

Andrew Epstein: On "Street Musicians"

By all accounts, the close-knit community of New York poets and artists was devastated by the news of Frank O'Hara's sudden death in the summer of 1966, as if the invisible webs that had fused together a far-flung series of fascinating people who thrived on a sense of community and shared principles had suddenly dissolved. In an obituary essay, Peter Schjeldahl observed, without undue hyperbole, that "the New York art world was collectively thunderstruck. In 15 years as poet, playwright, critic, curator, and universal energy source in the lives of the few hundred most creative people in America, Frank O'Hara had rendered that world wholly unprepared to tolerate his passing" (Schjeldahl, "Frank O'Hara," 139). The dance critic and poet Edwin Denby noted that "Frank was the center and joined them all together. After his death there was no center for that group" (Waldman, "Paraphrase," 32).

In the years that followed, many significant and diverse poets wrote moving elegies for this poet who was so fond of elegy himself, two of the most memorable being Allen Ginsberg's "City Midnight Junk Strains" (written just a few days after O'Hara died) and James Schuyler's "Buried at Springs." However, it has been widely assumed that because of the allegedly abstract, metaphysical, and impersonal nature of his poetry, John Ashbery never wrote a memorial to O'Hara in verse. In her book on O'Hara, Marjorie Perloff writes, "One poet who did not write an elegy for Frank O'Hara, even though he wrote the beautiful introduction to the *Collected Poems*, was John Ashbery" (*O'Hara*, 190).

In fact, after O'Hara's death, Ashbery actually does write about his friend in a number of poems (including "Lithuanian Dance Band," discussed in chapter 4) which respond in profound ways to the death of one of his closest friends and peers and to the catastrophic loss of the New York arts community's "center." The most powerful and moving of these poems is the 1977 poem "Street Musicians," an elegy fraught with feelings of sibling rivalry, regret, jealousy, and even survivor's guilt that reveals another important dimension of the role played by friendship in Ashbery's work and in postwar poetry more generally.

If, as I have argued throughout this study, the most influential experimental American poetry emerges out of the generative and anxious dialogue *between* poetic peers, out of the friction between an excitement about collaboration and a stubborn commitment to individual style, then Ashbery's "Street Musicians" is surely a poem that embodies this phenomenon. In this case, Ashbery's close relationship with O'Hara and O'Hara's work offers him a special aperture, a unique way to meditate on friendship, intimacy, loss, and loneliness, as well as on the shape of his own career.

"Street Musicians" can be read as a kind of valedictory address to Frank O'Hara and as a farewell to the whole idea of the avant-garde as a shared point of origin and collective effort. The poem articulates a moving allegory of the dispersal of the New York School itself, beginning with its rich and suggestive title, which seems to be an evocative figure for the poetic community that fostered Ashbery's own growth as a poet. Though it seems to refer to performers on the street, no sidewalk buskers appear in this poem, so the plural phrase can be seen as a trope for "city artists," or better yet, "New York poets."

It is clear from the beginning that "one" of the two musicians in the poem has died, and that the other must go on living, moving forward while shouldering the burden of surviving:

One died, and the soul was wrenched out
Of the other in life, who, walking the streets
Wrapped in an identity like a coat, sees on and on
The same corners, volumetrics, shadows
Under trees. (SP, 207)

The powerful image of wrenching grief at the poem's opening suggests that the death of one has left the other soulless and empty. The person lost seems to have been a very close friend, a fellow musician; he is also a sibling in what is later called "an obscure family." The poems Ashbery writes in the aftermath of O'Hara's death frequently intertwine the loss of a friend with the loss of a brother. For Ashbery, such a gesture is more than the characteristic turn to a rhetoric of fraternity to represent an intimate friendship: Ashbery has been haunted his entire life by the death of his nine-year-old brother to leukemia when he was twelve (Shoptaw, *Outside*, 363 n. 34). Rarely forthcoming about his personal life, the poet has made several candid remarks about the death of his brother in interviews: "I had a younger brother whom I didn't get along with," Ashbery told Peter Stitt. "We were always fighting the way kids do-and he died at the age of nine. I felt guilty because I had been so nasty to him, so that was a terrible shock. These are experiences which have been important to me" ("Art of Poetry," 35). In another, recent interview, Ashbery suggests the centrality of this loss to his life and poetry. He discusses his powerful sense of "nostalgia for my childhood" and then goes on to recall that he and some friends "had a mythical kingdom in the woods Then my younger brother died just around the beginning of WWII. The group dispersed for various reasons, and things were never as happy or romantic as they'd been, and my brother was no longer there. I think I've always been trying to get back to this mythical kingdom" (Rehak, "Child," 15). As we saw in chapter 4, many of Ashbery's best and most famous poems chronicle this sense of loss, this dispersal, and this desire to return to a mythical realm of idealized fraternity, a desire that continuously slams into the impossibility of that illusory dream.

The painful, guilt-provoking loss of a brother--of both his actual sibling and his "brother" Frank O'Hara--seems to take on archetypal significance in the world of Ashbery's work, something he makes quite clear in the late poem "The History of My Life," which begins "Once upon a time there were two brothers. I Then there was only one: myself" (*Your*, 31). In "Street Musicians," after the death of the "other," the remaining musician has apparently been called, summoned to fill some new role:

Farther than anyone was ever
Called, through increasingly suburban airs
And ways, with autumn falling over everything...

In the absence of the loved one, the speaker travels into brave new worlds and has departed the urban locale--a nod to the New York School identity they shared as street musicians--to arrive in a world more tame, prosperous, "suburban." Perhaps needed by a kind of survivor's

guilt, the speaker acknowledges that he has come a long way from the rebellious phase as a young "street" poet and has perhaps reached a more comfortable middle age. At the same time, his friend, the other bohemian "street musician," died before having to make this journey, and thus avoided that problematic trajectory--essentially the one from avant-garde marginality to acceptance.

On one level, then, "Street Musicians" is another Ashberyian "vague allegory" of poetic vocation and friendship that recapitulates the movement of Ashbery's own career. It reflects his discomfort in the mid-seventies with his newfound fame and critical acclaim, his induction into the mainstream of American poetry, which occurred on the heels of his fellow outsider's death. Ashbery catapulted to literary stardom in 1976 when he won the year's three major prizes for his breakthrough volume, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, so it is not surprising that this poem became the first piece in his *next* book, *Houseboat Days*. In a 1980 interview, Ashbery reflects on that moment in the mid-seventies when his "voice became recognized as separate" from the New York School: "I sort of separated myself, or got separated, from the others" ("An Interview in Warsaw," 299). The tension between active and passive voice in this comment--two ways of looking at that separation--perfectly capture Ashbery's mixed feelings about his own position relative to the insularity of the New York School community, mixed feelings this poem eloquently probes.

Not only does Ashbery's poem imply a certain guilt or uneasiness about the fact that he has moved into suburban comfort, it also suggests a recognition that he has moved into a bittersweet moment of maturity that brings with it an awareness of his own transience. In fact, everything in the poem seems to be declining, dying, with "autumn falling over everything." The poem is filled with what Shoptaw calls "a deliberate trail of leavings"--forgotten songs, "the year turning over on itself in November," the gaps among the days becoming more real, drifting smoke, water seeping up, trash, excrement, and so on (*Outside*, 208). As we have seen, the anti-foundationalist poetics of movement that Ashbery and O'Hara share is built upon a rhetoric of such abandonments and constant departures.

The poem's litany of departures includes a reference to an "obscure family" who is being evicted "into the way it was and is." Though Ashbery does not make it clear, this family can perhaps be read as another figure for that band of musicians, the New York School itself. The "plush leaves" may even runt at pages of poems in their books. Constantly charged with difficulty and willful obscurity by critics, ever courting the pleasures of ambiguity, the tight-knit group of New York School poets could easily be viewed as an "obscure family"; at the same time, their lack of general fame and acceptance (particularly in the 1950s, and especially prior to Ashbery's rise to prominence in the '70s) made them an obscure community indeed. Furthermore, the reference suggests how much of the poem's tensions are driven by sibling rivalry and Freudian "family romance."

The end of the first stanza indicates that some evolution and change in the relationship between the two musicians has occurred over time. "So they grew to hate and forget each other," the speaker admits. The moment recalls O'Hara's lines about the fragility of friendship in "Choses Passageres": "Last night, I was an old school chum; now? I am a washstand." These two figures who were once so close became estranged. In life? After the death of the other? It is not clear. But they have grown apart, diverged with animosity, and have tried to forget each other.

What are we to make of this moment? To forget the other, if the other is a strong poet and rival, is to avoid the pressures and burdens of influence, of the impingement of a rival poet's

words, tropes, and poetic strengths. But something else about this particular line reinforces my point that this poem is not only generally about friendship and rivalry, but in the most specific sense is about Ashbery's divergence from O'Hara and his work. If we compare the line in "Street Musicians" with the final line of O'Hara's earlier poem "Blocks," which is about the adolescence and growth of two close siblings (a boy and a girl), we hear a curious echo:

And thus they grew like giggling fir trees (O'Hara) (CP, 108).

So they grew to hate and forget each other (Ashbery).

For *his* poem, which, like "Blocks," is about sibling rivalry, Ashbery misreads, twists, and revises O'Hara's earlier trope. O'Hara had used this image to convey the trajectory taken by the siblings; Ashbery echoes it, builds upon it, and changes it. With this intertextual echo, Ashbery transforms O'Hara's positive celebration of the unity of the siblings (as identical as two laughing trees) and recasts it as a distinct movement of divergence, enmity, and forgetting. By troping O'Hara's words in this way, by even willfully "forgetting" them in a sense, Ashbery is able to clear (textual, stylistic) space for himself as the remaining street musician. As this moment of allusive riffing suggests, for postwar American poetry, friendship between writers becomes as much an intertextual as a social relationship.

The rather impersonal first stanza gives way to a much more personal-sounding second stanza, which shifts from "one" and "they" to "I," and from the past tense to the present:

So I cradle this average violin that knows

Only forgotten showtunes, but argues

The possibility of free declamation anchored

To a dull refrain, the year turning over on itself

In November, with the spaces among the days

More literal, the meat more visible on the bone. (SP, 207)

Here the speaker's tone becomes quite self-deprecatory, as he calls his violin "average," and his poems mere "showtunes," as he seems to suggest rather anxiously that because the other is gone and wiped from memory, he is alone with his average abilities, continuing to play old and "forgotten" songs.

The pathos of the poem results from the sense that one member of the duo has been left alone, attempting to sing, while unrelenting time constantly takes us ever further away from our origins (SP, 89). It seems to pose a question: Where has the passing of time left the friend and the poet himself? Back before the suburban airs and ways, before "one died," wasn't there some "mythical kingdom" where they were truly together as a "we," young New York poets attempting to leave their marks on a rapidly vanishing world? Against this rising sense of drift and loss, Ashbery hopes to locate some sense of "origin," but any poet as skeptical of fixity and foundations as Ashbery or O'Hara knows that such starting points are never static or isolated. They are always in motion, like fading wisps on the breeze:

Our question of a place of origin hangs
Like smoke: how we picnicked in pine forests,
In coves with the water always seeping up, and left
Our trash, sperm, and excrement everywhere, smeared
On the landscape, to make of us what we could.

The ending of the poem thus questions whether the duo shared a point of origin at the same time that it wonders whether they leave any joint legacy to the future. If they do share an originary point, would that erase the potency and uniqueness of the speaker as an individual artist? In either case, is it a place that is at all recoverable? The remembered moment of union is first cast as idyllic and pastoral--possibly an echo of Ashbery's early poem "Some Trees" which depicted a winter morning communion of self and other in the forest as a "chorus of smiles"--only to be ironically undermined by the threat of water rising up, and the repulsive mess of the remnants "we" leave there (SP, 19).

The end of "Street Musicians" brings two disparate selves together momentarily (for as brief a moment as in O'Hara's poem "To John Ashbery"): a "we" united, as poets. It imagines them as fellow picnickers who attempted to smear themselves, create and perpetuate themselves and their art on a stubborn, fleeting world, however briefly and however in vain it may seem or be. But that moment of joint artistic endeavor, that knit of identity, remains drifting like smoke in the lovely, distant past, long before "the soul was wrenched out / Of the other in life" and that lonely survivor began to move "Farther than anyone was ever / Called, through increasingly suburban airs / And ways." Although it summons a dim memory of rather idealized union, the poem moves away from friendship and its certainties into solitary wanderings, loss, and leave-takings.

Again and again across the long arc of his career and to his latest poems, Ashbery has returned to such gestures, as he continually contemplates the relationship between the poetic self and the group. which, by turns, nurtures, inspires, and imprisons that self. In his 2005 book *Where Shall I Wander*, one finds Ashbery, near 80, still pitting the individual talent against the "school" in which he "first discovered how to breathe" (SP, 8):

Time to get out
and, as they say, about. Becalmed on a sea
of inner stress, sheltered from cold northern breezes,
idly we groove: Must have
been the time before this, when we all moved
in schools, a fummy tribe, and this way
and that the caucus raised its din. ("Wolf Ridge," 36)

Ever aware of what it means to be part of a din-raising "finny tribe," of what happens to such caucuses over time and to the individuals who swim within them, the poets I have focused on

in this book frequently fashion representations of friendship by recourse to an image of troubadours dispersed, offriends as pairs of beautiful enemies torn apart by time and circumstance. This haunting trope embodies the dynamic of disaffiliation, loss, and inviolable separateness that must complicate any simplistic notion of American poetic communities and alliances.

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