

ANDREW EPSTEIN

Crisis, Possibility, and Pragmatism: Frank O'Hara's Early Journal and William James

the sun...it
hangs always promising some nebulous
healthy reaction to our native dark
—Frank O'Hara

“To put it very gently, I have a feeling that the philosophical reduction of reality to a dealable-with system so distorts life that one’s ‘reward’ for this endeavor (a minor one, at that) is illness both from inside and outside” (*Collected* 495). This statement was not written by the American philosopher William James, but it sounds very much like it could have been. Pragmatism, the name given to the strain of American philosophy James helped inaugurate, begins by rejecting the premises and enticements of monism, “with its absolutely closed-in world,” in favor of pluralism, which calls for “accepting a universe unfinished, with doors and windows open to possibilities uncontrollable in advance” (James, *Writings* 269). The pragmatist, in James’s view, rejects “dogma, artificiality, and the pretence of finality in truth” and “turns away from abstractions and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins” (*Writings* 379). As John Stuhr explains, pragmatism’s pluralistic vision sets it in opposition to previous ways of thinking:

Traditional philosophies have emphasized the eternal, the absolute, the fixed, the precise, the general, the common, the same and the one. They have sought synthesis, completeness, finality, and system. James resisted all this. In response, he championed finitude, relativity, change, vagueness, particularity, individuality, difference, and plurality. He declared himself a friend to the concrete, the incomplete, the imperfect, and the messy—in short, a friend of real experiences and real lives. Life exceeds logic, James wrote, and experience boils over our categories and neat theories. (41)

The author of the opening quotation, with its Jamesian blast at the

philosophical tendency to distort reality by reducing it to a closed “system,” is not a philosopher at all, but rather a poet, Frank O’Hara. In this early piece of prose, “Notes On *Second Avenue*,” O’Hara offers a response to the bafflement that greeted his wildly disjunctive, long, experimental 1952 poem *Second Avenue*. But O’Hara’s gloss on his own poem actually resists any direct explanation of the work’s *meaning*, which, he insists, “I don’t think can be paraphrased (or at least I hope it can’t)” (*Collected* 495). To support his unwillingness to reduce the poem’s indeterminacy to some paraphrasable meaning, O’Hara goes on to express a temperamental revulsion towards philosophical and aesthetic certainty and closure, or any “dealable-with” system, that seems strikingly similar to the pragmatist ethos articulated by James.

Despite the proximity between O’Hara’s characteristic attitudes about philosophy, art, and experience and pragmatism’s guiding principles, little attention has been paid to O’Hara’s influential role as a perpetuator of this tradition in American thought and poetics. In his recent book *Emancipating Pragmatism*, Michael Magee does make a compelling case that “O’Hara draws much of his aesthetic disposition from pragmatism” and places O’Hara squarely in a pragmatist lineage (132). But critics have only begun to explore the richness and significance of this connection.¹ Furthermore, this blind-spot is symptomatic of a more wide-ranging reluctance on the part of critics of American poetry to delve deeply into the remarkable connections between pragmatist philosophy and postwar avant-garde poetry in general.

In fact, Frank O’Hara is rarely mentioned in the same breath as the word “philosophy,” let alone “pragmatism.” Many readers have even stressed the downright *anti*-philosophical cast of his work, with one critic typically observing that “no poet has ever been freer of metaphysical pretensions than O’Hara” (qtd. Ward 53). Helen Vendler complains about O’Hara’s “radical incapacity for abstraction (like Byron, when he thinks he is a child)” and observes that he “genuinely has no metaphysical baggage. No religion, no politics, no ideology, no nothing” (234, 249). While O’Hara’s poetry is indeed free from metaphysical pretensions, it does resemble one particular philosophical outlook—that of American pragmatism—in many ways. Since pragmatism, by definition, turns away from metaphysics and abstractions, foundations and ideologies, one should not expect to find anything of the sort in Frank O’Hara.

O’Hara’s work has of course been discussed from a variety of illuminating angles. His poetry has frequently been viewed in the context of modern

art or as a verse counterpart to Abstract Expressionism; as an urban and Whitmanic poetry of American dailiness; as a mid-century American adaptation of dada, surrealism and other emanations of the European avant-garde; and, more recently, as a body of work intertwined with Cold War politics, popular culture, and issues of sexuality and gender. While these are all indispensable frameworks in which to consider his work, I argue that it is fruitful, and necessary, to consider O'Hara's poetics as a vital response to currents within a particular American intellectual and poetic tradition, that of Emerson, William James, and pragmatism.

Elsewhere I discuss in depth the importance of Emersonian pragmatism to the development of O'Hara's poetry, his conception of the self, and his preoccupation with the tension between friendship and individualism.² In what follows, I focus more narrowly on some of the rather surprising similarities of temperament, intellect, and biography between the young O'Hara and the young William James as a way of better understanding why each arrived at a pragmatist way of thinking about both their own lives and the world in general.

For my purposes, "Emersonian pragmatism" refers to a distinctive, influential, and in some ways quintessentially American mode of thinking and of talking—a way of viewing the universe, human experience, truth, the self, community, and language—that begins in the mid-nineteenth century with Emerson's essays and comes to a peak with the writings of William James, Charles S. Peirce, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead, before going on to directly inspire some of the principle influences on postwar poets like Frank O'Hara, especially the modernists Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and Gertrude Stein. My intention here is not to attempt to define or explain the enormous wealth and complexity of pragmatism itself; as Richard Poirier points out, "there are as many pragmatisms as there are pragmatist philosophers, just as surely as there are many different kinds of Emersonians, often at odds with one another" (*Poetry* 4). But suffice it to say that I am interested here in pragmatism as a philosophical mode that, most broadly, challenges foundationalism and absolutism; emphasizes contingency, pluralism, and action; and espouses a version of individualism that is both anti-essentialist and highly attuned to the social dimensions of selfhood.

Thanks to Richard Rorty, Cornel West, Richard Poirier, Frank Lentricchia, and other scholars, the last two decades have witnessed a surprising revival of interest in pragmatism, which has led a wide range of critics to, among other things, investigate more closely the connections

between pragmatist thought and American literature and culture.³ As such critics have demonstrated, pragmatism's questioning of traditional authority and absolute truth, its rejection of closure and certainty, its orientation towards the future and possibility, profoundly influences modernist American poetry and a number of its chief practitioners, like Stevens, Stein, and Robert Frost. But most of these recent studies of pragmatism's influence on twentieth-century literature screech to a halt with high modernism. At the same time, intellectual and cultural historians have often argued that pragmatism suffered an eclipse after World War II and ceased to have any real impact on American culture.⁴ In contrast, by focusing on Frank O'Hara and William James here, my intention is to highlight the persistence of pragmatism in American poetry after World War II. As I argue at much greater length elsewhere, pragmatist attitudes, vocabularies, and preoccupations find dramatic expression within the postwar avant-garde of O'Hara and his contemporaries, and more current *postmodern* American poetry actually offers, and continues to offer, a nuanced response to American pragmatist philosophy and poetics and the contradictions they raise.⁵

In fact, the avant-garde poets of the "New American Poetry" that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s (a movement which was led, in part, by O'Hara) find inspiration, validation, and subject matter for its project in some of the major elements of pragmatism: its anti-foundationalism, attention to contingency, and repudiation of stasis; its cultivation of provisional, generally affirmative responses to a chaotic and groundless universe; its hostility towards "essentialist" identity logic; its espousal of a form of deeply felt individualism that nonetheless holds the self to be inherently social; its skepticism of absolutes, dogma, and collective thinking; its experimental spirit and its demand for the continual reimagining of one's words and aesthetic practices. Not only do many of these poets write in a noticeably Emersonian and pragmatist idiom, but their work also lays bare some of the trenchant paradoxes, and the more disquieting implications churning within this tradition of American thought and writing.

Far from being offstage during the 1950s, the distinctive language and attitudes of Emerson, James, Dewey and their inheritors were buzzing in the cultural atmosphere in which O'Hara and his contemporaries first began writing. Paul Goodman, central figure in the postwar avant-garde, teacher at Black Mountain College, and a kind of early hero to the young Frank O'Hara, reminisced in *Speaking and Language*: "I grew up breathing the air of Jamesian pragmatism, which has seemed to me

to be politically right and, if I may say so, in the American grain" (qtd. Magee, *Emancipating* 135). The same could probably be said for O'Hara, who read and absorbed Emerson and Whitman at an early point in his development. As Brad Gooch relates in his biography of O'Hara, the poet's favorite aunt, Margaret, gave him a copy of Emerson's *Selected Essays* when he was eighteen. Gooch recounts that O'Hara dove into Emerson's essays while in the South Pacific with the Navy during World War II, a reading experience that gave the young, precocious O'Hara confidence in "voicing his opinions, even if they sounded reckless" (79). Apparently, Emerson made quite an impression on the eighteen-year old O'Hara: in a letter to his parents, he wrote that "Emerson says something to the effect that 'I have no patience with consistency. Only a stupid man is consistent'" (qtd. Gooch 79). These comments, paraphrased by memory from "Self-Reliance," one of the seminal essays for experimental American literature, clearly resemble—and lead to—O'Hara's later dedication to variousness, nonconformity, and multiplicity.

While he seems to have picked up this wariness of a "foolish consistency" from Emerson, he could also easily have gained a similar aversion from the copy of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* which his parents had given him the previous June for his eighteenth birthday (Gooch 83). This is not surprising, since, after all, Whitman declared that his "ideas were simmering and simmering and Emerson brought them to a boil" (qtd. Richardson 527–28). It is Whitman who, near the end of "Song of Myself," famously declared "Do I contradict myself?/ Very well then I contradict myself;/ I am large I contain multitudes," insisting on his Emersonian right to live and speak—to borrow O'Hara's well-known phrase—"as variously as possible" (*Leaves*, Cowley 85, ellipses in original; O'Hara, *Collected* 256).

So, thanks to his family's sophisticated gifts, O'Hara seems to have been steeped in this arch-American tradition of Emerson and Whitman from an early age, only to then arrive at a Harvard still very much affected by the legacy of Professor William James. The original home of pragmatism itself, Harvard had long been infused with the ideas of James and his colleagues, like Josiah Royce, a turn-of-the-century group that Frank Lentricchia has called "the philosophers of modernism at Harvard" (*Modernist* 1). Furthermore, as I have suggested, James's pragmatism deeply influenced an important series of Harvard students who became modernist poets—Stevens and Stein (both of whom were students of James), Frost, and T. S. Eliot.⁶ While at Harvard himself, O'Hara studied American literature with F. O. Matthiessen, at that time perhaps the greatest living authority on

Emerson and the Jameses.⁷ And he also immersed himself in the work of Stein, Stevens, and Williams, those modernist predecessors with powerful pragmatist affinities.

I briefly sketch in these connections and points of contact to suggest that O'Hara seems to have inhaled this diffuse but potent "air of Jamesian pragmatism" as he formulated his own poetics and outlook on life.⁸ But his affinities with pragmatism—and with James—have another dimension, one that becomes apparent when we consider certain revealing parallels between James and O'Hara. As young men, both James and O'Hara experienced severe bouts of depression and wrestled with painful crises of belief and vocation which served as crucial turning points for each of them and their careers. Both seem to have caught a shattering glimpse of the world's perilous instability and to have experienced a sudden recognition of the certainty of uncertainty. Both carefully considered suicide as an option, but ultimately rejected it, making a conscious choice to continue living. Each emerged from their harrowing ordeal armed with a remarkably similar stance towards experience, a new philosophical outlook that allowed them to acknowledge the chaotic, groundless, and transient nature of human experience but to hold out hope at the same time. In other words, they each found a way to go forward without succumbing entirely to nihilism and despair, to persist despite it all, by espousing a philosophy of affirmative skepticism, of change and possibility, that would stay with them for the rest of their lives.

In 1870, when James was about twenty-eight years old and filled with "philosophic pessimism and general depression of spirits about my prospects," he suddenly found himself face to face with the abyss (*Writings* 6). Seized by "a horrible fear of my own existence," James recalled that he "became a mass of quivering fear." "After this, the universe was changed for me altogether," he wrote. "It was like a revelation" (6). "I remembered wondering how other people could live, how I myself had ever lived, so unconscious of that pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life" (6).⁹ In the midst of this period of severe depression and anxiety about his vocation and future, James flirted with the idea of suicide. At the very brink, however, he experienced a profound revelation, which he recorded in his diary:

I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier's second "Essais" and see no reason why his definition of Free Will—"the sustaining of a thought because I choose to when I might

have other thoughts”—need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume for the present—until next year—that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will. . . . Hitherto, when I have felt like taking a free initiative, like daring to act originally, without carefully waiting for the contemplation of the external world to determine all for me, suicide seemed the most manly form to put my daring into; now, I will go a step further with my will, not only act with it, but believe as well; believe in my individual reality and creative power. (*Writings* 7–8)

Many commentators on James argue that this famous epiphany about free will sparked a breakthrough that led to James’s embrace of his vocation, the development of his mature philosophy of pragmatism, and the origins of his notion of the “will to believe.” As John J. McDermott puts it, “Having rejected suicide in favor of the possibility of a creative life unsupported by certitude, James developed a doctrine to sustain such a belief” (*Writings* xxvii).¹⁰

However, although this story about James’s breakdown and successful recovery constitutes the standard narrative about the arc of James’s life and career, it is worth mentioning that Louis Menand, in his 1998 essay “William James and the Case of the Epileptic Patient,” has undertaken a detailed, detective-like examination of these episodes in James’s life and writings, and argues that considerable uncertainty remains about when these events occurred and how we should view their import. Menand quite persuasively questions the neat “crisis and recovery narrative” that has become inextricable from discussions of James. He argues that readers, beginning with some of those closest to James himself, like his son Henry, have long distorted what may have actually occurred by isolating James’s later description of mental disturbance in *Varieties of Religious Experience* and the 1870 diary entry about free will and putting them together to create a tidy story of mental collapse and recuperation. However, Menand says, these two pieces of evidence “were plucked from a fragmentary record and erected into the narrative emblems of a breakdown and recovery.” Why? Because

the story of a philosophical-spiritual crisis overcome by “the will to believe” is conveniently symmetrical with James’s writings in *The Will to Believe* (1897) and *Pragmatism* (1907), writings which exhort us to act “as if” in the face of uncertainty—to believe that if we take a risk, the universe will meet us halfway. The biography is shaped to lend

authenticity to the philosophy: James, too, knew pessimism and despair, and this is how he overcame them.

This sounds all well and good. “Except,” Menand goes on, “he didn’t overcome them. . . . James was depressive all his life.” Rather than turning to philosophy as a balm for his spiritual and mental crisis, Menand argues, in reality James continued to struggle with melancholy for decades.

Although Menand’s caveats about the constructed nature of this accepted crisis-and-breakthrough narrative are valuable to bear in mind, James’s philosophy does indeed seem to begin with the recognition (found in the 1870 diary entry) that the self can and needs to be an active and creative agent in an unstable and uncertain world, and this belief does seem to have—at least temporarily—assuaged his terrifying realization of the “pit of insecurity beneath the surface of life” (*Writings* 6). You do not have to accept the convenient notion that James hit on a permanent “cure” for his existential crisis at this moment, or that he put his battles with depression forever to rest, to find it convincing that, as McDermott notes, James’s rejection “of the real possibility of suicide” marked “a decisive break in his attitude toward death and signaled his new belief in the creative dimensions of personal experience” (“Introduction,” xxvii). Although James continued to struggle with unhappiness and doubt, that new belief, and the sustenance it provided in the face of a calamitous and bewildering universe, seems to have found tangible form in the philosophical underpinnings of radical empiricism, pluralism, pragmatism, and the will to believe.

As I have suggested, Frank O’Hara weathered a crisis of his own that mirrors William James’s experience in fascinating, telling ways. At the age of twenty-two, O’Hara similarly found himself questioning all the sources of stability that he had once taken for granted. In 1948, during the fall and winter of his junior year at Harvard, O’Hara, in the words of his biographer, “suddenly dipped into a strong depression . . . [that] shadowed him for months” (Gooch 127–8). This intense struggle was recorded in what appears to be the only journal O’Hara ever kept. Although O’Hara’s meditations in this diary contain so many seeds of his later aesthetic and philosophical sensibility, its (literally) pivotal revelations have been barely mentioned by his critics.¹¹ Although it has the occasional ring of a forlorn, arty, and slightly pretentious youth’s private outpourings, both the phrasing and the concepts it contains notably resemble key motifs in the thought of Emerson and James. Perhaps the combination of influences I discussed above—reading deeply in Emerson, Whitman, and modern

American poetry, studying American literature with F. O. Matthiessen, and so on—welled up in this time of despair and produced an amalgam that would become O'Hara's own characteristic stance. In its pages, one meets O'Hara's later obsessions in embryonic form.

Deeply shaken by his father's abrupt death at forty-eight two years earlier, faced with wrenching doubts about his beliefs, his identity, and his future, O'Hara suffered months of melancholy during which he wrestled with searing existential dilemmas. "Utter depression," he confided to his journal. "If one could manage not to think. Life might become bearable. The less one thought, the less one might mind anything" (*Early* 98, 100). Although he had been raised a Catholic, O'Hara now confronted profound doubts about religion and Christianity: he wondered "Is there a god?" and admitted in his diary that "I know now that Satan lives, and I have not yet made up my mind which side I am on" (*Early* 101, 98).

In the midst of this funk, O'Hara, like James, considered killing himself: "I often wish I had the strength to commit suicide, but on the other hand, if I had, I probably wouldn't feel the need. God! Can't you let us win once in a while?" (*Early* 100). Again like James, O'Hara ultimately chose to set aside suicide as an option: "I refuse to be a slave; if life were merely a habit I should commit suicide; but even now, moreorless desperate, I cannot but think 'Something wonderful may happen.' It is not optimism, it is a rejection of self-pity (I hope) which leaves a loop-hole for life" (*Early* 108). This defiant opposition to habit's stultifying effect, this refusal to surrender to limitation, this rejection of self-pity are all tremendously important to O'Hara and his later work, as well as being core motifs in Emerson and James.

Here, faced with a dawning recognition of the radical evanescence and disillusioning limitations characterizing human experience, O'Hara tries to convince himself that life remains full of open-ended possibilities, unforeseeable opportunities for "something wonderful" to appear suddenly—this possibility, and only this, is the "loop-hole" that allows life to seem bearable. Even at twenty-two, O'Hara wards off an easy, naively pollyannaish outlook; instead, he sees the embrace of undefined possibility as simply a refusal to bemoan one's fate and mortal lot, not blind "optimism." Furthermore, O'Hara will repeatedly raise the issue of "self-pity" throughout his career, as his characteristic melancholy will frequently lead him to feel balanced on the edge of an abyss of despairing sentimentality and self-pity that he continually pushes away from, bristling when he thinks others see him and his work as awash in it.¹²

Both the phrasing and the philosophical ideas expressed in O'Hara's dramatic resolution are eerily similar to James's famous decision to exercise his own free will. O'Hara even echoes James's notion of the "will to believe" when he decides to believe in something unverifiable and possibly fictional solely because of the beneficial consequences it bestows on the believer:

I merely choose to remain living out of respect for possibility. And possibility is the great good: it is neither cowardice nor masochism to suffer as long as one believes in possibility. We must have courage to choose and to choose the nebulous possible positive rather than the definitive negative. (*Early* 109)

Turning away from the static finality of any "definitive" thing, and towards the open-ended, "nebulous" plurality of possibilities, the young O'Hara ventures forth from this depression as a thorough-going pragmatist and Emersonian individualist in all but name. Like James, O'Hara decides that living entails taking a leap in the dark: "Believe that life *is* worth living," James instructed in *The Will to Believe*, "and your belief will help create that fact."

In other passages of his journal, O'Hara declares the importance of remaining staunchly independent in matters personal, social, and artistic, revealing that he has fully absorbed the lessons of Emerson's "Self-Reliance." In that classic text of American individualism, Emerson had warned that "Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members... The virtue in most request is conformity Whoso must be a man must be a nonconformist" (*Essays* 261). O'Hara closely echoes Emerson's exhortation against conformity in his journal, as he warns himself about the pressures of society that would make all individuals alike—"the impulse, the, at times, compulsion, toward normalcy must be avoided, when its fulfillment is known to be unsatisfactory, and when the endeavor is, as it is by definition, inferior to that possible through idiosyncratic behavior" (*Early* 101). O'Hara declares that in order to navigate a world that so quickly hardens into conformity and dead conventions you must rely on your own eccentric, dynamic movement and resist forces that would constrain individual creativity:

One must live in a way; we must channel, there is not time nor space, one must hurry, one must avoid the impediments, snares, detours; one must not be stifled in a closed social or artistic railway station waiting for the train; I've a long long way to go, and I'm late already. What is known

as the normal social day-to-day existence is successful in only two ways: it passes the time, it stifles the creative impulse. (*Early* 101).

In another passage, O'Hara records his experience of a solitary winter walk, an "afternoon full of physical well-being and joy," that comes crashing to a close when he returns to Harvard and his classmates only to find the insidious conformity that lurks there, a timid homogeneity from which he longs to be separate: "Back at school the same old depression reestablished itself, settling over me like the brown stain of the dining hall's walls. That hall full of people worrying about what anyone else is saying or thinking about them! Why should anyone stifle an impulse to be uniform? *Je ne suis pas comme les autres*, if I remember Rousseau, and if I am not better, at least I am different" (*Early* 108). This paean to idiosyncrasy and self-reliance is not merely the product of a young man's rebellion against the status quo, but also a perpetual concern for O'Hara throughout his career, and a profound element of his aesthetic outlook. "*If I am not better, at least I am different*"—the concept, so dear to O'Hara early and late, could stand as a kind of motto for poets steeped in the lineage of American individualism. The individual, the artist, seeks not priority, not superiority, but a crucial, saving *difference* from other people, other artists. Where traditional philosophies have emphasized "the general, the common, the same and the one," pragmatists like O'Hara value "particularity, individuality, difference, and plurality" (Stuhr 41).

Another characteristic of O'Hara's mature poetics begins to form in the darkness of this crisis: a sense that the world, and everything in it, including his own identity, is marked by flux, motion, and transience:

The fragility of things terrifies me! However belligerent the cactus, ash from a casual cigarette withers its bloom; the blackest puddle greys at the first drop of rain; everything fades fades changes dies when it's meddled with; if only things weren't so vulnerable! We're all children playing naked in the sun! (*Early* 109)

In this passage, O'Hara seems to recoil from the sting of these revelations, the idea that the universe is utterly ephemeral and unstable, lacking any eternal truth or foundations whatsoever. In another entry, he writes:

Life moves too fast to be apprehended. Against death art is the only barrier, in that it is a recreation in sensible tempo of the components of life's fugue (*Early* 106).

Time after time in his later poetry, O'Hara will posit (and question the viability of) this very role for art: as a verbal expression of life's rapid "fugue," and as an albeit limited, temporary, yet necessary stay against dissolution and death. Only through art, through poetry, can one even hope to remain "a step away from" death's inevitable approach; however, the irony and tension in O'Hara's poems often stem from his inability to believe that art *can* be such a barrier to time or effective recorder of life's furious passage. His growing skepticism towards any attempts to apprehend and explain fully or objectively the riotous dynamism of life leads him to remark that "surely [the artist Fuseli's comment that] 'Life is rapid, art is slow, occasion coy, practice fallacious, and judgment partial' says about everything" (*Early* 106).

The final entry in the journal serves as a climactic discussion of the aesthetic and philosophical issues that have plagued him throughout the crisis, matters that will remain of great importance to him. In it, O'Hara quotes Mary McCarthy's observation that "the most harrowing experience of man [is] the failure to feel steadily, to be able to compose a continuous pattern" (*Early* 109). This comment prompts a series of reflections about how and whether we can sense of our fleeting, kinetic experience, as well as whether an artist must follow any imposed pattern.

Responding to McCarthy's remark, O'Hara wonders "but if one does feel steadily and the pattern is horrific?" As if engaged in strenuous debate with himself about these complicated issues, he goes on:

I do maintain that there is no greatness divorced from being, that being is all, further, and that there is no greatness, merely the tawdry pawns of an avaricious, self-protective admiration on the part of other people, pawns, prizes to seduce the artist into imbecility, a dirty rose for the bosom of art to make it look cheap and whorish, when the whore is something else, something which sells itself for anything... (*Early* 109–110)

Bristling with a blossoming nonconformist's hostility towards conventional forms of recognition, such as prizes and praise from the guardians of culture, O'Hara feels that the thirst for popularity, for acceptance by the crowd, makes artists into "tawdry pawns." He shares Emily Dickinson's fear that "Publication—is the Auction / Of the Mind of Man" and concludes that it can only lead to the cooptation and commodification of the artist. O'Hara seems to equate all these things with lies, with a falsely imposed pattern, with the opposite of uncontained "being." Thus, the journal proves prophetic in another way, as O'Hara would go on to have surprisingly

little interest in conventional markers of achievement and a notoriously ambivalent attitude toward seeing his work captured in the immutable print of publication.

O'Hara continues to ponder McCarthy's observation, and to wonder about whether any permanent or stable forms of "order"—to use Wallace Stevens's quite similar vocabulary—are tenable, whether any "continuous pattern" can be drawn or "composed" from our experience:

I feel steadily but there is no pattern, there can be no pattern, there is only being; you cannot sell yourself, you cannot stand that far apart from your self to dicker, if there is any integrity in you. There is only the giving of self and the having, the always being; you must be to always love and always create, the artist is and always loves and always creates and cannot help but love and create...

Here O'Hara arrives at a pragmatist resistance to any and all monistic explanations or definitions of experience. Instead, he claims that life entails merely sensing and feeling and going forward, only to find more amorphous "being," a new welter of experiences—what James calls "the booming, buzzing confusion" of experience, with no final, absolute, or identifiable order waiting to be found (qtd. John Smith, 47). At the same time, he recognizes that this state of affairs, the patternlessness of existence, is what allows the creative person to continue doing what he or she must—loving and creating in the absence of any fixed orders or answers. The goal for the individual, or the artist, in O'Hara's eyes, is not a lofty, transcendent one; it is rather to accept that one's self is at best a contingent, vital element that suffers, creates, and loves in a mutable world that lacks any steady pattern or order:

I do not mean that only the artist achieves being; I am not metaphysical, quite vulgarly I mean realization of personality, but it is in the being as an entity, and in the realizing of things as entities, that one establishes being, that one lives. There is no need for a pattern if one lives, for in the realization of being one can cope with life as it comes with suffering but no bitterness.

This idea that "one can cope with life as it comes with suffering but no bitterness" resounds with pragmatism's attitude toward experience. This American tradition has always been one that conceives of life as a "real fight"—that sizes up the world as a dangerous, ambition-thwarting place,

gauges the possibilities, and responds accordingly and, always, provisionally. The "safety" of the world, James warned, is "unwarranted. It is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through" (qtd. Mitchell 102). Pragmatism, following Emerson, has always insisted on "the inescapability of chance and contingency—on what Dewey called the 'precariousness of existence' where the world is 'a scene of risk' and is 'uncannily unstable' (qtd. Bernstein 388). Richard J. Bernstein argues that one of pragmatism's major themes is "the awareness and sensitivity to radical contingency and chance that mark the universe, our inquiries, our lives" (388). Pragmatism accepts that "we live in 'an open universe' which is always at once threatening and a source of tragedy and opportunity. This is why the pragmatists placed so much emphasis on how we are to respond to contingencies" (389).

Awakened to the fact that human experience is necessarily fragmentary, fleeting, and unfulfilling, O'Hara rather heroically decides to plunge forward into life anyway, with as little bitterness as possible. Just when the suffering of life seems about to overpower one's will to believe, one's will to continue to live and love and create, a refusal to give in to defeat takes over. In the journal's final words, O'Hara's claims for art, for poetry, for the self, as well as for this philosophical viewpoint, are limited and tentative, in keeping with the adherence to the provisional so common to his pragmatist forbears and contemporaries.

I have not achieved being. I face sacrifice with the trembling of the coward, and suffering is deep enough and dark enough to extinguish the flame; but trembling is not defeat; I love, I create and I almost am. (*Early* 110)

The last lines of O'Hara's journal echo Emerson's characteristic statements of perseverance in the face of life's mishaps, emergencies, and losses, such as when he says "never mind the defeat: up again, old heart!" at the end of "Experience" or "I am *Defeated* all the time; yet to Victory I am born" in his journal (*Essays* 492; *Selections* 209). O'Hara's emphasis on such key terms as "suffer" and "create" also seems to recall rather uncannily the diction of James's conclusion: in the last lines of his famous diary entry, James declares that henceforth "life shall [be built in] doing and suffering and creating" (*Writings* 8).¹³

O'Hara's later poems will fluctuate with precisely this rhythm of near-defeat and resilient affirmation, as they ponder "how we are to respond to contingencies" and trace the poet's unwillingness to give into despair—like

when he rallies his own forces in “Hôtel Transylvanie,” asserting “you will continue to refuse to die for yourself/ you will continue to sing on trying to cheer everyone up,” or when he rejects the possibility of death and “prepare[s] calmly to face almost everything that will come up” in “Joe’s Jacket” (*Collected* 350, 330). In his later masterpieces, O’Hara echoes and builds on this stirring moment of artistic and intellectual arrival.

It is at this moment of crisis that both men seem to decide that life will be about “suffering and creating.” The young William James turns away from self-destruction convinced of his purpose in a wholly contingent world, assuaged by his decision to believe in the “creative power” of the individual (*Writings* 8). Like James, O’Hara seems to have discovered a sense of vocation at the nadir of his despair—“I am romantic enough or sentimental enough,” O’Hara admits, “to wish to contribute something to life’s fabric, to the world’s beauty” (105)—and decides that no matter what, he will, he must, live a creative life:

Simply to live does not justify existence, for life is a mere gesture on the surface of the earth, and death a return to that from which we had never been wholly separated; but oh to leave a trace, no matter how faint, of that brief gesture! For someone, some day, may find it beautiful! (*Early* 105)

However, neither James, as I mentioned earlier, nor O’Hara find any measure of permanent solace or consolation in the optimism that characterizes this new outlook. In his biography of O’Hara, Brad Gooch portrays this episode as a rather isolated crisis, but O’Hara’s bout with depression at Harvard would not be his last, despite the contagious *joie de vivre* that pervades his work. Shadowed by intermittently serious depression the rest of his life, O’Hara seemed largely able to keep desperation at bay through his active engagement in his great passions—writing poetry, immersing himself in the arts, drinking, love, and friendship.

A profound sense of melancholy continues to course through both men’s lives and works, forever mingled with a bright, attentive exuberance towards experience, a mixture that seems to typify the pragmatist sensibility. With James, there is a sense that his rugged, hearty exhortations are always barely masking a deeper sense of anxiety and sadness: “If it can be said that James assented to ‘The Will to Believe’ until the end,” John McDermott notes, “we must caution that it was a belief always shot through with irresolution and doubt. Behind the consistent cadences of a rich and future-oriented prose, there lurked a well-controlled but omnipresent sense of despair”

(“Introduction,” xxvii). Menand teases out these tensions even further, stating: James “created a philosophy of hope expressly premised on the understanding that there is, finally, no reason for hope ... What lends authenticity to his philosophy is not its triumph over the unhappiness in his own life, but its failure” (“William James”).

These contradictions resemble the mixture of attitudes that surges through O’Hara’s poems and makes them so complicated and so effective as works of art. As David Lehman notes—quantifying the classic O’Hara sadness/happiness ratio rather precisely—the poet’s “distinctive tone” is “two parts melancholy, three parts joy” (170). For example, in an extremely Jamesian, upbeat yet desperate poem, “Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul,” O’Hara strives to believe that happiness and fulfillment are just around the corner, that

surely we shall not continue to be unhappy
we shall be happy
but we shall continue to be ourselves everything continues to be possible
Rene Char, Pierre Reverdy, Samuel Beckett it is possible isn’t it
I love Reverdy for saying yes, though I don’t believe it (*Collected* 329)

This passage evokes a version of James’s “will to believe”—drawing on the idea that, as Wallace Stevens put it, “it might be possible to yield, or to try to yield, ourselves to a declared fiction” (*Letters* 443). This strenuous, perhaps ultimately doomed, effort to believe in what he cannot epitomize O’Hara’s characteristic merging of affirmation and doubt.

Chastened by their glimpse into the abyss, both James and O’Hara went on to create immensely influential, charming, moving, and inspiring bodies of work that refuse the temptation of philosophically or artistically reducing reality to “a dealable-with system”—ever wary that do so risks distorting life, taming its complexities, and courting “illness both from inside and outside” (*Collected* 495). Like William James, O’Hara would spend his career exploring the idea that both the world and consciousness are everywhere in motion, transient, brimming with possibility, and devoid of certainty. As James said, “no word”—and, one might extend this to say no poem or philosophical theory or novel or painting—“closes your quest,” for worse *and* for better. James claimed that rather than arriving at any form of closure, “the word ‘and’ trails along after every sentence”; and, almost as if inspired by this very notion, O’Hara goes on to develop a distinctive poetry that is syntactically open and strung together with

ands (*Writings* 806). Surely enough, as he puts this worldview into poetic practice, composing rambling, mobile, and radically open-ended poems that often drift off without a final period become O'Hara's forte.

"Always possibility, often celebration, frequently mishap and never absolute certitude": John McDermott's description of John Dewey's pragmatist philosophy could easily stand as an apt motto for the poetry of Frank O'Hara (*Streams* 35). Rather than being an anti-philosophical poet, O'Hara draws on a certain *kind* of philosophy—one that deliberately turns away from metaphysics and absolute answers, while at the same time refusing to surrender to hopelessness or nihilism. As Morris Dickstein observes,

the pragmatists tend to be exuberant and constructive rather than pessimistic. The dark and apocalyptic strain of modernism held little appeal for them; the rupture with past certainties opened up new horizons. They saw "the quest for certainty" as the futile and misguided remnant of an outworn metaphysics, and they take the new, contingent, human-centered world as a source of opportunity and possibility. (4–5)

American pragmatist thinkers and poets are continually contemplating "how we are to respond to contingencies" in a world of flux, stripped of certitude and teleology (Bernstein 389). The answers must always remain undefined and in process, but, like the "sun" in the O'Hara poem that I quoted in my epigraph, they seem to "hang always promising some nebulous / healthy reaction to our native dark" (*Collected* 352). After rejecting the allure of suicide and choosing instead to believe in the chance that "something wonderful may happen" despite all appearances to the contrary, O'Hara, like James, went on to spend his life creating hymns to a world of nebulous possibilities and pluralistic meanings. Both O'Hara and James, at crucial moments in their development, seemed to hit on the recognition that such an approach to life is the healthiest way one can respond to "our native dark"—the best method of staying a step away from "the definitive negative" and the prison of closure, certitude, and stasis.

Notes

¹ There are several exceptions to this general neglect of O'Hara's links to pragmatist thought and Emersonian poetics, most importantly Michael Magee's book *Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing* (2004). Magee's

is the most extensive discussion to date of the relationship between pragmatism and postwar American literature more broadly, and makes a strong case for pragmatism's influence on postwar writers, including O'Hara, Ralph Ellison, and Robert Duncan. See also Richard Poirier's "The Scenes of the Self," a brief yet illuminating 1993 review essay on O'Hara that ostensibly evaluates Brad Gooch's biography of O'Hara. Poirier implicitly argues for O'Hara's role in the Emersonian pragmatist tradition he sketches in *The Renewal of Literature* and *Poetry and Pragmatism*. See also David Jarraway's recently published *Going the Distance*, which uses pragmatism to frame its argument about subjectivity in "modernist American literature" (within which he includes Frank O'Hara).

² See my study, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (2006) particularly Chapters 3 and 6, which focus on O'Hara and discuss his pragmatist poetics.

³ See, for example, Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, Richard Poirier's two groundbreaking studies, *The Renewal of Literature* and *Poetry and Pragmatism*, Frank Lentricchia, *Ariel and the Police* and *Modernist Quartet*, Jonathan Levin, *The Poetics of Transition*, Ross Posnock, *Color and Culture*, along with numerous others.

⁴ For example, see Morris Dickstein's introduction to *The Revival of Pragmatism*, where he argues that "the reaction against pragmatism became even more marked after World War II, abetted by a variety of new influences including existentialism, crisis theology, the cold war, psychoanalysis, European modernism, and a cultural conservatism bred of growing prosperity and the fear of Communism" (9). For a similar argument, see Louis Menand's discussion in *The Metaphysical Club* (438–442) about why after World War II pragmatism "seemed to go into almost total eclipse. A movement of thought that had grown out of the experience of the Civil War appeared to reach an end with the Cold War" (438).

⁵ Again, see my *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (2006), which argues that O'Hara, John Ashbery, and the early Amiri Baraka should be viewed as important figures within the pragmatist tradition. The book focuses on the conflict between friendship and individualism that rages at the heart of the postwar American avant-garde by situating the poetry and the communities from which it emerged within the context of Emersonian pragmatism and Cold War culture.

⁶ On Eliot, Harvard, and pragmatism, see Menand, "Pragmatism and Poets." He makes the case that "Eliot has, if this matters, a much firmer claim to the pragmatist philosophical tradition than Frost or Stein or Stevens ever did. He wrote a doctoral dissertation in the Harvard department that William James created, and if he had not met Ezra Pound in and married Vivien Haigh-Wood when he went to London in 1914, he would very likely have become a member of the department himself. For years, Eliot's dissertation was ludicrously misread, when it was not ludicrously unread, by the Eliot scholarly establishment, but as Walter Michaels has shown, and as Eliot himself virtually admitted, it is a pragmatist dissertation" (367). The reference is to Walter Benn Michaels, "Philosophy in Kinkanja: Eliot's Pragmatism," *Glyph* 8 (1981): 170–202.

7 As David Bergman observes, “today [Matthiessen] is regarded as the most influential writer on American culture of the 1930s and 1940s. As a teacher at Harvard, he personally influenced an entire generation of students and scholars” (“Matthiessen” 62). Matthiessen specialized in the American tradition stretching from Emerson through the Jameses to the modern poetry of Eliot and Stevens and was an expert on pragmatism, having published his book *The James Family* (1947) while O’Hara and Ashbery were at Harvard. *The American Renaissance* (1941), his massive study of nineteenth-century literature, did much to crystallize the critical consensus about the innovative, distinctive genius of Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorne, and Whitman.

8 Michael Magee maps out some of the contours of this heritage in his argument that O’Hara should be read as a pragmatist, emphasizing his connections to the pragmatist poetics of Stein, Williams, Paul Goodman, and, ultimately, jazz. See *Emancipating Pragmatism*, and especially, his chapter “Tribes of New York: Frank O’Hara, Amiri Baraka, and the Poetics of the Five Spot” (129–175).

9 This famous description of melancholia and mental calamity appears in James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* not as James’s first-person account of his own experience, but rather as the case history of a disturbed Frenchman. However, Louis Menand explains, “as everyone now knows, the business about the Frenchman was a pretense,” because James later admitted that the story was really his own (“William James”). Although the episode has been viewed as autobiographical since shortly after James died in 1910, Menand usefully explores the story’s complex, ambiguous status as personal disclosure and warns us about taking it too literally as autobiography.

10 On James’s crisis of 1870, see McDermott’s introduction to James’s *Writings*, xxvii–xxx, and McDermott, *Streams*, 23–26; 46–49. For an exhaustive and highly skeptical re-examination of this event and its impact, see Louis Menand’s essay, “William James and the Case of the Epileptic Patient.”

11 For one account of O’Hara’s depression and his journal keeping, see Gooch, 127–131. Gooch convincingly portrays this depression as “more truly a confrontation with questions of meaning and vocation” than a result of “realizing he was a homosexual,” a fact, it seems to me, O’Hara knew years earlier in high school, if not in the Navy. “After January 1949, he never again returned to any sort of diary-keeping or self-analysis, but was poised to burn furiously as a writer” (128).

12 For example, see O’Hara’s letter to Fairfield Porter, where he self-deprecatingly comments that his own work is full of “spleen and ironically intimate observation which may be truthfulness (in the lyrical sense) but is more likely to be egotistical cynicism masquerading as honesty” (Gooch 268); see also “Post the Lake Poets Ballad” where O’Hara reacts to Larry Rivers’s comment in a letter about his own “gorgeous self-pity” (*Collected* 326). On the conflict regarding his own tendency towards sentimentality, see Gooch 29, and elsewhere.

13 The brackets denote that these words in the manuscript of James’s diary are “doubtful” (difficult to decipher) (8).

Works Cited

- Bergman, David. “F. O. Matthiessen: The Critic as Homosexual.” *Raritan* 9.4 (1990): 62–82.
- Bernstein, Richard J. “Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds.” *Menand, Pragmatism* 382–401.
- Dickstein, Morris. *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture*. Durham: Duke UP, 1998.
- Elledge, Jim, ed. *Frank O’Hara: To Be True to a City*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1990.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Essays and Lectures*. New York: Library of America, 1983.
- . *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson: An Organic Anthology*. Ed. Stephen E. Whicher. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957.
- Epstein, Andrew. *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry*. New York: Oxford UP, 2006.
- Gooch, Brad. *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O’Hara*. New York: Knopf, 1993.
- James, William. *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*. Ed. John J. McDermott. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1977.
- Jarraway, David. *Going the Distance: Dissident Subjectivity in Modernist American Literature*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2003.
- Lehman, David. *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets*. New York: Doubleday, 1998.
- Lentricchia, Frank. *Ariel and the Police: Michel Foucault, William James, Wallace Stevens*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1988.
- . *Criticism and Social Change*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983.
- . *Modernist Quartet*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Levin, Jonathan. *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999.
- Magee, Michael. *Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2004.
- Matthiessen, F. O. *The American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. London: Oxford UP, 1941.
- . *The James Family: Including Selections from the Writings of Henry James, Senior, William, Henry & Alice James*. New York: Knopf, 1947.
- McDermott, John J. “Introduction: Person, Process, and the Risk of Belief.” *James, Writings* ix–l.
- . *Streams of Experience: Reflections on the History and Philosophy of American Culture*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1986.

Menand, Louis. *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*. New York: Farrar Straus, 2001.

---. "Pragmatism and Poets: A Response to Richard Poirier." Dickstein 362-69.

---, ed. *Pragmatism: A Reader*. New York: Vintage, 1997.

---. "William James and the Case of the Epileptic Patient." *New York Review of Books* 17 Dec. 1998: 81+.

Mitchell, Charles E. *Individualism and its Discontents: Appropriations of Emerson, 1880-1950*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1997.

O'Hara, Frank. *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*. Ed. Donald Allen. Berkeley: U of California P, 1971.

---. *Early Writing*. Ed. Donald Allen. Bolinas CA: Grey Fox, 1977.

Poirier, Richard. *Poetry and Pragmatism*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992.

---. *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1987.

---. "The Scenes of the Self." Rev. of *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* by Brad Gooch. *New Republic* 2 Aug. 1993: 33-39.

Posnock, Ross. *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998.

Richardson, Robert D., Jr. *Emerson: The Mind on Fire: A Biography*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1995.

Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.

Rosenthal, Sandra B., Carl R. Hausman, and Douglas R. Anderson. *Classical American Pragmatism: Its Contemporary Validity*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1999.

Smith, John E. *The Spirit of American Philosophy*. New York, Oxford UP, 1963.

Stevens, Wallace. *Letters of Wallace Stevens*. Ed. Holly Stevens. Berkeley: U of California P, 1996.

Stuhr, John J. "William James's Pragmatism: Purpose, Practice, and Pluralism." Rosenthal, 31-44.

Vendler, Helen. "The Virtues of the Alterable." Elledge 234-252.

Ward, Geoff. *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poetry*. New York: St. Martin's, 1993.

West, Cornel. *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989.

Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition*. Ed. Malcolm Cowley. New York: Penguin, 1959.

As Difficult as Rain

the snow on the glass as it melts.

Another border to ignore by crossing—

But why not stop
and turn to squint
at the streaks as they dry to burden,
wreck the window, make it less.

Why not focus on the failure of glass
to guide the eye through,
watch the snow harden

and not fall.