

A Time to Dance: Frank O'Hara Reading Edwin Denby

Aaron Deveson
Department of English
National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan

Abstract

Academic interest in the post-war American poet writers generally gathered together under the label of “the New York School Poets” has never been greater; at the center of this perceived milieu is Frank O’Hara. My article is intended to fill a gap in the critical literature on O’Hara, which has failed to take into account the significant textual relations between his work and the still under-appreciated writings of Edwin Denby. Prompted by O’Hara’s paratextual responses to Denby but above all by the multiple allusions to the latter’s writing which I have found in the 1956 poem “A Step Away from Them,” this essay offers readings that suggest O’Hara’s highly original poetry developed at least partly through a revisionary engagement with the temporal themes and structures he found in Denby’s poetry and dance-themed prose. This article appropriates Clive Scott’s Bergsonian approach in order to illustrate how, contrary to critical responses which emphasize O’Hara’s deliberate lack of “depth,” his poetry’s intertextual engagement with Denby is in fact productive of a highly textured presence of inter-involved memories corresponding to Benjamin’s concept of *Erfahrung*. Reading O’Hara back through Denby’s already very suggestively phenomenological writings helps us to see the ways in which strategies of silence, of retrospective transformations at the endings of poems, and of the accumulation of perceptual “instants” become the self-protective means by which privileged “moments” of freedom and memorialization can occur. A fuller understanding of these strategies adds to criticism’s recognition of O’Hara’s conflicted relationship with America’s post-war expansionism.

Keywords

Frank O’Hara, Edwin Denby, New York School, time, temporality,
Benjamin, Bergson, street photography