

## Reading Sophie Robinson through Frank O'Hara's 'Ploop!'

Article (Accepted Version)

Kane, Daniel (2019) Reading Sophie Robinson through Frank O'Hara's 'Ploop!'. *Textual Practice*. pp. 1-17. ISSN 0950-236X

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Manuscript title: *“Ploop!”: Reading Sophie Robinson Through Frank O’Hara’s Shit,*

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Word count: 7331

Abstract:

Frank O’Hara’s 1959 “POEM (Wouldn’t it be funny),” is, at first glance, adamantly minor and wilfully juvenile. And yet, as I argue the first section of this essay, O’Hara’s “POEM” and related works have much to say about abjection and silliness as a form of politics. O’Hara’s texts also serve to repudiate the romantic equation of poet as prophet that through the 1950s and 1960s defined writers as various as Ezra Pound, Allen Ginsberg and Dylan Thomas. O’Hara upends poets’ efforts both to represent a falsely universalised human condition and, correspondingly, to frame poetry as hierarchically superior to other artistic genres.

The second section of the essay notes O’Hara’s prominence in the United Kingdom and moves on to consider specifically how O’Hara’s poetry has influenced the work of Sophie Robinson, a significant figure in British innovative poetry networks. Robinson, this essay concludes, positively applies and adapts O’Hara’s invocation of the abject to her own project, in part by advancing a progressive politics that appears however complexly and elusively in her verse.

Keywords:

Frank O’Hara

Sophie Robinson

English and American poetry

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Part 1: *Ploop!*

**POEM**

Wouldn't it be funny  
if The Finger had designed us  
to shit just once a week?

all week long we'd get fatter  
and fatter and then on Sunday morning  
while everyone's in church

ploop!<sup>1</sup>

Frank O'Hara's 1959 "POEM (Wouldn't it be funny)," is, at first glance, adamantly minor and wilfully juvenile. And yet, as I will argue here, the poem has much to say about abjection and silliness as a form of politics. It also serves to repudiate the romantic equation of poet as prophet that, even by the late 1950s and early 1960s, continued to define writers as various as Ezra Pound, Allen Ginsberg and Dylan Thomas. O'Hara was very much aware – and critical – of the efforts of post-war poets on either side of the New American and New Critical divides to recreate, following Whitman, "the ancient conception of the poet as prophet, and of poetry as religion, as an ecstatic expression of faith."<sup>2</sup> O'Hara's "POEM (Wouldn't it be funny)" questions poets' efforts to represent a falsely universalised human condition.

This essay, however, is not content to simply celebrate “POEM (Wouldn’t it be funny)” as a Rabelaisian irruption of poetic authority. O’Hara’s importance in the United Kingdom is indisputable, as generations of UK-based poets such as Tom Raworth, John James, Lee Harwood, Mark Ford, Tim Atkins, Carol Watts, Amy De’Ath, Andrea Brady, Keston Sutherland, and Jeff Hilson cite him as an influence.<sup>3</sup> I want to consider how O’Hara’s poetry has informed the work of Sophie Robinson, a writer increasingly recognized as a significant figure in British innovative poetry networks. As Robinson explains regarding the influence of O’Hara’s poetics on her own work,

I’m really interested in the casual mixture of humor, pop-culture spirituality, performative “confession,” and affect within O’Hara’s work and all of these things certainly infiltrate my practice. Through my writing I try to foster a sense of intimacy and vulnerability, often using direct address and ruptured forms of the confessional mode. At the same time, I try to make these things strange or new through incorporating the violent language of the corporation, of globalization, or by placing such moments within the banality of the everyday. All of these tactics are surely O’Hara-isms of one kind or another.<sup>4</sup>

Such “O’Haraisms,” complicated by Robinson through her critical engagement with late-capitalist economies and politics, links Robinson to an innovative tradition one can trace back to Maggie O’Sullivan’s 1996 anthology *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North American and the UK* and to the various UK-based writers, magazines, and public reading series indebted (in at-times openly conflictual ways) to the New American Poetry.<sup>5</sup> How is a contemporary UK poet such as Robinson – particularly given a progressive politics that appears however complexly and elusively in her verse – applying and adapting O’Hara’s thinking to her own project? I ask because I’m moved especially by O’Hara’s rhetorical question in his mock-manifesto “Personism” “But how can you really care if

anybody gets [the poem], or gets what it means, or if it improves them. Improves them for what?"<sup>6</sup>

***This is me, and I'm poetry, baby***

Defending O'Hara's posthumous reputation from accusations of disengaged diletantism, John Ashbery explained famously that "Frank O'Hara's poetry has no program and therefore it cannot be joined," adding "his poems are all about him and the people and images who wheel through his consciousness, and they seek no further justification: 'This is me and I'm poetry, baby,' seems to be their message, and unlike the message of committed poetry, it incites one to all the programs of commitment as well as to every other form of self-realisation: interpersonal, Dionysian, occult or abstract."<sup>7</sup> While Ashbery's comments might be misconstrued as providing evidence for those who wish to prosecute O'Hara for a self-indulgent and a-programmatic poetics (e.g. "This is me and I'm poetry, baby"; "interpersonal, Dionysian, occult or abstract"), we must note that Ashbery nevertheless highlights O'Hara's work as an *incitement* for future poets and readers to volunteer for "all the programs of commitment." The poems may not state baldly that war is bad, and corporations are evil, but their example is such that a respect for or acquiescence to the status quo would have no place in their articulation. While Ashbery might not have had "POEM (Wouldn't it be funny)" specifically in mind when he positioned O'Hara as a kind of gleefully contrarian iconoclast, one can imagine how Ashbery might appreciate this practically stupid text as capable of provoking one to radically question the way power is institutionalised and how it might be redistributed.<sup>8</sup>

Read within the field of O'Hara's oeuvre – including his love poems, epic works of radical disjunction, charming "I do this, I do that" quotidian lyrics – one can situate "POEM (Wouldn't it be funny)" as a text that serves to wilfully process potentially good poetry into bad poetry, into waste.<sup>9</sup> O'Hara, particularly in terms of his decision to title this poem

“POEM,” plays on the fact that the civilizing process – represented here by the very announcement of the generically privileged word “POEM” – conceals but cannot erase the infantile and solipsistic pleasures of the anal stage. Indeed, the wicked glee and libidinal gratification evident in the prospect of holding a bowel movement in for a week and then releasing it “while everyone’s in church” encourages us to associate the poem with Freud’s understanding of the pressures between the often-tense act of restraining oneself from defecating and the concomitant pleasure of defecating at will, wherever one wants to. Conforming to external demands to crap regularly, discreetly and hygienically is part of the process of socialisation that involves internalizing shame as a response to losing or refusing to adhere to the norms that define bowel control. Holding it in, declining to go potty where one is expected to, defecating outrageously and inappropriately, foregrounds the subject’s autonomy and independence from public norms and denies shame as an inherited affective response to such bodily transgressions.

If, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, the anus “was the first organ to suffer privatization, removal from the social field,”<sup>10</sup> then O’Hara’s focus on the excretory function in “POEM” and related works can be understood as invoking the anus to undermine vatic postures and institutionalised hierarchies for whom the shame-and-shit filled asshole is, by its very nature and function, antithetical.<sup>11</sup> Take a section from O’Hara’s “Memorial Day 1950” that seems to riff outrageously on Whitman’s numerous invocations of the East River. Here, O’Hara applies shit to counter the rhetoric of depth and poetic authority: “I hear the sewage singing / underneath my bright white toilet seat and know / that somewhere sometime it will reach the sea: / gulls and swordfishes will find it richer than a river.”<sup>12</sup> O’Hara’s river, polluted by and reduced to functioning as a conduit for “sewage” that the speaker is actively depositing his own contribution into, flows figuratively against the monumentalism inherent in the syncretism of Whitman’s “I.” O’Hara’s clearly Whitmanic “singing,” after all, removes the

lyric “I” that in Whitman’s oeuvre is implicitly attached to the poet himself – “I sing” becomes “the sewage singing.” The poet’s job in “Memorial Day” is not to sing the body electric, but rather to listen in on the ways waste sings the abject truth of the time-bound body back up to the poet.

And yet, we must also note that O’Hara is not simply repudiating inherited poetic authority from previous city poets. The idea that O’Hara’s shit will flow into the river, be transported into the sea, and then be digested by a gull and a swordfish is an entirely Whitmanian gesture, if absurdly so. The Whitman who writes “Behold this compost! behold it well!”<sup>13</sup> finds a naughty contemporary corollary in O’Hara’s “Memorial Day” where birds discover in the poet’s excreta a rich source of recycled food. There is a kind of push-pull aesthetic at work here. The reader is relatively sure O’Hara is merely mocking his predecessors through bathroom humour only to then wonder if O’Hara, however strangely, is extending Whitman’s implicitly demotic poetics to include the pooping gay urban aesthete as an integral part of the Whitmanian city.

O’Hara seems intent on assaulting poetic authority by summoning shit. At times he does this adolescently (“ploop!”), at other times such as in “Memorial Day” with more complexity. There is of course an entire theoretical edifice built around exploring the insurrectionary possibilities of the abject, and more specifically the excremental. Dominique Laporte’s *History of Shit*, for example, draws historical parallels between the sanitary regimes that were developed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to deal with human excrement, efforts initiated by the French Royal Academy to “purify” the language, and the emergence of the bourgeois subject. Laporte’s history of shit thus “becomes the history of subjectivity,”<sup>14</sup> and the reader is encouraged to understand how shame, so often attached to the excremental, is produced in part to sustain the assumed normativity of hierarchical institutions. In a similar spirit Cindy LaCom, drawing on Bakhtin, Bataille, and Kristeva, asks trenchantly in her essay “Filthy

Bodies, Porous Boundaries,” “what [are] the politics of shit? [...] shit disturbs identity and order — collapsing boundaries of self and object, inside and outside, child and adult, control and loss.”<sup>15</sup> O’Hara’s “(POEM) Wouldn’t it be funny” seems to some extent to anticipate analyses such as these, employing shit to transgress the propriety of the Church in an entirely unsubtle way. If we understand that “The Finger” signifies The Finger of God (especially so given the phrase “designed us” and the second stanza’s reference to Sunday services), the poem takes on an ever-more mischievous charge. The Finger of God first appears in the Hebrew Bible after God enabled Moses and Aaron to bring down a plague of lice upon their Egyptian oppressors. “This is the finger of God”<sup>16</sup> Pharaoh learned from his magicians, even as he remained steadfastly committed to persecuting Jews. Correspondingly, The Ten Commandments are “written with the finger of God,”<sup>17</sup> and the phrase appears elsewhere in the Bible as a sign of God’s power and will. O’Hara reduces God to his synecdoche and tacitly gives Him The Finger, as he proposes God’s finger as an object that stops us up for a week then diddles us to release pent-up waste.<sup>18</sup> That O’Hara wrote this poem in the late 1950s, a period in American history that saw a practically unprecedented surge in church attendance, makes O’Hara’s poem all the more cheeky.<sup>19</sup>

It would be too easy though to insist this poem employs the carnivalesque to undermine clerical power. This poem, and much of O’Hara’s poetry, is as unfriendly as it is juvenile. O’Hara even denies us the satisfaction of depicting an actual shit – readers walk away from this poem with nothing more than the *sound* of a turd falling into toilet water. Compare that immaterial (if sonorous) gesture with the loving depictions of faeces limned by O’Hara’s contemporaries such as John Updike’s “The Beautiful Bowel Movement” (“a flawless coil, / unbroken, in the bowl, as if a potter / who worked in this most frail, least grateful clay / had set himself to shape a topaz vase”)<sup>20</sup> or Maxine Kumin’s “The Excrement Poem” (We eat, we evacuate, survivors that we are. / I think these things each morning with

shovel / and rake, drawing the risen brown buns / toward me, fresh from the horse oven, as it were”).<sup>21</sup> O’Hara, even in the context of a silly little poem, sustains an abstract style resistant to paraphrase. All proposed subjects implied in the pronouns are ultimately mysterious. It is hard to get a hold of this poem, to consume it.

I am especially interested in O’Hara’s use of the indefinite pronoun “everyone” in “POEM (Wouldn’t it be funny)” and related works. “Everyone” shows up throughout O’Hara’s writing in manifestly ambivalent ways. We can turn to one of O’Hara’s best-known poems, “The Day Lady Died,” and note how the final line “whispered a song along the keyboard to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing”<sup>22</sup> works in such a way as to muddy the target for “everyone.” The “everyone” can serve as an embodiment of what Charles Altieri calls the poem’s efforts to achieve “absolute communication when Billie controlled the entire audience and led them to a single ecstasy,”<sup>23</sup> *or* it can be read as an instance in which O’Hara separates himself from any ideation of community outside of coterie. Reading the line in a way that emphasizes the “I” as distinct from the Blue Note audience (“whispered a song along the keyboard to Mal Waldron and everyone and *I* stopped breathing”), rather than conflating the “everyone and I” as Altieri does, alters the dominant readings of the poem as idealising “absolute communication.” Rather, by reframing the “everyone” as grammatically separate from the “I” one finds the speaker standing *apart* from “everyone,” a practically phantasmal flâneur.

O’Hara in his use of pronouns tends to bob uneasily between Whitmanic celebration and vaguely misanthropic elitism. Pushing back against Whitman’s capacious tallies of butcher boys, fish smack crew-members, blacksmiths, business people, prostitutes, brides, opium eaters and beyond whom the poet identifies with, the individuals that O’Hara encounters on the streets of his beloved Manhattan are just as often referred to darkly as the “obscure public”<sup>24</sup> as they are depicted affectionately and individually in poems such as “A

Step Away From Them.” “We” and “us” in O’Hara’s writing stand in marked contrast to the indefinite “everyone.” “But isn’t everyone a stranger” O’Hara asks plaintively in his poem “Aggression.”<sup>25</sup> Other works reveal a light disdain for the undifferentiated other: “There’s something wrong with everyone” O’Hara pouts in his poem “On Rachmaninoff’s Birthday #161.”<sup>26</sup>

In much of O’Hara’s poetry, friends are a bulwark against the threat of “everyone” else who fail to match O’Hara and company in glamor, wit, and sharp intelligence. Note the following lines from “Personal Poem,” one of O’Hara’s prototypical “I do this, I do that” poems. Describing the details of a day with his friend LeRoi Jones / Amiri Baraka, O’Hara in the second of three stanzas makes an entirely straightforward, affect-free reference to a police assault on Miles Davis (“LeRoi comes in / and tells me Miles Davis was clubbed 12 / times last night outside BIRDLAND by a cop”). Immediately following these lines is the campily dismissive report “a lady asks us for a nickel for a terrible / disease but we don’t give her one we / don’t like terrible diseases.”<sup>27</sup> The sudden appearance of a street fundraiser is an impediment to personal delight, not a goad to charitable giving. True, several readings of the poem highlight and celebrate the poem’s reference to Davis’s assault as proof of O’Hara’s social consciousness.<sup>28</sup> And yet, given that the rejected fundraiser is invoked immediately following the reference to Davis being “clubbed 12 / times last night outside BIRDLAND by a cop,”<sup>29</sup> one sees O’Hara pulling away from the nascent politics of the poem introduced by the Miles reference. Any reader looking to the poem to confirm her own moral disgust over police violence against people of colour is unlikely to be satisfied here. The variance between the radical politics of African-American civil rights and the *bien pensant* liberal politics of being “against disease” (well, who isn’t?) is practically erased by O’Hara’s breezy listing – “I hear this, I hear that” one might put it here – that tends towards flattening out difference and distinction. That subsequent lines find O’Hara abandoning any pretence to social concern in

favour of invoking the pleasures of consumerism, literary gossip, and being thought of affectionately by “one person out of the 8,000,000”<sup>30</sup> inhabitants of New York City further emphasizes that the poetry is committed more to enacting a kind of hard-to-pin-down and playful heterodoxy than it is a progressive politics in tune with the social movements of its particular time and place.

## **Part 2: “I’m Sick of Love”**

So how, in the end, does this kind of work resonate with UK-based poets such as Sophie Robinson? What seems clear is not only the fact that, as I will show shortly, there are clear echoes of O’Hara’s style visible in Robinson’s work, but, more complexly, that Robinson’s poetry stages a friendly argument with that part of O’Hara’s work that foregrounds the figure of the poet as Paterian aesthete. We can read Robinson’s verse as an attempt in part to *correct* an art-for-art’s sake breezy aestheticism that characterizes some of O’Hara’s poetry.

Robinson’s work is committed to synthesizing the feelings of ebullience that emerge when experiencing the daily pleasures made possible by Western consumer culture with an insistence on confronting the ethical dilemmas such pleasures pose against the wider backdrop of neo-liberal hegemony.

While O’Hara’s poetry, steeped in the daily, does not fold in the geopolitical horrors of his day in a consistently critical and hortatory way, Robinson’s poetry at times compromises joy in the world with woeful references to wage inequity, violence against women, police violence, and the collapse of the welfare state that O’Hara would probably avoid or ironize in a poem. And yet, Robinson’s overtly critical references to the daily horrors meted out by the powerful on the powerless are not in the service of reifying the model of the poet as vatic spokesman that O’Hara felt should be problematized if not purged entirely from poetry. Rather, Robinson’s poetry extends O’Hara’s iconoclasm by constructing

a dialectic hostile to ideological surety, one in which an exemplary space is created for oppositional action that actively blurs or simply refuses to identify what the right path is.

Turning to Robinson's book *The Institute of Our Love in Disrepair*, one finds the poet embodying a politics and poetics that is clearly influenced by – though not beholden to – poetry affiliated with the New York Schools.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, given this essay's focus on O'Hara's shit, Robinson's book begins with a photograph of a roll of toilet paper in a bathroom, the words "I'm sick of love"<sup>32</sup> stencilled just above the roll. I like to think of this epigraph as Robinson's version of O'Hara's *ploop*. Immediately renouncing normative representations of poetry as holding what Pierre Bourdieu describes as "an elevated position in the hierarchy of literary occupations,"<sup>33</sup> Robinson is perhaps invoking our bottoms to stage the work as an example of anarchic space.

Robinson's poetry I think also expands on O'Hara's "I do this, I do that" style productively. "Ah lunch" O'Hara sighs contentedly in his poem "Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul."<sup>34</sup> Robinson's lunch, as we see in her poem "Luncheonette, en booth" is of an entirely different order, generating a poetry of awkward disclosure ("I am an / overweight fool / a sideways fool, shooting / darkness, a plateful of sherbet in my / lap")<sup>35</sup>, Moving on from lunch, dinner finds Robinson more despondent, even if despondency is lightened by the ludic. As she writes in her poem "Hunky Dory": "Struck acute, I dine alone / & sad; like a burned / out carcass of a car in / a ghetto in Paris I / am too tired to riot."<sup>36</sup> Identifying not with the estranged youth of Paris's banlieu but, surprisingly, with an anthropomorphized car one assumes the rioters set fire too, Robinson plays a curious game here. Robinson dramatizes a presupposition of a readership expectant of sympathetic affiliation with an alienated underclass, only to then refuse us such righteous satisfaction. The speaker of this poem is like the car, not the rioter.

In fact, Robinson shares with O'Hara a scepticism towards ideations of community that reveals itself through a complex series of pronominal shifts. In "the way she bends," Robinson opens with a sensuous and funny appreciation of a lover's movement: "the way she bends: / like a sailor, / as luck would have / it. & i am / lucky." In subsequent stanzas, Robinson then moves on to frame the intimacy of this two-way relationship in a particular social context, making what appears at first to be a fairly straightforward point about the connection between the personal and the political:

on television  
the starship troops  
are marching up  
to beat us to  
a pulp, for being  
found wanting  
too much: a place  
to live, to not be  
sick in, a fair  
go at it all  
or at it all  
again.<sup>37</sup>

This stanza serves as practically a *cri de couer* for the welfare state. Cops bash the heads of an "us" that, at first glance, appears to include the speaker and her lover as they agitate for housing rights and universal healthcare. And yet, the violence is taking place "on television," compromising the apparent critical dialogue Robinson is enacting between ostensibly private romantic lives and the workings of the neo-liberal state. Television is a remove from lived experience - Robinson seems here to be creating a kind of gap or trap in which too-facile

interpretations of the poem as agit-prop can fall. This gap only widens in the third stanza when Robinson, seemingly aware of the reader's confusion over the way the "television" disassociates the lovers from the violent demonstration, clarifies what she means by "us" and "them":

When i say us  
i mean them – i  
am not there i  
am with you, &  
thinking we cling  
to love in lieu  
of anything just.  
love,  
one step down from  
god<sup>38</sup>

This poem, read in the context of contemporary British avant-garde poetry, is an outlier in its surprising insistence on the primacy of the beloved couple sequestered from larger social-political communities.<sup>39</sup> "Thinking" takes place apart from collective efforts to initiate change. While this is not an optimistic poem – "we cling / to love in lieu / of anything just" – what remains is "love," which sustains. One hears an echo here of Ezra Pound's Canto 81, in which he writes "What thou lovest well remains, / the rest is dross / What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee."<sup>40</sup> For Robinson, "dross" in part is, following O'Hara, the cultural capital poetry has accrued, a capital which includes challenging a politically-committed poetry's ambition to, as poet Keston Sutherland put it, "exercise some influence of a political character over living individuals, now, in this world."<sup>41</sup> Robinson recognizes the material limitations of poetry – its relatively small audience, its rarefied place in literary hierarchies –

and questions the underlying authority assumed by any writer who believes his verse might affect actual political change.

Simultaneously, though, it is important we recognize that Robinson's poetry cannot be dismissed as quietest. Like O'Hara's "POEM (wouldn't it be funny)," Robinson's work is not without its own dissident charge. Her refusal to take on the political questions of the day explicitly does not impede the ways in which Robinson's open-ended, conversational and sceptical modes fundamentally agitate against models of power and authority. For instance, in the first bracketed line of the third poem in the section "She! Retro Love Songs" the reader is instructed to "[insert an edgy adjective as vein]," followed by "capital drops to leave us: empty, lost / again, rattling inside a coconut."<sup>42</sup> That second line contains a familiar message about how the metastasizing nature of late capitalism "drops" away from an implicitly alienated "us" who are left bereft, inhabiting an empty shell. And yet, note the O'Haraesque push-pull aesthetic at play here, embodied by the bracketed instruction to "insert an edgy adjective as vein." This invitation might serve as a parodic commentary on outraged diction and radical form as stylized and inherently *addictive* poetic tics, a sly critique of Robinson's more overtly political poetry peers' insistence on affects of intensity or edginess to frame their politics. One thinks here of what David Nowell Smith referred to as Sean Bonney's "lyric outrage,"<sup>43</sup> or Keston Sutherland's efforts to transgress the boundaries between the personal and the political in poems such as his "Ode: What You Do,"<sup>44</sup> or Andrea Brady's verse-essay *Wildfire* that serves in part to condemn the use of white phosphorus by American invading forces to assault the inhabitants of Fallujah, Iraq.<sup>45</sup>

"Vein" of course is also a homophone of *vain* and speaks back to my earlier point that links Robinson's poetry to Pound's "Canto 81." As Pound wrote "pull down thy vanity," so Robinson seems to rather elliptically propose that the relatively obvious assertion of political conviction runs the risk of being an exercise in vanity, propagating the culturally-

authoritative image of “the poet as rebel” (as David Nowell Smith recognizes in his study of Sean Bonney’s early poetry<sup>46</sup>) that paradoxically reifies or remodels the very hierarchies a collectivist politics aims to disassemble. The *poète maudit* is a figure who, while apart from society, is graced with the visionary insight of the shaman and is further strengthened by an association with the very exemplariness of the poet as culturally authoritative figure.

Robinson’s refusal to play the role of the *maudit* practically throbbing with righteous understanding is, read within the context of the attempts of so many of her peers to “articulate political collectivity”<sup>47</sup> through wildly disjunctive form and deranged syntax, a strangely and compellingly disobedient act.

Robinson’s “Bathroom” (a fortuitous title given this essay’s focus on O’Hara’s scatological humour) further illustrates the poet’s productive refusal to stage authority. While there is a hint of narrative evident in a limited number of words and phrases (“terry-cloth”; “mirror”; “the bowl”; “soapy thighs”; “porcelain”; “lavatory”; “Cologne, toothpaste”) that point towards the implied subject of the poem, the work taken as a whole rejects narrative. The poem begins with what appears to be an evocative, almost florid description of the bathroom – “Water-landscaped chamber, flat-roofed – / a set of matching units to be fitted.” The coherency of these lines however is instead immediately undermined by an inscrutable quotation: “this is the good sun, the necessary / to look sun.” What, one wonders, does this have to do with the characterization of the bathroom? Who is the implied speaker of these lines? What does the “good sun” represent in the context of a bathroom? Is there a play on words where we are encouraged to read “sun” as “son,” and if so, who is this good son and what is the purpose of the homophone? Rather than continuing by clarifying the seeming disconnect between the first two lines and the quoted text, Robinson further muddies the waters with a series of pronominal shifts from “you” to “she” to “his,” made more opaque by

mysterious italicization: “You wanted & you faded there / *she could see the twilight dilating in / his eyes, feel his economics coming on.*”

I cannot help but wonder if that “his” is a personification of the more overtly political poetry of Robinson’s peers.<sup>48</sup> It is as if Robinson is summoning the looming presence of a man intent on applying “his economics” to reconcile the poem’s series of paradoxes and incomprehensibilities. “She,” however, is committed to maintaining this poem as ill-disciplined. “His economics” are thus satirically compromised – made ludicrous – by being situated in the space of a bathroom, a room devoted primarily to the endless cycle of evacuating waste and hosing it and accrued other dirt off when one’s done. Economic theory is overwhelmed by the awkwardly personal. “Prune-faced, pimped,” the author writes in the third stanza, “she puffs / her body out as wall to wall canvas / of stretched skin, so early, so slipped & those / sauces drool down hard, down chins, jawlines.” Anything approaching sense is overwhelmed and reduced throughout the stanzas in these poems by and to the grotesque, the excremental, and the abject.

Like O’Hara, Robinson in the final stanza of the poem appears to complete this elusive poem with her own version of a meaning-resistant *ploop*:

She is naked, screaming, this is not a  
metaphor. To habituate or  
symbolize this thought is nothing less.  
you think of bathrooms as transitory  
places, but people can die there, humming,  
dark sun, slow destination, humming.

Refusing the ornament of metaphor, Robinson downgrades the possibilities of poetry in a way that further connects the text to waste and inutility. This configuration becomes even clearer when we note that the poem ends with “humming,” a music characterized by its wordlessness. Humming is not singing, and thus an implicit critique of the Whitmanic “I sing” – with all the attendant status accorded to the poet embedded in that phrase – appears to serve in part as a conclusion to this poem.

Crucially, “hum” has also entered the vernacular lexicon as a specifically British slang word for “stench” and its related synonyms. Readers will note that “humming” is invoked throughout the poem: “*slow, slow, my / destination, humming, slow, slow*” (stanza 2); “the balconied, the abnormal, / the slow destination humming, humming” (stanza 7); “to gag and hum” (stanza 8). In this final stanza, the humming that has seeded the poem comes to define it as Robinson, like O’Hara in “Memorial Day,” establishes her refusal to sing the body electric. Far from using poetry to glorify the body, “Bathroom” becomes a vehicle in part to downgrade and demystify it (the aforementioned “drool,” alongside “spray recoiling from her,” “oozing red,” “fatter,” “glob,” the vomit or dry-heave implicit in “to gag,” and so forth). And what clearer space to recognize the baseness of the body than the bathroom, a space that, as I note above, quite literally serves as a pictorial frame for the book. Not a “transitory” place, the bathroom becomes site where lyrics implicit in poetic song are rejected in favour of a wordless hum that, synesthetically speaking, also stinks.

While more open to purely melancholy strains than O’Hara’s poetry, and perhaps more sceptical of the embrace of the ridiculous evident in O’Hara’s “POEM (Wouldn’t it be funny)” specifically, Robinson’s works extend and complicate O’Hara’s suspicion of the projective, oracular poet. Resistant to metaphor and paraphrase, revelling in disjunction, yoking narrative to lyric to confessional and tearing them up all over again, Robinson’s

poems refuse the satisfaction of the predictable, no matter how obscured such predictability might be by radical form and apoplectic rhetoric.

This essay has pointed to the critical histories of O’Hara’s work as celebrating anarchic non-partisan glee as much as it has been framed as serving the goals of queer, Civil Rights, and related progressive politics. This nervous dialectic remains and is productive in terms of serving as example for the generative potentials of being silly, awkward, unsure,<sup>49</sup> vulnerable, “always ‘outside’ and ‘between’.”<sup>50</sup> Reading Robinson through the scrim of O’Hara’s shit, then, one can sense the complicated legacy O’Hara has bequeathed to contemporary poets in the United Kingdom. That Robinson’s poetry seems to actively resist absorption into any singular interpretive community suggests her writing serves as a vibrant alternative to neo-confessional, narrative and purportedly “mainstream” contemporary writing, even as it simultaneously leaps haphazardly into and outside the circles of a highly politicized avant-garde. In this sense Robinson’s work can be situated as extending the possibilities of the neo-avant-garde, which Tyrus Miller argues helpfully rejects doctrinaire ideological positions typical of earlier avant-garde formations in favour of “an open-ended set of exemplar actualizations of situations in which social experience and learning can take place.”<sup>51</sup> Much of Robinson’s and O’Hara’s poetry produces an ambivalence that – often paradoxically, often beautifully – avoids polarization, challenges binary way of thinking, and breaks down oppositionality. The possibilities of what *we do* with that is the gift of such writing.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank O’Hara, “POEM (Wouldn’t it be funny),” in *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, edited by Donald Allen, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 351.

<sup>2</sup> Harriet Monroe, qtd. in L. Szeffel, *The Gospel of Beauty in the Progressive Era: Reforming American Verse and Values*, (New York: Springer, 2011), 52.

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<sup>3</sup> A number of poets cited here attest to O’Hara’s influence in “Contemporary English Poetry and North American Influences | Jacket2.” <https://jacket2.org/feature/contemporary-english-poetry-and-north-american-influences>. Critical essays on O’Hara by poets such as Sutherland can be found in Robert Hampson and Will Montgomery’s edited volume *Frank O’Hara Now: New Essays on the New York Poet* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press), 2010. See also “A Quick Introduction to the Poetry of John James.” Accessed May 29, 2019. <http://www.modernpoetry.org.uk/introjj.html>. Poetry journals such as Tim Atkins’s *onedit* provide further examples of an O’Hara-entranced UK-based poetry community. In his essay “Tom Raworth and the Invisibles,” Geoff Ward provides readers with an interesting reading of Raworth’s debts to O’Hara and other New York School-affiliated writers [*Cambridge Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (2002): 17]. Lee Harwood’s *The Man with Blue Eyes* (New York: Angel Hair Press, 1966) both invokes the quotidian style of O’Hara and was awarded the Frank O’Hara Prize.

<sup>4</sup> “Poems by Sophie Robinson | Jacket2.” Accessed January 8, 2019. <https://jacket2.org/poems/poems-sophie-robinson>. In this article Robinson also cites Bernadette Mayer and Alice Notley – poets affiliated with the New York School of Poetry who were committed readers of O’Hara – as formative influences.

<sup>5</sup> For a helpful history of UK-based poets variously enthral to or in reaction against the dominance of the New American poetic avant-gardes from the 1950s through the new millennium, see Sam Ladkin and Robin Purves, “An Introduction,” *Chicago Review* 53, no. 1 (2007): 6-13. For a focused cultural history of women’s innovative writing as it responded in part to the influence of the New American poetry, see Scott Thurston, “Contemporary Innovative Poetry by Women in the United Kingdom,” *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 9, no. 1 (2015): 53-72. Thurston’s essay is particularly helpful in reading Sophie Robinson’s poetry

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in this context and, more specifically, alongside the work of her contemporaries Holly Pester and SL Mendoza.

<sup>6</sup> Frank O'Hara, "Personism: A Manifesto," in *The Collected Poems*, pp. 498-9. This question is all the more pertinent when one considers a collectivist poetics, informed by Marxist theory, characterizes the work of many of Robinson's contemporaries such as Sutherland, Brady, De'Ath, and Sean Bonney. The turn towards such a poetics is now so pronounced that parodies of what poet Verity Spott describes as "Marxy" poems now speak to its dominance. "Drop a contemporary reference alongside a crescendoing sublimity. Remind your readers how fucked everything is. In fact, fuck your readers and their reading with your Penis" Spott advises, having edited a Simon Armitage poem to make it more "Marxy":

The sun comes like a headless Iraqi  
through last night's bare luminosity ~~turtleneck~~.  
A pigeon in the yard on the Internet turns tail-Capital  
on its ass and offers me a credit card. Any card. (Verity Spott, "A Short Essay on  
How to Make Your Poetry More Marxy – For Joswelf Churchyard Linkin Waltzon,"  
[2015], [http://twotornhalves.blogspot.com/2015/02/a-short-essay-on-how-to-make-  
your\\_19.html](http://twotornhalves.blogspot.com/2015/02/a-short-essay-on-how-to-make-your_19.html)).

Jeremy Noel-Tod, using the pseudonym Ron Paste, also produces parodies of "Marxy" poems. In a send-up of Keston Sutherland's poetry, for example, "Paste" writes "I pop a zit, I sex on the phone. / Fish and cut. Paste and / chips. Happy / slap love / that will shag out your eye / my hat. Where in the World / Bank is a halter-neck Arafat." The poem is ascribed to one K.M. Bridge, a clear play on the Cambridge School of poetry that Sutherland is so often aligned to. Jeremy Noel-Tod, *Other Men's Flowers: A Poesy Cut by Ron Paste*, (Norwich, Landfill Press, 2007), n.p.

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<sup>7</sup> John Ashbery, “Writers and Issues: Frank O’Hara’s Question,” in *John Ashbery: Selected Prose*, Eugene Richie, ed., (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 83.

<sup>8</sup> I read Ashbery’s comments here in large part inspired by Andrew Epstein’s analysis. “Some critics,” Epstein explains, “have taken Ashbery’s encomium as proof of the New York School’s allegedly apolitical and aestheticist nature. But it actually suggests his profound approval of O’Hara’s nonprogrammatic resistance to dogma, partisanship, and assimilation of any kind, rather than a retreat...from political causes, historical realities, or oppositionality” [*Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 77]. Similarly, Mark Silverberg writes “What we find in O’Hara is not a lack of commitment but a critique of, or counter-discourse to, the current rhetoric of commitment (which saw any valid political program as offering a stable narrative for describing reality and positing change). O’Hara’s obligations were either hard to see at the time or were simply disqualified as superficial because they did not fit current conceptions of the political. It is now much easier to see O’Hara’s commitments as a species of (what would become) a postmodern micropolitics of the local and particular” [*The New York School Poets and the Neo-Avant-Garde: Between Radical Art and Radical Chic*, (New York: Routledge, 2016), 43].

<sup>9</sup> For more on “waste” as it is troped in the work of related poets and artists such as John Ashbery, James Schuyler and Joe Brainard, see Christopher Schmidt, *The Poetics of Waste: Queer Excess in Stein, Ashbery, Schuyler and Goldsmith*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 143.

<sup>11</sup> I’m reminded here of some advice my grandmother Bubby Sarah gave me before I went to a job interview. “No matter how nervous you are,” she said, “you need to look at everyone in

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the room and imagine them all sitting on the toilet making a doody.” Poop, in other words, is the great leveller.

<sup>12</sup> O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Walt Whitman, “This Compost,” in *Whitman: Poetry and Prose*, (Washington D.C: The Library of America, 1982), 495.

<sup>14</sup> Rodolphe el-Koury, Introduction, in Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), viii.

<sup>15</sup> Cindy LaCom, “Filthy Bodies, Porous Boundaries: The Politics of Shit in Disability Studies,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 1/2 (March 15, 2007): <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v27i1/2.11>.

<sup>16</sup> Exodus 8:19 NASB

<sup>17</sup> Ibid 31:18

<sup>18</sup> I wonder if O’Hara is also referring – impishly, as ever - to Gerard Manley’s Hopkin’s “The Wreck of the Deutchland,” whose opening stanza includes “Thou hast bound bones & veins in me, fastened me flesh, / And after it almost unmade, what with dread, / Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh? / Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.” *Selected Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, (Mineola, N.Y., Dover Thrift Editions, 2011), 8-9.

<sup>19</sup> See Andrew Preston, “The Spirit of Democracy: Religious Liberty and American Anti-Communism during the Cold War,” in Joel Isaac and Duncan Bell, eds., *Uncertain Empire: American History and the Idea of the Cold War*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), for more information on the rise in church attendance during the 1950s.

<sup>20</sup> John Updike, “The Beautiful Bowel Movement,” in *Collected Poems 1953 - 1993*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 224.

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<sup>21</sup> Maxine Kumin, “The Excrement Poem,” in *Where I Live: New and Selected Poems, 1990-2010*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 167.

<sup>22</sup> O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 325.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry During the 1960s*, (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1979), 122.

<sup>24</sup> O’Hara, “Favorite Painting in the Metropolitan,” *Collected Poems*, 423.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 264.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 419.

<sup>27</sup> O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 335.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Michael Magee, *Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing*, (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 160-166; Neil Corcoran, *Poetry & Responsibility*, 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5949/liverpool/9781781380352.001.0001>; and Geoff Ward, *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 136.

<sup>29</sup> O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 335.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid* 336.

<sup>31</sup> For example, with its loose adherence to traditional form and its employment of profanity, “necessary fucking,” the first poem in this book, is a sonnet very much in the spirit of the multitude of sonnets written by New York School predecessors Ted Berrigan and Bernadette Mayer.

<sup>32</sup> Sophie Robinson, *The Institute of Our Love in Disrepair*, (Toronto: Bad Press, 2012), 5.

<sup>33</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules Of Art: Genesis And Structure of the Literary Field*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 237.

<sup>34</sup> O’Hara, *Collected Poems*, 328.

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<sup>35</sup> Robinson, *The Institute of Our Love in Disrepair*, 13.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 52-53.

<sup>39</sup> Again, Robinson's moves here might be fruitfully read as participating in a critical conversation with her "Marxy" peers. "Remember," Verity Spott writes satirically in reference to politically-engaged poets, "love is *only* capitalism. This must be your driving principal. Syntax is the enemy of love which is capitalism."

<sup>40</sup> Ezra Pound, "Canto LXXXI," in *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, (New York: New Directions, 1998), 520-521.

<sup>41</sup> "Interview with Keston Sutherland," in *The White Review*, accessed January 17, 2019.

<http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-keston-sutherland/>.

<sup>42</sup> Robinson, *The Institute of Our Love in Disrepair*, 34.

<sup>43</sup> David Nowell Smith, "'An Interrupter, a Collective': Sean Bonney's Lyric Outrage," in *Études Britanniques Contemporaines. Revue de La Société D'études Anglaises Contemporaines*, no. 45 (October 20, 2013). <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.746>.

This "lyric outrage" is evident in, for example, Bonney's calling for the blood of Donald Rumsfeld and Tommy Franks, respectively Secretary of Defense and commander-in-chief of American occupying forces in Baghdad:

streetsounds of  
Baghdad  
emerge (cynical  
bone tourista load  
(we should be)  
blast

---

with

( )

1=1 is

what we want is

Donald Rumsfeld Tommy Franks

their blood [Sean Bonney, 'Poisons, their Antidotes', in *Blade Pitch Control*

*Unit* (Cambridge: Salt, 2005), 76.]

<sup>44</sup> In "Ode: What You Do," [*Poetical Works*, (London: Enitharmon Press, 2015), 72]

Sutherland identifies social injustice within the space of what Frank O'Hara might otherwise

insist should be a "personal poem":

Point evacuate them, mean the sky

and snow-stars. Eros permits

this, Sabra and Shatila thread through

love they are a polyglactin of

areas unused in the lung.

The ring of fire shines and divorces.

Such a poem creatively occupies the space formerly held by the genre "love poem." The

stanza is a little room. We must not get too comfortable, or so happy, in such a space. One's

pleasure in love must be balanced and judged against Western complicity in human rights

atrocities such as the massacre of Palestinian refugees in the Sabra and Shatila camps in

Lebanon.

<sup>45</sup> Andrea Brady, *Wildfire: A Verse Essay on Obscurity and Illumination*, (Berkeley, CA:

Krupskaya Books, 2010).

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<sup>46</sup> We should note that while Nowell Smith is somewhat critical of Bonney's early poetry, he goes very far to argue that "the tensions between the lyric outrage of the individual and the outraging of language by lyric for a collective consciousness" are reconciled in Bonney's more recent work.

<sup>47</sup> Nowell Smith.

<sup>48</sup> For example, the impact on Sutherland's work of Marxist economic theory and a wider critique of late capitalism is evident both in Sutherland's poetry and in his broader role as editor and publisher of / with British avant-garde poets including Brady, Bonney, Atkins, Marianne Morris, JH Prynne, Verity Spott, and others.

<sup>49</sup> In a charming essay that cites, among others, Sophie Robinson's poetry as an example of the virtues of being unsure as an aesthetic approach, Jack Underwood writes, "With poems you have to risk all kinds of small, hopeful, doomed leaps; uncertainty is central to your business. You not only have to acknowledge the innate inaccuracy of language as a system that cannot catch or hold onto anything securely, but also that it's precisely this characteristic of inaccuracy that a poetic, empathetic transaction rests on." Jack Underwood, "On Poetry and Uncertain Subjects," *Poetry* 212, no. 2 (2018): 166.

<sup>50</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, "A Conversation: What is it? What is it for?," in *Dialogues II*, (New York: Continuum, 2002), 5.

<sup>51</sup> Tyrus Miller, *Singular Examples: Artistic Politics and the Neo-Avant-Garde*, (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 40.