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Voices in Contrast: Accessibility, Authorship, and Poetic Intimacy in O'Hara and Spicer

What makes a poem feel like it's speaking directly to us? Is it the clarity of its language, the familiarity of its references, or the sense that the poet is reaching out with intention? In postwar American poetry, few figures embody this question as vividly, and as divergently, as Frank O'Hara and Jack Spicer. Though contemporaries, the two poets occupy almost opposite ends of a poetic spectrum. O'Hara, with his breezy immediacy and performative charm, and Spicer, with his cryptic dissection of language and approaches of 'dictation.' Their work invites a deeper investigation into how poetry communicates, who it addresses, and what it demands from its reader. An exploration into the question of accessibility in their respective poetics allows introspection on O'Hara's autobiographical method and Spicer's commitment to fragmentation. By situating these poets within the broader frameworks of archival poetics, authorial presence, and literary communication, the essay traces how each poet's philosophy shapes not only their style but also what they are trying to capture of their zeitgeist.

Applying Fredric Jameson's theory of cultural production allows us to understand how the poets' geographic and social environments shaped their aesthetic choices. The New York School's embrace of spontaneity and visibility can be seen as a response to urban modernity and Cold War-era cosmopolitanism, while the San Francisco Renaissance's esoteric, anti-mainstream orientation reflects the West Coast's countercultural impulses and philosophical leanings (Jameson ix-xii, 1-6). Their poetry, then, becomes a record of historical tensions, rather than merely personal or formalist choices. The New York School, emerging in 1950s Manhattan, was

a lively, socially engaged group of poets and artists including Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler. Closely linked to the Abstract Expressionist movement, they embraced spontaneity, collaboration, and the blending of everyday life with art. Their poetry was playful, conversational, and often addressed to friends or situated in real time, reflecting a belief that art should be immediate, accessible, and socially embedded. In contrast, the San Francisco Renaissance, centered on figures like Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan, and Robin Blaser, took a more mystical and philosophical approach. These poets saw language as something alien or sacred, to be received rather than authored. They favored serial forms, mythic references while often resisting mainstream culture and conventional ideas of self-expression, viewing poetry as a form of transmission rather than communication.

O'Hara's relative accessibility emerges from his integration of poetic practice with social presence and archivable immediacy. Inspired by gossip, spontaneity, and friendship, his work positions itself as open, casual, and oriented toward a specific, real-world audience. His "Personism Manifesto" and *Lunch Poems* exemplify this ethos: poetry as a form of relational communication embedded in lived experience. Published in *Yugen No. 7* in 1961 and written in under an hour while Allen Ginsberg was literally on his way across town to pick it up, the "Personism Manifesto" playfully situates poetry among phone calls and love notes. O'Hara writes, "I realized that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born" (O'Hara, "Personism Manifesto" 29). He credits its inception, half-jokingly, to being "in love with someone (not Roi, by the way, a blond)" (O'Hara, "Personism Manifesto" 29) and acknowledges a debt to LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka): "[Personism] was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones" (O'Hara, "Personism Manifesto" 28-29). The joke

contains a serious explanation of poetics and how poems, like conversations, should be personal, direct, and socially embedded.

This sense of immediacy defines O'Hara's style. In lines like "If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run…" (O'Hara, "Personism Manifesto" 27) and "Allen [Ginsberg] recently commented on in It Is…" (O'Hara, "Personism Manifesto" 28) he collapses poetic voice into lived experience and cultural reference. His work avoids literary pretense and resists traditional formalism: "I don't even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff" (O'Hara, "Personism Manifesto" 27). Even his description of the poem as pants "tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you" (O'Hara, "Personism Manifesto" 28) underscores his irreverent charm and performative openness. O'Hara's poetics thrive on instinct, rejecting the mystical detachment that defines Jack Spicer's work.

Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* reveals a poet who is present, alive, and grounded in the world, who is a witness or point of view to things like, "I was in such a hurry / to meet you but the traffic / was acting exactly like the sky / and suddenly I see a headline / LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!" (O'Hara, *Lunch Poems* 78). Written on the Staten Island Ferry en route to a poetry reading, *Lunch Poems* is filled with O'Hara's voice, his finger on the pulse, rushing between errands, art galleries, and lovers, naming names, soaking up New York. This line typifies his approach: mundane, sensory, romantic, and urban. His poetry is conversational and self-aware, based on ephemeral encounters and emotional immediacy, often composed in real time, quite literally during his lunch breaks.

Where O'Hara writes toward others, Spicer writes from somewhere else, somewhere haunted. His poetics of 'dictation,' articulated in "The Vancouver Lectures" and exemplified in *After Lorca,* conceptualize the poet as a medium through whom language flows, not as a

conscious author crafting expression. In contrast to O'Hara's sensory diarism, *After Lorca* opens with a letter from the dead poet who says, "Frankly I was quite surprised when Mr. Spicer asked me to write an introduction to this volume…" (Spicer, *After Lorca* 14). The act of Lorca addressing the audience signals a desire to dissolve the author entirely. The "translations" that follow are Spicer's own poems, passed off as dictated echoes from Lorca himself. When Spicer writes, "You are dead and the dead are very patient," (*After Lorca* 19) he is not drawing from inspiration but receiving from elsewhere.

This spectral orientation is heightened in poems like "Imagine Lucifer", where the line "Imagine Lucifer / An angel without angelness / An apple / Plucked clear by will of taste, color," (Spicer, *My Vocabulary Did This to Me* 61) imitates the breeziness of a pop song, only to open onto a space of theological anxiety and tonal ambiguity. Likewise, in "A Diamond", Spicer compresses contradiction and clarity into a single image: "A diamond / Is there / At the heart of the moon or the branches or my nakedness / And there is nothing in the universe like diamond / Nothing in the whole mind..." (Spicer, *My Vocabulary Did This to Me* 119). The poem resists context or exposition. Meaning, if there is any, glints and withdraws. These lines offer no narrative or confessional anchor but only cold surfaces and strange transmissions.

By contrast, Spicer's poetry turns away from presence. It is obsessed with erasure, with gaps, with what cannot be said. In After Lorca, he writes, "The perfect poem has an infinitely small vocabulary," (Spicer, *After Lorca* 33) suggesting that the poet's goal is not expression but refinement to the point of silence. His work continually asks the reader to listen to what is not said, to what lurks between lines or between poems. This is poetry that does not confess but withholds. Spicer's commitment to alienation extends to his theoretical reflections. In "Sporting Life", he writes, "The poet is a radio. The poet is a liar. The poet is a counterfeiter," (Spicer, *My*

Vocabulary Did This to Me 374) rejecting the lyric tradition that views poetry as a form of personal truth. In the Vancouver Lectures, he elaborates: “There is no real poem except the whole poem which is the whole of the poet's life” (Spicer, *The House That Jack Built* 51). His serial poem “The Holy Grail” moves across mythic, religious, and absurd registers, refusing unity in favor of layered transmission. His poems do not resolve; they echo (Spicer, *My Vocabulary Did This to Me* 329).

While O’Hara performs poetic intimacy, Spicer stages poetic estrangement. Their divergent aesthetics reflect different understandings of the reader’s role. Each poet constructs a radically different readerly position. O’Hara’s writing invites recognition and familiarity; the reader feels spoken to, implicated in the poem’s emotional and cultural texture. Spicer’s fragmented voice, in contrast, resists recognition, forcing the reader into a space of uncertainty. Together one is rooted in community and immediacy, the other in alienation and transmission, each asking different things of the reader, and each offering different possibilities for what poetry can be. O’Hara says poetry could be a phone call to a friend; Spicer says it’s a séance.

These contrasting poetic philosophies, the extroverted immediacy of O'Hara versus the cryptic inwardness of Spicer, reflect deeper questions about voice and authorship. This difference in accessibility stems not only from stylistic differences but also from fundamentally different understandings of poetic communication and the role of the reader. Frank O’Hara and Jack Spicer didn’t just write poems; they wrote out of scenes, out of friendships, rivalries, philosophies, and contradictions that defined two different coasts of American poetry. Their circles weren’t just contexts; they were conditions of poetic expression. These contrasting approaches force us to reconsider the terms of poetic accessibility, whether it is a matter of style, subject matter, or the underlying philosophy of communication. What’s at stake in comparing

them isn’t just style but how poetry imagines its relationship to the world. O’Hara’s intimacy was performative but sincere, an invitation to be in the poem with him. Spicer’s estrangement was deliberate, casting the reader as investigator, not companion. For their respective movements, this mattered: The New York School made poetry social and immediate; the San Francisco Renaissance made it speculative and haunted. And for us as readers, the difference still shapes how we approach poems today, whether we’re looking to feel seen or to be unsettled, to be spoken to or spoken through. They weren't just poets; they were stakes in a larger question about what poetry is for, and who gets to answer.

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