelihood, and even physical safety make their way into poems.

Beautiful Enemies neatly integrates its treatment of the environmental factors influencing creative friendships in the postwar avant-garde with a distinctive vision of pragmatist theories of self and community. The chapter on Emersonian and post-Emersonian pragmatism is a richly documented and convincing argument for the relevance of that school of thought beyond modernism and into the postwar period. In fact, Epstein's illumination of pragmatist antifoundationalism and its commitment to mobile relations between individual and community suggests that it could be an abundant resource for the continued conceptualizing of these issues as they play out in global networks of cultural production. While William James is more often credited with bringing the tenets of pragmatism into the twentieth century—and certainly with influencing Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens, among other modernists—it is in Emerson's complex stances toward both individualism and social relations that Epstein finds the most compelling model for the conflicted attitudes that inform the lives and works of his three subjects. In Epstein's reading, Emerson's individualism, as powerfully proclaimed and fiercely nonconformist as it was, nevertheless resists "the deification of a monumental individual identity" (66). Emerson's distaste for "foolish consistency," his privileging of contingent experience over abstract systems of thought and society, translates into a conception of subjectivity as protean, mobile, relational. "Every spirit makes its house," Epstein quotes from Emerson's "Fate," "but afterwards the house confines the spirit."

Among the abundant evidence Epstein finds of the "dialogic tension between self and other, particularly between fellow writers" in

Emerson's work, a moment he cites from "Circles" seems especially apt in its sense of the productive nature of contemporary rivalry:

There is no outside, no inclosing wall, no circumference to us. The man finishes his story,—how good! how final! how it puts a new face on things! He fills the sky. Lo! on the other side rises also a man, and draws a circle around the circle we had just pronounced the outline of the sphere. Then already is our first speaker not man, but only a first speaker. His only redress is forthwith to draw a circle outside of his antagonist. And so men do by themselves.

(69)

Epstein helps to situate this competitive creative dynamic in the material, horizontal field of contemporary social relations, as well as in the vertical domain of literary influence, where it has traditionally been located. For the antifoundationalist Emerson, the fact that "there is . . . no inclosing wall," no finality, is nothing less than a necessity, for both life and art. Emerson's "parable" (69) offers a vision of sociopoiesis as a unique kind of developmental narrative, the fraught process of "man's growth . . . seen in the successive choirs of his friends" (70).

Of the poets in Epstein's study, and perhaps of all the poets in the postwar avant-garde, none has been so defined by the idea of "growth" in relation to radically changing "choirs of friends" as Amiri Baraka. Baraka's trajectory has been read traditionally (and often described by the poet himself) as a three-phase process—from Beat, to black nationalist, to his final resting identification with global socialism and/or "populist modernism"—and his changes are almost always understood in purely political terms. It is impossible and indeed undesirable to forget the galvanizing force for revolutionary change that Baraka would become, but as the sole lens through which to view his life and poetics, this retrospection has a distorting effect. While clearly taking into account the collectivist political positions that Baraka would later assume, Epstein chooses to weight the poet's early career, specifically the work he produced while living at the heart of the West Village scene between 1958 and 1965. This decision is useful in a number of ways. It not only brings critical attention to interesting and valuable pieces from Baraka's first two books—such as "Ostriches and Grandmothers," "The

Turncoat," and "The Liar" and his play *The Toilet*—but offers an additional approach to understanding his lifetime of radical transformation, one that both complements and clashes with, but certainly complicates, the oversimple narrative of dawning racial consciousness.

Epstein makes a good case for Baraka's early pragmatism by tracing his "forward-looking, change-loving, experimental attitude" back through Ralph Ellison and Zora Neale Hurston to the Jamesian principles of Harvard graduates like W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke (173). Doing so allows him to read the unsettled speakers of poems such as "Notes for a Speech" not as stolid prolepses of racial self-hatred but as articulating a protean, skeptical sense of self. What's fascinating about Epstein's positioning of Baraka as "a key poet in the tradition of American individualism and experimentation" (170) is that, while it most literally describes the phase of his career (and the friends who shared it) from which he quickly turned away, the commitment to radical turning, which Epstein describes in terms of the Emersonian ideal of "abandonment" (23), is itself a kind of constant in Baraka's work, arguably at the heart of its continuing interest and relevance. For this reader, at least, understanding Baraka's "Publicly redefining / each change in [his] soul" (as he puts it in "The Liar") as both an intellectually consistent position and, as Epstein writes, part of the "vibrant, changing process of being a self" mitigates a tendency to recoil from the shifting social stances and rhetorical acrobatics that ripple through even his most recent work (227).

Baraka "publicly" worked out the struggle between his pragmatist, proto-postmodern aversion to fixed identity and the pressing need for revolutionary, racial art, and he ultimately aligned himself more fully with the latter. Ashbery and O'Hara, who arguably had far greater luxury of choice, remained in perpetual undulation. If *Beautiful Enemies*, which so crucially tempers hagiography with analysis at almost every turn, appears to loosen its grip, it is in elevating what Ashbery called "a kind of fence-sitting" to both an aesthetic and a *political* ideal (79). In a 1966 obituary essay for his friend, Ashbery praised O'Hara's poetry's refusal to "speak out against the war in Viet Nam or in favor of civil rights" and its refusal to "attack the establishment." O'Hara's poetry "merely ignores [the establishment's] right to exist," he wrote,

“and is thus a source of annoyance for partisans of every stripe” (77). Epstein acknowledges the critical response to this statement, which he counters by arguing that O’Hara had a “nonprogrammatic resistance to dogma . . . of any kind,” and that this is distinct from being apolitical. As Epstein notes, the evidence for a vigorous, if complicated, support for civil rights is in fact present in O’Hara’s work; had he lived, the volatile mixture of moral and erotic passion he felt around race, and indeed toward his African American friends, may have led to a full-fledged political commitment. But even without such wishful speculation, Epstein’s assimilation of Ashbery’s and O’Hara’s unwillingness to wear an artistic label like “the New York school” with the refusal to speak out against the war in Vietnam or in favor of civil rights merits a bit more discussion. In 1966, the need to make a distinction between such refusals was becoming increasingly important, as it continues to be. *Beautiful Enemies* gives us a social, historical, and artistically reverberative context in which to evaluate these sorts of decisions—and a heightened recognition that they are never made alone.

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