

'Safe in your thoughtful arms'

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‘safe in your thoughtful arms’:

the radical friendship of Frank O’Hara and Allen Ginsberg

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Post-war American poetry has long been defined by stories of friendship and non-conformity, and as Brian Glavey notes, in an essay on New York School poet Joe Brainard, ‘taking these dynamics seriously ... has helped call attention to the way that poets’ allegiances and rivalries provide a forum for thinking about individuality, creativity, and personal autonomy’. Such allegiances, dramatized in the cultural productions of groups including the Beats and the New York School, also illuminate larger contexts and social systems. The politics of such groups are found as much in the practice of the writers as in the content of their writing – in their mode of belonging, a form of sociable organization that existed outside of the politics, economics, and culture of mainstream American society. The dynamic and enduring friendship between Allen Ginsberg and Frank O’Hara, leading figures in Beat and New York School circles respectively, reveals the ways in which it was possible to resist the forcefully venerated post-war ideals of uncompromising heterosexual masculinity and the nuclear family, through cultivating queer male friendships that flew, as Andrew Epstein writes, in [*Beautiful Enemies*](#), ‘straight in the face of normative constructions of masculinity, acceptable male relationships, and the family’.

O’Hara and Ginsberg, for overlapping periods of time, occupied the same places – literally, but also in terms of influence and interest, sharing both literary forebears and friends. Both queer, and almost exactly the same age, they first met in the early 1950s, and became further acquainted when Ginsberg returned from San Francisco to New York in 1956. Later they both lived on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, attended poetry readings together, and would often visit each other’s apartments, proving important to each other both creatively and personally. The friendship between them can be traced in their writing, from O’Hara’s conversation about music and the movies with a hungover Ginsberg through a bathroom door in the poem [*Fantasy*](#), to Ginsberg’s 1966 elegy for O’Hara, [*City Midnight Junk Strains*](#) (‘chattering Frank / stopped forever’). It can be seen, too, in a photograph of Ginsberg at O’Hara’s funeral, heavy with grief as he walks away from his graveside, his arm around another of O’Hara’s beloved friends, poet Kenneth Koch. And it is there in [rare footage](#) of

Ginsberg and O'Hara together, along with Amiri Baraka and Ray Bremser, taken by Jonas Mekas at the Living Theater, in the late 1950s. They shared literary influences in anti-establishment forebears Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams, dynamic synergies between their respective literary circles, a love of New York, a reciprocal belief in the inclusive nature of poetry ('there were no kings and queens of poetry', Ginsberg said), and common experiences of living openly queer in a society obsessed with surveillance and purges of gay men. Their poetry is at once a social text rich with interpersonal relations and a site of enquiry pertaining to Cold War culture.

Frank O'Hara was known as a warm and expressive person – the kind of person who would invite a stranger in off the street to a party, simply because he had spoken to them. In his riotous mock-manifesto, '[Personism](#)' (1961), he asserts that poetry should be 'between two persons instead of two pages', and recalls the realization, which sparked 'Personism' in the first place, that instead of writing a poem to someone he was in love with, 'he could use the telephone'. Ginsberg suggested that O'Hara 'felt that any gesture he made was poetry, and poetry in that sense was totally democratic'. Ginsberg, too, was convivial and uncensored both in writing and in life, also writing at the centre of a large coterie, also making no distinction between what he told his friends and what he told his Muse. Neither, to borrow from Russell Ferguson, writing in *In Memory of My Feelings* (1999), aimed 'to flaunt his erudition, but rather to submerge its deeper content in the embrace of the quotidian; to write always in the now of a particular time and place'.

This is not to say that their writing was necessarily confessional. Indeed, Ginsberg and O'Hara came together partly as a result of being excluded from the privileged, more establishment group of confessional poets writing at the same time – including Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath. There is an important distinction between the attention O'Hara pays to the minutiae of his everyday life, and what was deemed confessional writing. The poet John Ashbery suggests that while O'Hara's poetry is 'almost exclusively autobiographical ... there is little that is confessional about it – he does not linger over aspects of himself hoping that contrition his self-absorption will make them seem exemplary'. Ginsberg also took this approach to writing about himself and his friends, navigating a path between privacy and publicity by addressing an audience which was constructed by and contained within the poetry in question. As queer men living and writing amid the spectre of McCarthyism O'Hara and Ginsberg were invested in resisting the prevailing cultural and political emphasis on open confession and repentance, preferring instead the intimacy of a trusted coterie.

Ginsberg subscribed to O'Hara's notion that poetry should occur between people rather than pages – or, as Ginsberg put it in his 'Notes for *Howl and Other Poems*', between 'my own soul's ear and a few other golden ears'. Ginsberg was someone O'Hara felt was worth both writing about and talking to within the context of his poetry. He appears frequently, often in passing references to the various comings and goings of 'Allen' or 'Allen and Peter' (Peter Orlovsky, Ginsberg's partner), seen in the poems '[All that gas](#)', 'John Button Birthday', '[Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul](#)', 'Poem ('Now the violets are all gone)', 'Post the Lake Poets Ballad', and 'Vincent and I Inaugurate a Movie Theater', for example. In the latter poem, in which O'Hara and his boyfriend see Ginsberg and Orlovsky from across the theater, his connection with Ginsberg becomes enmeshed with the media, with Hollywood and with queer spaces such as the movies. Movie theatres at mid-century offered a space where one could maintain a degree of privacy in public – where people could sit together in darkness, perhaps engaging in sexual activity, perhaps not, but either way sharing the same space without policing each other's activities. He also appears directly, in the 1964 poem '[Fantasy \(dedicated to the health of Allen Ginsberg\)](#)', in which O'Hara enacts a conversation half with Ginsberg and half with himself, about the campy 1943 Errol Flynn spy movie [Northern Pursuit](#). During the poem O'Hara concocts a home-made Alka-Selzer for the hungover Ginsberg who is languishing in the bathroom, urging 'Allen' to 'come out of the bathroom and take it' before enquiring, affectionately: 'Allen are you feeling any better?', even as he continues to muse on the merits of the movie.

Ginsberg appears again in Alfred Leslie's 1964 film [The Last Clean Shirt, for which](#) O'Hara provided the subtitles. O'Hara addresses Ginsberg directly in a shot from the last third of the film, saying: 'Allen I wish we were uptown doing the "Bronx Tambourine"'. He also addresses him indirectly in a sequence which begins 'India! India! India!', implicitly referring to Ginsberg's extensive subcontinental travels, and continues: 'My friends are roaming ... and listening to La Bohème', once again a reference to 'Allen and Peter's' travels and bohemian lifestyle. O'Hara's friends – their stories and their adventures – made their way into O'Hara's work. We find Ginsberg in O'Hara's work because Ginsberg was in O'Hara's life, and their friendship provided sustenance, both intimate and literary

Ginsberg, in his turn, felt that O'Hara was worth writing *to*, and, later, talking *about*. He effused in *The Village Voice* that O'Hara 'taught me to really see New York for the first time, by making the giant style of Midtown his intimate cocktail environment. It's like having Catullus change your view of the Forum in Rome'. Speaking of his talent in integrating

‘purely personal life into the high art of composition’, he celebrated O’Hara’s compulsion to write poems about his friends, explaining that it was ‘a serious Whitmanic-Williams move and based on the same principles as Abstract Expressionist painting ... which was that the actual gestures of the body are poetry, that ordinary mind, ordinary life is poetic’. In a 1982 series of classes at Naropa University, Ginsberg recalled that O’Hara was simply ‘the coolest guy around’. He dedicated two poems to him. ‘[My Sad Self](#)’ was written in 1958, and in it Ginsberg uses a view of Manhattan from a height followed by immersion in the city streets to explore his psychic history. O’Hara’s poem ‘Naphtha’, written a couple of years later, echoes ‘My Sad Self’ in its related employment of the affective qualities of the city to explore his anxiety and unease with relation to his time, his legacy, and his creative pressures and precedents. Ginsberg’s second poem dedicated to O’Hara is his elegy, ‘[City Midnight Junk Strains](#)’, written after O’Hara’s untimely death on Fire Island at the age of forty, in 1966. The poem, which Ginsberg wrote in an apartment on the Lower East Side two nights after attending O’Hara’s funeral, is a loving testament to his friend’s expansive capacity for friendship and ‘deep gossip’. He mourns the loss of O’Hara, ‘the gaudy poet ... the chatty prophet ... beloved poet far from home ... 40’s only half a life to have filled / with so many fine parties’, and longs for

your / broken roman nose

your wet mouth-smell of martinis

& big artistic tipsy kiss.

But he also simultaneously celebrates the power of radical friendship – and the formation of queer families – as he evokes O’Hara’s ‘family of decade-olden friends’, and imagines joining him ‘there in your garden party in the clouds’. Echoing ‘Fantasy’, Ginsberg tells O’Hara to ‘take an aspirin’, before writing: ‘I’m falling asleep / safe in your thoughtful arms ... I see New York thru your eyes’. As O’Hara wrote in ‘[John Button Birthday](#)’: ‘that’s friendship for you’.

Rona Cran

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