QUEER ORDINARINESS:
FRANK O’HARA AND CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

A Thesis
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of
Masters of Arts
in English

By

Yee Hang Tam, B.A.

Washington, DC
August 27, 2010
Acknowledgements

The research and writing of this thesis would not have been possible without the following people, to whom I would like to pay immense gratitude: Dana Luciano, my thesis advisor, whose critical acuity always pushed me to think harder in aspects where I had found comfortable, and whose patience for the production of this thesis permitted me to think through the problems carefully, and to travel around the fields of queer theory and ordinariness that know no boundary; Henry Schwarz, who served on my oral exam committee, has been to me the paragon of human kindness; his enduring support and confidence in me proved invaluable when I was most doubtful of my intellectual capability. I would also like to thank the people at Georgetown University who, in the past two years, have been such great mentors and friends. Thanks to my professors, particularly Ricardo Ortiz, Dennis Todd and Patrick O’Malley, for their intellectual nurturing both inside and outside classrooms. To Roya Biggie, Matt Bailey, Matt Moses, Sonia Valencia, Keith Hasperg and Sarah Workman, I am grateful for their friendships and comradeships. Transpacific support from the people in Hong Kong was most needed when I felt lost and disconnected from everywhere: I thank Brian Ho, Carmen Ho, Janice Chan and Sam Schneider for their unfailing friendships, for their willingness to talk with me when I had a sudden urge to speak Cantonese. This thesis is dedicated to my family—my grandmother “ma ma,” my parents, and my sister Hazel.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Introduction**  
Queer Ordinariness ................................................................. 1

**Chapter I**  
On Walking: Frank O’Hara’s Poems ........................................... 23

**Chapter II**  
On Lessening: Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man* ................. 40

**Bibliography** ............................................................................. 66
Introduction
Queer Ordinariness

1. Queer Ordinariness

“Our current emphasis on mindfulness,” remarks Lauren Berlant in an interview, “neglects the mind’s need for incoherence, to rest, to coast, spread out, incohere.”

It is, perhaps, an ingrained habit that critics are particularly tuned to things that matter—expressions, feelings and actions that are dramatic and memorable enough to leave an impact reverberating across time. One may easily concede that rebellion is more attractive than absorption, feeling defeated is more heart-wrenching and action-provoking than feeling adrift, detached, or nonparticular. This habit of reading has also shaped our tendency to be especially alert to feelings that can be comfortably settled in categories, ones that demand unitariness and assume exclusivity. In recent queer criticism, our preoccupation with terms like “utopianism” and “negativity” attests to this habit of hair-splitting categorization, of identifying emotions (shame/pride, optimism/pessimism, happiness/unhappiness) that are, presumably, able to heighten, arouse or undo the characters’ states of mind. Recent admonition not to “rescue” pre-Stonewall queer figures seems to only reinscribe our assumption that those who existed before Stonewall were all defined by negativity.

---

The recent emphasis on “shame” is perhaps most iconically exemplified in a conference held at The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor in 2003, entitled “Gay Shame,” which brought together a vast number of scholars, critics, activists, archivists, performers, journalists and artists to interrogate “the residual effects of shame on lesbian and gay subjectivity in the era of gay pride.” (4). The conference was such a major international event that, as organizers David Halperin and Valerie Traub later claimed, “no public event on such a large scale had ever taken place at the University of Michigan with the university’s full sponsorship and support, and no significant conference in the field had been held at the university since 1975” (5). Halperin and Traub state that the rationale of the conference stems from “a surprising array of discontents” about the gay pride movement:

We wanted to find out what it would be like to do queer politics and queer studies otherwise. In this case, ‘otherwise’ seemed necessarily to imply some degree of renewed engagement with a category that represents, by definition, the very opposite of ‘pride,’ at once its emotional antithesis and its political antagonist (3).

While it might be true that the gay pride movement has produced antithetical feelings for lesbians and gays, the way in which Halperin and Traub structure the rhetoric triggers a logical problematic: is the “otherwise” of pride really, by definition, the “opposite” of pride? Can the “otherwise” be something other than pride and shame,
the “unitary terms,” as George Chauncey calls, that are now predominantly structuring the way we talk about queer politics and queer studies?  

Halperin and Traub contend that during the early 1990s, queer culture was “all about the rejection of heteronormativity, the refusal to conform to social norms deemed irreparably heterosexual and heterosexist” (8). Such formulation seems to posit queer culture in the early 1990s as inherently vested with oppositional power. Yet while such political drive can be said to characterize many queer movements, inscribed in numerous pamphlets, manifestos and statements after Stonewall, it is not always clear how it registers queer culture when “culture” is blurred with “activism.” Generally, while activism demands collective attachment to a goal and its actualizing potentiality, culture contains multiple modes of beings that reflect how crises are encountered in ongoing habituality and lagging temporality. Daily routines, quotidian tasks, as well as other mundane affects such as boredom, apathy, daydreaming, fits of laughter or pain all come into play in the formation of culture, even when it is bombarded unceasingly by social activism and propaganda. In some cases, extremities in social life are even absorbed into ordinary spaces, producing ennui rather than shock, a blasé sensibility rather than discontent. When Septimus in *Mrs. Dalloway*

---

2 A strict binary opposition of these “unitary terms” can also be found in Heather Love’s essay, “Compulsory Happiness and Queer Existence.” While Love certainly talks about other sentiments including feeling ordinary and bored, the way she structures happiness and unhappiness is so rigid that they seem to be the “either/or” defining sentiments for queers. “Because of the long history of queer unhappiness,” she writes, “queers have been remarkably inventive in cultivating alternative modes of happiness.” See throughout the essay in new formations: a journal of culture/theory/politics. 63 (Spring 2008), 52-64.

returns to London after the War, the city’s hustle and bustle fails to produce any more feeling in him: “he watched them explode with indifference.” To understand culture, we might need to look beside political movements and consider a lighter sensibility that moves in a slower pace than what Philip Fisher calls the “vehement passions” like grief, fear, or rage.4

In 1954, Frank O’Hara wrote a poem whose “explicit” title might have enraged the public at the peak of McCarthyist censorship: “Homosexuality.” A plain and audacious title at once signaling protest and shame, it opens nonetheless with a sensibility that would only undermine its explicit gesture:

So we are taking off our masks, are we, and keeping our mouths shut? as if we’d been pierced by a glance!

The song of an old cow is not more full of judgment than the vapors which escape one’s soul when one is sick;

so I pull the shadows around me like a puff and crinkle my eyes as if at the most exquisite moment of a very long opera, and then we are off! without reproach and without hope that our delicate feet will touch the earth again, let alone “very soon.” (CP, 181)

How far does the speaker feel being “judged” by the hostile eye that “pierces” his unmasked face? The moment of accusation doesn’t mark, as we would suppose, the moment of being shamed; in reducing into a “puff,” the “judgment” becomes something that blows the speaker off to other social or imaginary spaces. It is a

departure, most importantly, without “reproach” and a “hope” that he will come back. How does this sensation of feeling adrift and detached fit into either “optimism” or “pessimism”? O’Hara use of “as if” (line 2), for one thing, suggests not only the failure of the homophobic glance, but also the fact that what is intended as a shaming mechanism against homosexuals and what homosexuals, in return, feel about such mechanism are not necessarily correlated. Ordinariness, as I would take it as the conceptual center of this thesis, is the word that tries to capture the consciousness of being disconnected from a historical moment, a personal or social crisis that is assumed to alter, shift or redirect the subject’s feeling to the compulsory state of responsiveness, whether affirmatively or negatively. Ordinariness, in other words, conceptually works to explain the hiatus between “what is going on” and “what is felt about what is going on.”

In Ordinary Affects, Kathleen Stewart talks about the “immanent, obtuse, and erratic” nature of ordinary affects (3). And yet, admittedly, ordinariness is an elastic and polymorphous expression; while demanding certain desubjectification of agency, ordinariness is nevertheless determined subjectively. But generally, for the purposes of this thesis, ordinariness is defined as a lessening of individuality as one is absorbed to

---

5 Berlant challenges the mirroring relation between affective activity and emotional states by rhetorically asking, “If one determines that an event or a relation is shameful, must it produce shame in the subjects it impacts? Is the absence of this transmission a sign of some distorting or unethical defense? Is the presence of this transmission evidence that a subject or a society knows itself profoundly? Of course not.” For Bersant, the mirroring logic underdescribes the complex forms of incoherence, detachment, or other emotional investment of the subject who experiences an activity that is purportedly emotionally invasive. See “Thinking about feeling historical,” Emotion, Space and Society 1 (2008): p. 4.
the environment; it permits a subject to be detached from an event, or what Berlant calls the “process of eventilization,” that demands a coherent manner of thinking and a heightened state of consciousness. Ordinariness is usually manifested in “stretched-out,” overexposed and lackluster spaces, following out a habituated pattering in which activities occur and reoccur in such a mundane mode that history is perceived as a slow, ongoing process. In ordinary spaces, individuals follow the circuit of norms, intuitions, and a pre-existing schema of cognition that define our orientations of living. While we may be cognizant of certain changes in different moments in life, it is the lack of perturbation or intensification of our sensorium that defines the affective sense of ordinariness.

If ordinariness is essentially about individuals (being lessened, perceptually private, and “out-of-touch” with the historical process), it is also about how individuals, especially queer subjects, are connected, interpenetrated and build their kinship beyond the imperative of hetero-reproduction. For some critics, though, theory of everyday life has been dismissed as that which tolerates, perpetuates or even glorifies stubbornness and exclusiveness; taking precedence of individual habits over social mobility can be dangerous in that, as Ben Highmore argues, xenophobes and exclusionists can be given a pretext for their resistance to those who don’t belong.

6 While people are of course always thinking, Berlant argues, it is in the sense of “making sense, when they apprehend what fluctuates without challenging very much the procedures of living.” See “Thinking about feeling historical,” pp. 4-9.

Lessing, in this sense, becomes a further privatization of the individual, and kinship can be a threat to the hard-won privilege of feeling ordinary. Highmore’s insight into the “darker” aspect of everyday life is sound, but there is, I argue, also an important distinction to make between the theory of everyday life and the theory of ordinariness, though they do often overlap. As I have pointed out, ordinariness is usually manifested in spaces of everyday life, but they differ subtly in that while everyday life refers to the habitual conditions of living with or without a conscious mind attached to them, ordinariness precisely refers to a lack of mindfulness, an affective disconnection from what’s being habitually done. Habituality is distinct from habit in its very emphasis on inattentiveness, the absence of a defensive shield. While everyday life might drive people apart, this thesis will argue that it is ordinariness that binds them together.

Lessening, by permitting individuals to be detached, incoherent and unfocussed, lessens the barrier of difference and creates (or widens) a space that is hospitable to connection, kinship and intimacy. This transition from lessening to extension will be discussed in greater details along with readings by Leo Bersani in Chapter Two.

With its visible lack of direction, aim, substance, function and utility, it is indisputable that ordinariness can be an intractable force. What Stewart argues as the “immanent” nature of ordinariness indicates its resistance to be transcended or mystified as a resistant ideology: to “instrumentalize” ordinariness as that which
serves a social telos is contradictory to its obtuse, irreconcilable qualities. What, then, can we make of ordinariness? And more intriguingly, how can we conceive ordinariness alongside queerness when these two terms seem so obstinately opposite? What is queer about the ordinary, or what is ordinary about the queer? To answer these questions I want to trace, very briefly, the genealogy of “queer” as a term that denotes resistance to that which, as Elizabeth Freeman argues, encompasses the idea of “excess” of extension that defies the scientificity of time and space, as well as the imperative of biological reproduction.

In the final chapter, “Critically Queer,” of her 1993 book Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex, Judith Butler opens with a note urging the reader not to take “queer” as a summary moment, for the vexed temporality of the word is precisely what she wants to address: how is it, she asks, that a term which signals such degradation has been “refunctioned” to signify “a new and affirmative set of meanings?” This question determines the stake of the rest of the chapter: if it is the “reiterating acting” of power relations (through “the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices”) against homosexuals that produces “queer” subjects,

---

8 In her essay “The Invention of Everyday Life,” Rita Felski addresses the central problematic of talking about everyday life in contemporary politics. It is true, she argues, that an over-reliance on habit can be “personally constraining and socially detrimental,” an overpoliticization of everyday life can also result in “a denunciation of any form of fixity in favor of permanent flux,” thereby undermining the authenticity of life. From such a perspective, a habituated mode of being is not something we can ever hope to transcend, although the social richness and potentiality embedded in it can be tempting: “The contemporary city may constitute a chaotic labyrinth of infinite possibilities, yet in our daily travels we often carve out a familiar path, managing space and time by tracing out the same route again and again.” See her essay online at http://people.virginia.edu/~rf6d/felski.the-invention-of-everyday-life.pdf.
we will never be able to “overcome” the discourse of insult that heterosexism deploys in our effort to create an affirmative identity for “queers.” Butler’s definition of “queer,” in her very emphasis on the term’s painful historicity, lays the foundation of anti-progress at the core of queer criticism.

The term “queer” emerges as an interpellation that raises the question of the status of force and opposition, of stability and variability, within performativity. The term “queer” has operated as one linguistic practice whose purpose has been the shaming of the subject it names or, rather, the producing of a subject through that shaming interpellation. “Queer” derives its force precisely through the repeated invocation by which it has become linked to accusation, pathologization, insult (226).

For Butler, the formation of a queer subject (indeed, any subject) depends on its being interpellated as such: there is no “queer,” “lesbian,” “gay,” “transsexual” that is “behind discourse and executes its volition or will through discourse”; the transformative capacity of the term “queer” is limited by “a chain of historicity” that, in promising the possibility of freedom, only recalls the unceasing performative that keeps reciting a set of homophobic practices and rules. Yet such performatives, Butler emphasizes, are not really put into effect by any malicious intention: when a performative act provisionally “succeeds” in authorizing or deauthorizing a set of social relations, it is “not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions” (226-227). Action is conferred meaning and power only when it is, at various levels, reiterated and becomes reiteratable. Any affirmative action that aims to liberate the term “queer” from its painful chain of historicity must, necessarily, reiterate the discourse of power
relations steeped in the chain. In other words, it is not possible for “queer” to be retooled as a term that *inceptively* designates a brave new world, free of the historical traces of injury that produced it in the first place.⁹

The idea that it can be named in disjunction from the term’s ingrained negativity, as if “language expresses a will or a choice,” is dismissed by what Butler calls “the conceit of autonomy” (228). Manifested mostly in the early slogans of gay activism, such “conceit” became documented in *OED*’s definition of “queer”: “from the late 1980s it [queer] began to be used as a neutral or positive term (originally of self-reference, by some homosexuals; cf. QUEER NATION n.) in place of gay or homosexual, without regard to, or in implicit denial of, its negative connotations.” This official documentation of the smooth transition of “queer” is vehemently criticized in recent queer criticism, which argues that such transition is reliant on a linear historiography of queer representation that often disavows negative feelings still stubbornly residing in the present. Yet in dismissing this hair-splitting transition, these critics also acknowledge the affective complexity of our responses to the term. *Ambivalence* is the word that Heather Love takes up when she describes the intensely vexed coexistence of pride and shame in queerness.¹⁰ Rooted fundamentally in

---

⁹ Long before being used as slur against homosexuals, in fact, the term “queer” had already been connected with negativity. The earliest definition of “queer,” now obsolete, is “bad; contemptible; untrustworthy; disreputable,” normally used as criminals’ slang, with its first recorded appearance dating back to 1569. In later centuries, queer was sometimes used, also as criminals’ slang, for “counterfeit” or “forged” (*OED*).

Butler’s logic of linguistic historicity, these critics’ affective approaches have, I would suggest, expanded the interpretative scope of the “chain of historicity”; it is not that such expansion can bestow upon us the agency with which to reintroduce the term discontinuous from the “chain,” but rather that a closer scrutiny of the affective response to “queer”—as well as to the whole set of homophobic reiterations that it accompanies—allows us to revisit what the “chain” is composed of, what sorts of emotional energies are invested in the “chain,” and how far the discourse of shame has shaped the “chain” into a force sufficient to bind the named “queer” subjects into a prefixed and predictable emotional category from which the “chain” further evolved.

That the term “queer” is handicapped by its own history, Butler argues, simultaneously marks its “most enabling conditions” (228). The reason being: since “queer” is perpetually driven by pain and discontent, it potentializes democratization by ways of its incapability and/or refusal of conformity and institutionalization. From the term’s efficacious and expansive involvement in all sorts of minority studies, we might perhaps say that “queer” has become somewhat a tautology of “resistance.” To queer something, as we would say nowadays, is fundamentally to revise something in order to resist the dominant modalities of power. But the fact that the shaming interpellation doesn’t always successfully produce shame in queer subjects seems to suggest that “queer” as an expression of resistance is limiting. It “enables” its function grounded on the logic of political efficacy, but “disables” a critical inquiry of an expression that doesn’t work toward resistance. “Queer” as a tautology of resistance
becomes insufficient to express homosexuals who fail to feel shame as expected. In this Butlerian sense, then, what we see early in O’Hara’s poem—his non-resistant attitude and his final retreat to his own social and imaginary worlds—only register a “non-queer” way of being a homosexual.

If this thesis maintains O’Hara’s failure to resist is queer, it is not “to queer” it as in to redeem the failure with an oppositional power; rather, it is to see how O’Hara’s non-normative affiliations and his reimagining of social spaces offer an occasion to open up new social relationality. That is, as Michel Foucault argues, to “re-open affective and relational virtualities” based on non-conjugal ties such as friendship. Here the notion of “queer” does not reside in resistance in the traditional sense, but in the radical reimagining of time and space—their infinite extendibility and expansiveness that is otherwise unimaginable in a heterosexual discourse. In her 2007 essay “Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory,” Elizabeth Freeman puts forward the idea of “queer belonging,” which is both “longing to belong” and “being long,” as that which encompasses “not only the desire to extend our individual existence or to preserve relationships that will invariably end, but also to have something queer exceed its own time, even to imagine that excess as queer in ways that getting married or having children might not be” (305). The formation of these queer belongings, Freeman emphasizes, is not through some codified rules that

demand coercion and obligation, but rather through affective and bodily practices that are “built up, accrued, and, crucially, transmitted” elusively in the registers of everyday life; that are, in other words, “cultivated” in terms of habituality. Habitus, a word borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu, is so pervasively used in the essay that, although Freeman does not explicitly acknowledge this, it might well be said that “queer belonging” is both founded and manifested in ordinariness: queer kinship is not “built” like an architecture, but “transmitted” like a contagious disease, in spaces that are visible but perhaps so visible that they tend not to produce attentiveness and mindfulness. To answer my previous questions about the relation between ordinariness and queerness, I would argue that ordinariness is queer insofar as it occasions to open up new relationality for queer subjects beyond the heteronormative model; ordinariness describes and explains the non-resistant gesture of spreading out in order to excavate the queer potentialities of unusual extension, affiliation and kinship.

The aim of my thesis is to trace and investigate certain “modes of ordinariness,” from literary works including Frank O’Hara’s late poetry and Christopher Isherwood’s 1964 novel A Single Man, whose expression has not been adequately addressed by the binary terms that are populating in recent queer criticism.

12 While Freeman emphasizes corporeality in the formation of queer kinship, my thesis will take on the affective side, closer to what Foucault calls “relational virtualities.” It is interesting to see that Freeman, in a lecture, distinguishes queer theory from postmodernism and deconstruction by virtue of its insistence on erotic corporeality, on the “lived engagement with bodily risk and experimentation.” I am sympathetic to this important distinction, but I also think that a radical reimagining of kinship to the extent that the heteronormative imperative of reproduction is challenged can be aptly called queer, even though such affective reimagining might not have an immediately visible relation to erotic life. The lecture except can be found at http://enlnews.ucdavis.edu/FFL07.html.
The aesthetics of ordinariness will bind together my analyses of O’Hara’s poetry and Isherwood’s *A Single Man*. These texts share a few characteristics, and “fates” of criticism when they were first published. Written before Stonewall, they are both autobiographical in fashion. In depicting quotidian tasks and undramatic individual encounters in their works, O’Hara and Isherwood had to deal with harsh criticism both outside and inside the queer circle. John Ashbery had to confront the posthumous charge that O’Hara is not outspoken enough in his opposition of the Vietnam War in his poetry. Dan Luckenbill recalls in the memorial essay that academics generally ignored Isherwood’s work for its lack of importance: “If a writer’s themes were Los Angeles, gay life, and alternative religion, then his books were not significant” (34).

The greatest flaw of these early critics, I think, is not their dismissal of these works, but rather their dismissal on the grounds that these works are not enabling of social transformation. What is valuable about a literary work that is pervasively an account of everyday life, the habitual, personal, insignificant matters? This question gets more politically intense in queer criticism: how can a queer subject that doesn’t actively resist homophobia, and that feels neither optimistic or pessimistic of the queer future, be worthy of discussion? This thesis would implicitly address these questions by *showing* what queer subjects in O’Hara and Isherwood can create by their very lack of political drives. “To show,” Bersani and Ulysee Dutoit argue, “is art’s highest accomplishment,” and must be “ethically defended” for its capacity to register what
politics cannot. If “pride” and “shame” are being massively deployed, in various ways, as acts of resistance to heteronormativity, the discovery of what remains unseen by these terms signifies a kind of liberation—a register of what can be done more for queer criticism.

Chapter One, “On Walking: Frank O’Hara’s poems,” will discuss how O’Hara’s poems are filtered in a way to achieve the complex level of intimacy and immediacy. O’Hara was himself a museum curator for the Museum of Modern Art; John Ashbery recorded that O’Hara “dashed the poems off at odd moments,” sometimes in the street at lunchtime and sometimes he was on the run. His poetry can be aptly characterized by fragmentation, with lines and stanzas often frittered away on his mundane, ho-hum activities with his coterie of friends, artists, painters, and even strangers on the streets. O’Hara’s spaces of ordinariness are formed through light encounters with them, offering a kind of kinship that rejects not only heteronormative reproductive time, but also a sociability that would performatively demand obligation and attachment. Since O’Hara’s train of thought was often disrupted by the abrupt shifts of the New York cityscapes, his poetry is conspicuously disjointed, making any unitary labels even harder to impose. Roger Gilbert uses terms like “kinetic” and “transcriptive,” as opposed to “mimetic” and “descriptive,” to describe O’Hara’s receptiveness to the immediate surrounding.¹⁴

---

¹³ See Forms of Being: Cinema, Aesthetics, Subjectivity (Durham, 2004).
O’Hara’s way of multiplying positionality is not enabled through a self-assertive agency, but through an all-encompassing embrace of whatever that flits by his eyes; his refusal to end his poems with a formal closure only enhances this openness. In walking with New York, O’Hara upsets not only reader’s expectations, but also the poetics of coherence that defines the lyric tradition. Of all major conventions of lyric, the “expectation of totality and coherence” probably stands out as the most antithetical to O’Hara’s disjointed poetics. Jonathan Culler argues that even if a poem succeeds as a fragment it depends on the fact that “our drive toward totality enables us to recognize [its] gaps and discontinuities and to give them a thematic value.”

To an extent, this argument is validated by the fact that O’Hara’s fragmented experience is made intelligible only with our ability to grasp the central concept of his receptiveness. But it is, I think, also possible that O’Hara’s poetics can challenge the lyric tradition by virtue of destabilizing thematics as a renewable concept. Michel de Certeau’s description of a self-regenerating New York sheds light on this idea: “New York has never learned the art of growing old by playing on all its pasts. Its present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future.” Just as the city itself is filled with incoherent possibilities, O’Hara’s rambling poetics must crack open the journey as a

---

totality of experience; the binary of queer emotions is also bound to be shattered as a result.

Chapter Two, “On Lessening: Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man,*” is a study of the protagonist George’s de-subjectification in an ordinary single day. From waking up in the morning as a clinical non-being to going to bed imagined as one of the “rock pools” bound with others in an “unbroken” ocean, George exists in the novel as though he is part of the ordinary ambiance rather than a subject that struggles against it. The novel has been said to be modeled after Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway,* not only for its iconic delineation of a single-day experience, but also for its obsession with everyday objects. Like Woolf, Isherwood is particularly keen at portraying details of everyday life, a gift cultivated by his habit of writing diary for 60 years continuously, from 1920s to 1983. Everyday objects such as ceiling, hair, breakfast, and the “john” abound in the novel; they install a circular mode of temporality through which George’s memory of his dead lover, Jim, is inexorably evoked. Critics in the past have generally interpreted the novel as an irreducibly “sad” book. *The New York Review of Books* calls it “a sad book, with a biological melancholy running through it,” while *The New York Times* describes it as “a sad, sly report on the predicament of the human animal.” These comments are legitimate insofar as we consider how the novel is predicated on loss: Jim’s death and George’s fear of his own aging. Yet to

---

17 These two review quotes can be found at the backcover of the University of Minnesota first edition of *A Single Man,* published in 2001.
impute a mirroring relation between loss and sadness, or memory and memorialization, would be one of the great mistakes of these criticisms. Much of George’s a single day, as I would argue, is an unconscious cultivation of affiliation and intimacy with spaces and people beyond the scope of knowledge. If Foucault tells us affective and relational virtualities can be opened up based on friendship, Isherwood tells us, even more radically, that these virtualities can be cultivated between strangers based on “not-knowing,” misrecognition, invisibility, secrecy, encryption, and elusiveness. Such “not-knowing” is not so much the failure of knowing as the desire not to know. The final part of this chapter will be devoted to George’s cultivation of these queer kinships in relation to Peter Coviello’s idea of “stranger intimacy,” which, as I would suggest, can revise Bersani’s and Adam Phillips’ notion of intimacy as preconditioned by shame.

II. Writing Queer History, Writing Everyday Life

Admittedly, O’Hara and Isherwood do not engage with the topic of homosexuality as much as they do with the ways in which homosexual beings position themselves in spaces of everyday life, always in an unheightened manner. While this mode of being may be extremely unhelpful for queer historiography, if we assume that to write history is to write “events,” the accounts of the private, the low, the incoherent, become the most valuable when these everyday experiences start to diminish. In her influential book *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt writes,
"The justification of statistics is that deeds and events are rare occurrences in everyday life and in history. Yet the meaningfulness of everyday relationships is disclosed not in everyday life but in rare deeds, just as the significance of a historical period shows itself only in the few events that illuminate it. The application of the law of large numbers and long periods to politics or history signifies nothing less than the willful obliteration of their very subject matter, and it is a hopeless enterprise to search for meaning in politics or significance in history when everything that is not everyday behavior or automatic trends has been ruled out as immaterial (42-43).

Perhaps this is the most extraordinary (and poignant) aspect of everyday life: the value of everyday life is noticed only when it is threatened to extinction. It is vulnerable not because of its elusiveness, but precisely because of our readiness to write it off from history. Arendt’s contention that our habit of periodization and enumeration is a “willful obliteration” of history’s subject matter probes us, as queer critics, to think whether our current preoccupation with the pride/shame binary is doing the same thing for the subject matter of queer history. What will be sad about this obliteration is that it is not done by our homophobic enemy, but by us—those who think that everyday life is not “useful” for a resistance politics.

“This is no utopia. Not a challenge to be achieved or an ideal to be realized, but a mode of attunement, a continuous responding to something not quite already given and yet somehow happening,” Stewart concludes the final chapter “The Vagueness of the Ordinary” (127). What is vague in O’Hara and Isherwood’s George is their unexplainable persistence in spreading out to the spaces of everyday life that doesn’t turn to any obvious good. But to write history based on everyday life doesn’t hinge upon the ulterior purpose of political transformation, although, as Henri
Lefebvre suggests, a history characterized by a downside-up structure can help us dissect the superstructure and the limit it imposes on individual freedom. Commonly grouped as one of the twentieth-century Marxist thinkers, Lefebvre can be more accurately said to be the one who massively revises the principles of Marxism—in fact, his invention of the everyday life theory can be understood as his frustration of Marxism’s failure to address the microscopic problems that most intimately concern common individuals:

“Socialism until now failed before the problem of the everyday. Too bad for it! It had promised to change life, but only did so superficially. Hence the profound dissatisfaction. […] We always speak of economic deficiencies in socialist countries. But that isn’t it. The wound there is that everything became too serious, horribly serious. They didn’t know how to improve the everyday for real people […] life was monotone, monochrome, tainted by repetitive ideology.”

Denouncing the French Communist Party’s insensitivity to people’s basic level of living conditions, Lefebvre argues that the use of everyday life lies in its “referentiability” to the problems of modernization such that the structure of capitalism can transpire. “The everyday,” he says, “remains a sole surviving common sense reference and point of reference. […] The proposition here is to decode the modern world, that bloody riddle, according to the everyday.” As such, everyday life doesn’t spell out the logic of itself—it is for Lefebvre only a “symptom” of the long-affected social malady of capitalism. The biographer Andy Merrifield rightly points out: “For Lefebvre, everyday life became a bit like quantum theory: by going small,

by delving into the atomic structure as it is really lived, you can understand the whole
structure of the human universe” (5).

In de-emphasizing the dramatic and the eventful with a view to “decoding” the
mechanism of capitalism, Lefebvre implies that everyday life ultimately works to
expose the “structure of totality” that governs social behaviors and phenomena. But if
we recall O’Hara, his groundbreaking poetics does not seem likely to support structure
as a totalizing drive. Fernand Braudel, the leader of the Annales School, shares
Lefebvre’s “downside-up” historiography by seeing narrative history as dominated by
dramatic accidents, “by the actions of those exceptional beings who occasionally
emerge, and who often are the masters of their own fate and even more of ours” (11).
To resist this historical representation inevitably sided only with the victors, Braudel
urges to consider a “repeatable” history. He writes, “There is […] a history slower still
than the history of civilizations, a history which almost stands still […] a dialogue
which never stops repeating itself, which repeats itself in order to persist.” Yet while
Braudel concedes that certain repeatable modes of being may contribute to a fuller
account of history, he refuses to believe that everyday life is rooted in a true, enduring
historicity; everyday life can only account for a “short time span” which, in itself, is
insufficient to account for the “structure and layout” of society, “the slow process of
civilization.” Braudel argues that “the mediocre accidents of ordinary life: a fire, a
railway crash, the price of wheat, a crime, a theatrical production, a flood” are “the
most capricious and the most delusive of all,” as their incoherence fails completely to
represent “the depth of history on which scientific thought is free to work.” According to Braudel’s formulation, then, only “structure” is real and trustworthy.

In queer criticism, “homophobia” and “heteronormativity” as two relatively modern inventions (and the shaming mechanism they deploy) can be said to be the structure that defines the lives of many pre-Stonewall queer subjects. While this account may be accurate to a large extent, we may well question if certain ordinary persistence in everyday spaces, and the flat, unheightened expression it accompanies, are necessarily “symptoms” of resignation to homophobia. If we conclude that these “symptoms” are not evidence of failure, that they are in fact expressions of ambivalence, are we going to read them as what Douglas Crimp calls “pre-Stonewall styles of queer culture resistance”? In other words, must feeling ambivalent be either (blatant) evidence of failure or (latent) evidence of resistance? Either way of reading presupposes that the heteronormative structure is the shaping force of queer subjectivity. Again, as I have argued in the beginning, the relation between “what’s going on” and “what is felt about what’s going on” is not necessarily a mirroring one. If feeling ambivalent, apathetic or “stretched-out” register something other than a response to homophobia, we may rethink whether words such as “failure” and “resistance” are sufficient for a queer historiography that is based on everyday life. To write an ethical queer history is to take queer ordinariness into account, not just as a way to “decode” the structure, but also as a record of how queer subjects register their modes of being that political vocabularies fail to capture.
Chapter One
On Walking: Frank O’Hara’s Poems

I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking.

-- Christopher Isherwood

I.

Less than two months after O’Hara died tragically in a car accident on Fire Island in July 1966, his close friend John Ashbery published an obituary essay “Frank O’Hara’s Question,” defending O’Hara’s art against the cultural demands in the 1960s for treating poetry as a form of political protest:¹

O’Hara’s poetry has no program and therefore cannot be joined. It does not advocate sex and dope as a panacea for the ills of modern society; it does not speak out against the war in Viet Nam or in favor of civil rights; it does not paint gothic vignettes of the post-Atomic Age: in a word, it does not attack the establishment. It merely ignores its right to exists, and is thus a source of annoyance for partisans of every stripe. (qtd. in Herd 12)

Indeed, presenting itself against the grain of liberation, in a way that chooses to idle waywardly in every corner of New York City, O’Hara’s poetry is marked by its fragmentary experience and abrupt shift of tones and moods without giving any

¹ Ashbery further explained in a letter to The Nation, written in response to Louis Simpson’s accusation that he “complimented” O’Hara on “not having written about the [Vietnam] War”: “All poetry is against war and in favour of life, or else it isn’t poetry, and it stops being poetry when it is forced into the mold of a particular program. Poetry is poetry. Protest is protest. I believe in both forms of action” (qtd. in Herd, 93).
signpost in advance. O’Hara’s ordinary experience in his poems does not seek to transcend itself to that which becomes theoretical or objective, momentous or revelatory; instead, the ordinary experience simply exists as it is. Since O’Hara wrote many of his poems while he was on the run or during lunch hour, it’s not hard to imagine that his experience and pacing were often influenced by the abrupt shifts of the New York cityscapes. It is, then, perhaps also accurate to say that O’Hara’s poetry “has no program” because “it cannot be joined.”

The disjointedness of O’Hara’s poetry (whether disjointed between poems or within a poem) is nonetheless fundamental to the portrayal of the ordinary, because the ordinary, as I have mentioned before, is characterized by its elasticity, meaning that it can’t be organized into something logically “valid” or “sound.” The ordinary

---

2 O’Hara himself was acutely aware that any attempt to unify his fragmented voices would only put the poetry’s aesthetic in jeopardy. In a blithe poem titled “The Critic” (1951), he writes:

> I cannot possibly think of you other than you are: the assassin of my orchards. You lurk there in the shadows, meting out conversation like Eve’s first confusion between penises and snakes. Oh by droll, be jolly and be temperate! Do not frighten me more than you have to! I must live forever. (CP, p. 48)

This poem is, to a large extent, self-explanatory, except that the parody on Eve invites more analysis. Traditional biblical symbols such as the forbidden fruit and the snake are often used to create or sustain an underlying thought in literary works. In the poem, however, O’Hara deliberately avoids any illusion of depth by conflating a sexual image and a biblical image so that, to quote Altieri, none of the “traditional symbolic overtones can emerge” (98). O’Hara’s rejection of symbolism enables him to grasp the very surface of every fleeting moment, even though it may appear to be all too trivial or “irrelevant” to be included in a poem.
also has a special effect in O’Hara’s poetry: it exudes a sense of intimacy through the poet’s ostensibly uninhibited presentation of his private experience, including his most trivial, mundane and ho-hum activities. My analysis of the following poem “My Heart” will explain how such effect is achieved, but it also investigates how such intimacy is simultaneously filtered by the poet’s self-distanciation.

I’m not going to cry all the time
nor shall I laugh all the time,
I don’t prefer one “strain” to another.
I’d have the immediacy of a bad movie,
not just a sleeper, but also the big,
overproduced first-run kind. I want to be
at least as alive as the vulgar. And if
some aficionado of my mess says “That’s
not like Frank!”, all to the good! I
don’t wear brown and grey suits all the time,
do I? No. I wear workshirts to the opera,
often. I want my feet to be bare,
I want my face to be shaven, and my heart –
you can’t plan on the heart, but
the better part of it, my poetry, is open. (CP, p.231)

Once proclaiming that he “dislike[d] dishonesty [more] than bad lines” (qtd. in Perloff 14), O’Hara was especially concerned whether his poetry could convey a sense of honesty and authenticity. This poem begins with O’Hara’s seemingly intimate confession: that he is not going to “cry” or “laugh” all the time. ³ If a good poem is defined by its ability to provoke response by demonstrating a host of expected emotions, O’Hara seems to suggest that he would rather produce bad poems (“a bad
movie”), boring (“a sleeper’), “overproduced,” and yet unique (“the first-run kind”) as a way to encompass all moments of his life. O’Hara’s presentation of his intimacy—from a series of pseudo-confessions (his emotional inconsistency, his desire to be “as alive as the vulgar” and his habit of wearing workshirts to the opera) to the figuration of his bare feet and shaven face, suggesting his naked receptivity—is strikingly exposed, and yet such a “bare-it-all” gesture is deliberately filtered: the poem runs on in a strictly “I” confessional style, until “you,” the only addressee, suddenly appears in “you can’t plan on my heart.” Besides emphasizing the speaker’s unpredictability, “you” functions to expose O’Hara’s sudden awakening that he may actually be talking to an audience, thereby revealing his impersonality in the previous series of confessions. Furthermore, while O’Hara admits that he prefers “immediacy” to “strains,” the poem itself also incarnates such immediacy in a way that violently intersects the impression of intimacy. The idling style of the poem allows the reader to be connected with each “confession,” yet the subject “I” is so overtly overproduced that each utterance is void of any lasting and substantial value. If the poem itself is O’Hara’s “heart,” this “heart” is then at once alluring, in that it sustains the reader’s curiosity, and yet so pulsatory that any delay or stoppage would be sufficient to kill it.

Intimacy and immediacy, then, play out an intricate sensibility in O’Hara: while his “private talk” ushers us into his kaleidoscopic world, generously sharing with us his experience in his daily life, his stylistic immediacy is indicative of his refusal to let us investigate further what he feels in each sweeping moment. In his
famous, tongue-in-cheek manifesto “Personism,” O’Hara has something more to say about intimacy:

Personism has nothing to do with philosophy, it’s all art. It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it! But to give you a vague idea, one of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love’s life-giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet’s feelings toward the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person. That’s part of Personism. (CP, p.499)

Since “Personism” does not have to do with personality or intimacy, it would be problematical to construe “Personism” as O’Hara’s proposal that a poet should lay bare himself to tell all. But a thorny logical question arises when O’Hara goes on writing, in the later part of the manifesto, that “it [“Personism”] puts the poem squarely between the poet and the person” and that “the poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages.” How, then, can the poem be “between the poet and the person” while the poet is “prevented” from “feeling about the person”? This strange intimacy is occasioned by O’Hara’s aesthetic of nerves, from his famed dictum: “You just go on your nerve yourself” (498). Mark Silverberg argues that a nervy poetics, as a “camp-inflected version” of serious poetics, is that which “just runs”: instead of attaching himself in a situation that would demand prudence and responsibility, a nervy poet simply “vacates” the scene before it turns into a weighty subject (154). It is as though a campy nervousness nourishes an intimate situation where two beings are held together by their mutual awareness of how impudent and free the relationship is.

In her famous “Notes on Camp,” Susan Sontag argues that “camp” is defined, among
others, by its commitment to the non-serious, for it is “too much” when it is proposed seriously (59). Camp is at once too extravagant and unable to treat such extravagance as a serious matter, just as O’Hara’s overbrimming activities are never invested with deliberative thoughts. But perhaps one more interesting point to note is that camp, in Sontag’s definition, “is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater” (56). The relation between the poet and the person in O’Hara’s “Personism” is figured like that between an actor and audience; an actor/poet stages his everyday life as a performance to the audience/person, during which the actor develops connection with his (sole) audience, but is at the same time “prevented” from knowing him so as to determine what he could do better or should do next; the actor/poet can only act on, without a deliberative mind to consider the effect the show produces. Intimacy is achieved by the prevention of a full awareness—by the “risk” that the poet, in the recounting of his quotidian everyday matters, gets detached from the “person,” that is, the reader.

The following lines are taken from one of his longer, more well-known poems, “Adieu To Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul.” Like many other poems he wrote, it begins with a spatiotemporal marker: “It is 12:10 in New York and I am wondering / if I will finish this in time to meet Norman for lunch.” Informing his reader of such a specific time may achieve an air of authenticity in the poem, but it simultaneously implies that 12:10, after all, is as much specific as it is ordinary. Pondering if he can finish writing his poem before meeting Norman for lunch, O’Hara
eventually wonders if he can halt all the humdrum daily work and escape in his fantasies:

I wish I were reeling around Paris
instead of reeling around New York
I wish I weren’t reeling at all
it is Spring the ice has melted the Ricard is being poured
we are all happy and young and toothless
it is the same as old age
the only thing to do is simply continue
is that simple
yes, it is simple because it is the only thing to do
can you do it
yes, you can because it is the only thing to do
blue light over the Bois de Boulogne it continues
the Seine continues
the Louvre stays open it continues it hardly closes at all
the Bar Américain continues to be French
de Gaulle continues to be Algerian as does Camus
Shirley Goldfarb continues to be Shirley Goldfarb
and Jane Hazan continues to be Jane Feilicher (I think!)
and Irving Sandler continues to be the balayeur des artistes
and so do I (sometimes I think I’m “in love” with painting)
and surely the Piscine Deligny continues to have water in it
and the Flore continues to have tables and newspapers and people under them
and surely we shall not continue to be unhappy
we shall be happy
but we shall continue to be ourselves everything continues to be possible
René Char, Pierre Reverdy, Samuel Beckett it is possible isn’t it
I love Reverdy for saying yes, though I don’t believe it (CP, pp. 328-329)

This paragraph is astonishing in many ways, in that it is entirely unpunctuated except for the exclamation point after the interjection “I think” and two commas after “yes”; the lumbering sense of continuity is made manifest by the repetitive phrase “continue to be” as well as the anaphora of “and.” But still more astonishing is the unrestrained
gush of unfamiliar names. O’Hara’s proper-name dropping technique has been noted by many critics. Charles Altieri, for example, argues,

His [O’Hara’s] texture of proper names gives each person and detail an identity, but in no way do the names help the reader understand anything about what has been named. To know a lunch counter is called Juliet’s Corner or a person O’Hara expects to meet is named Norman is rather a reminder for the reader that the specific details of another’s life can appear only as momentary fragments, insisting through their particularity on his alienation from any inner reality they might possess. (93-94)

While Altieri notices that the “particularity” of the “specific details” serves to remind the reader that they are only “momentary fragments,” I propose that the whole structure of proper names transcends the sense of momentariness of each name. It seems as though our habit of monumentalizing things has made us unable to recognize that sometimes things can be forgettable. Which, however, doesn’t mean that forgettability doesn’t have its values. With the names flooding the paragraph, the impression of linear continuity is intersected by what Henri Lefebvre calls the “linear repetition.” In anticipating reproduction, production “change in such a way as to superimpose the impression of speed onto that of monotony.”4 By “linear repetition,” however, Lefebvre means not so much “material repetition” as the repetition of

---

4 In “Everyday and Everydayness” (1987), Lefebvre argues that there are two types of repetition: cyclical and linear. The former, dominating in nature, implies the repetition of “nights and days” “seasons and harvests,” “activity and rest,” “hunger and satisfaction,” while the latter, dominating in “rational processes,” implies the “repetitive gestures of work and consumption” (10). In Lefebvre’s account, though, these two types of repetition are densely intersected, in that “the repetitive gestures [in modern life] tend to mask and to crush the cycles,” so that while modern life appears to be linear and variable, it actually envelops “the invariable constant of the variations” (10).
“form”: the monotony of actions and of movements, imposed by structures. In the poem, indeed, what repeats is not the name per se, but rather the monotonous (almost predictable) way in which the names are produced. The velocity with which O’Hara drops each new name, furthermore, not only reveals the insubstantiality of each, as Altieri has noted already, but also its ahistoricity and, by extension, its nonspecificity and unmemorability. Just as one would become blasé from sensory bombardment, O’Hara produces an overpresence of names only to enhance the anesthetic effect of the poem.

From escapism (“I wish I were”) to resignation (“the only thing to do is simply continue”), O’Hara ostensibly shows to the audience, with a simple communicative logic (or perhaps lesson!), that since the future is unavoidable, one must leave one’s fantasies behind and keep moving on. Yet, since O’Hara’s longing for continuity is conspicuously redundant (the word “continue” appears ubiquitously), his apparent optimism and engaging hopefulness curiously envelops an insidious sense of detachment and impersonality. O’Hara’s use of indeterminate pronouns works additionally to such effect. From the beginning to end, the pronoun abruptly shifts from “I” (“I wish I were reeling around Paris) to “you” (“yes, you can”). The third personal pronoun comes up as “we” in the last few lines (“we shall be happy”). From “I” to “you” to “we,” the paragraph progresses, on the surface level, from solitariness to universal love. Yet if we may recall “Personism,” bringing together the “poet” and

---

the “person” ultimately serves an intimate as well as distancing effect. The question/affirmation mode in “can you do it / yes, you can” can be construed as the poet’s self-reassurance that he himself can continue, especially when we consider the last line of the poem – “I love Reverdy for saying yes, though I don’t believe it” – suggesting that “yes, you can” is simply the poet’s sudden evocation of what the French surrealist Reverdy might have said. If “you” is the poet himself, “we” only seems to re-bind the poet’s selves into a single and stronger whole. Such a technique ultimately works to actualize the aesthetic of detachment, creating an impression of intimacy while undermining our access to his imaginary world in which he keeps repeating his wish for continuity.

The following poem will take us to another dimension of the ordinary because unlike “Adieu To Norman,” it belongs to O’Hara’s famous “walk poetry” and is, above all, specifically concerned with the queer culture in 1950s New York.

I live above a dyke bar and I’m happy.
The police car is always near the door
in case they cry
or the key doesn’t work in the lock. But
he can’t open it either. So we go to Joan’s
and sleep over,
    Bridget and Joe and I.
I meet Mike for a beer in the Cedar as
the wind flops up the Place, pushing the leaves
against the streetlights. And Norman tells about
the geste,
    with the individual significance of a hardon
like humanity.

    We go to Irma’s for Bloody Marys,
and then it’s dark.
We played with her cat and it fell asleep. We
seem very mild. It’s humid out. (Are they spelled “dikes”?)
People say they are Bacchantes, but if they are

we must be the survivors of Thermopylae. (286)

The gay subculture of 1950s New York was characterized by a precarious yet
repetitive mode: of a thriving hustler scene and more stringent entrapment by
plainclothesmen; of mushrooming gay bars and periodic police raids; of a growing
variety of sexual expressions and more violent extortions. George Chauncey notes that
“from the 1930s through the 1960s, most gay bars lasted only a few months or years
before the police closed them and forced their patrons to move on to some other
locales” (347). In another study by Charles Kaiser, one of the lesbians interviewed
echoes Chauncey’s observation, saying that “bars were all over the place in those
days. They kept opening and closing. They were raided and there would be a signal:
when they knew that the cops were coming, the lights would flash on and off” (86).
While these historical accounts of the precarious gay life in the 1950s attend mostly to
the factual rather than the affective, they nonetheless reveal a general adaptive
behavior of lesbians and gays in that historical period: one is damaged, but one still
survives and keeps up one’s mode of being.

Such a “move-on” attitude is reflected in the poem in an intricate way.
Beginning with “dyke bar” and “police car,” the poem introduces a twin association
that immediately recalls the historical trauma of police harassment of homosexuals
and their failed resistance in pre-Stonewall New York. But against a liberationist grain, the poem only lightly parodies the police and then turns away. The poet’s static descriptions of his living condition (lines 1–5) shifts abruptly to a series of walking motions (lines 5–14), deliberating eschewing the stagnancy that the police and his failed key represent. The following activities are defined by their utter lack of particularity: going to friend’s place, sleeping over, going to another friend’s place, listening to a tale; and finally going to a bar at night. The poem is ostensibly united syntactically by conjunctions like “and” and “so,” but these connectives—what Perloff calls “a system of nonsequiturs”—in fact barely make any sense. How is, for example, going to Joan’s a result of the police not being able to open the lock to a “dyke bar”? These false connectives, as a result, serve not so much to connect the fragmented details into a united journey as to underscore the immediacy of each ordinary particular. They mark the speaker’s refusal to linger over an activity as well as his ready receptiveness to more people and things.

If the last line of the poem—“we must be the survivors of Thermopylae”—implies the survival of homosexuals, with their remarkable courage and endurance on the battlefields against all odds, O’Hara seems to suggest that homosexuals survive only by running away. The impulse to move on because of the “police car” and the convoluted sense of immediacy and disjointedness all seem to attest to the precarious gay life in 1950s New York. However, what is remarkable about this poem—and what makes the poem more than just a “testimonial” to a kind of gay life with which
we are already familiar—is the sense of uneventfulness that finds expressions paradoxically in fanciful details. Like “Adieu To Norman,” the poem is populated by proper names, which only highlights the forgettability of certain encounters as I have discussed. But the walking details are uneventful drive here in that their density and expansiveness adamantly disrupts the seriality of the walk itself. Recall the convention of “totality” and “coherence” in lyric poetry, O’Hara seems reluctant to make the walk into a totalizing experience that makes sense. From “sleep[ing] over” in Joan’s place to playing with the cat until it falls asleep, all these activities happen within one night. The closing of the day, signaled by the cat falling asleep, does not signal the end of the poet’s activities: “We played with her cat and it fell asleep. We / seem very mild. It’s humid out.” His last observation of the exterior suggests that he is expecting to walk again. Within a night, then, there doesn’t seem to be a destination for the poet’s journey.

With a conspicuously campy twist, O’Hara’s ordinariness creates a queer sociability among his circle of friends that is based on traveling, non-purpose and non-commitment. Perhaps to be camp is to be flirtatious to some degree; O’Hara is never committed to anything serious and stable.6 Though we may be unable to find a coherent logic in O’Hara, just as Helen Vendler rightly observes that his “poetic transiency” must and preclude any “sublime relational metaphysics,” we may

---

6 For an elaborate discussion on flirtation, its ability to “exploit the ambiguity of promises to sabotage our cherished notions of commitment,” see throughout Adam Phillips’ On Flirtation. (Cambridge MA: Harvard U Press, 1996), especially the Introduction.
nonetheless see what his poetic incoherence—its lightness, flirtatiousness and infinite extendibility—can create. Challenging the “closed” poetic form that characterizes Eliot and Pound’s high modernist tradition, O’Hara’s “open-endedness” (or, precisely, “unendability”) also challenges kinship as regulated by reproductive time and space.

In the poem “Cornkind,” O’Hara radically reimagines “fertility” as a kind of ideational production based on transtemporal and transspatial kinship. “Kind,” at its Old English root, after all means offspring, race or nature (OED). The poem begins,

So the rain falls
it drops all over the place
and where it finds a little rock pool
it fills it up with dirt
and the corn grows
a green Bette Davis sits under it
reading a volume of William Morris
oh fertility! Beloved of the Western world
you aren’t so popular in China
though they fuck too (387)

The traditional association of rain and soil that leads to fertility is supplanted by the procreative ability of a rock. The newborn Bette Davis is begotten, as it were, through the nutrients of William Morris’ literary work. O’Hara here echoes Elizabeth Freeman’s notion of “queer belonging”; yet instead of abandoning the concept of reproduction, O’Hara gives it a twist and describes how reading, as a form of being inseminated by a literary progenitor, is central to the flourishing of the artistic circle.

The poem continues,

and do I really want a son
to carry on my idiocy past the Horned Gates
poor kid a staggering load
yet it can happen casually
and he lifts a little of the load each day
as I become more and more idiotic
and grows to be a strong strong man
and one day carries as I die
my final idiocy and the very gates
into a future of his choice

but what of William Morris
what of you Million Worries
what of Bette Davis in

AN EVENING WITH WILLIAM MORRIS
OR THE WORLD OF SAMUEL GREENBERG

what of Hart Crane
what of phonograph records and gin

what of “what of”

you are of me, that’s what
and that’s the meaning of fertility
hard and moist and moaning

If Bette Davis is made by William Morris, their spending an evening together (and
expecting, probably, a third child) hints at an incestuous relationship that must further
contest the order of heternormativity, though very much in a fun way. O’Hara suggests
that not only are gay men procreative, but also phonograph records, gin and ideas. Far
from something that requires any laboring effort, procreation is reimagined as the
process of ideational transmission, happening as casually as having sex, “hard and
moist and moaning.” But what is so queer about the poem is that O’Hara is not just
having sex with Hart Crane and others, but also with the reader: “you are of me, that’s
what.” “[W]hat of Hart Crane” can thus be read as “you are of me of Hart Crane.” The erotic aspect of kinship extends so infinitely to encompass the future unknown reader that even though transtemporality must signify the absence of lived bodily touch, touching affectively can also be an immensely erotic experience.

One might rightly observe that the “Crane, O’Hara, you” model basically underwrites the ancestral, linear paradigm of heterosexual reproduction, even though O’Hara twists it profoundly. Yet in following this linear model, O’Hara also emphasizes the absolute independence of each newborn: O’Hara’s son, probably any of “us,” must have “a future of his own.” The idea of queer kinship here is not characterized by what Freeman calls “a longing to be long,” a sort of infinite preservation and attachment, but, rather, by an insistence on freedom within which one can leave one’s own kin and develop a new one of his own. Beyond calculation, organization and management, O’Hara’s kinship is cultivated, formed and de-formed in a space that doesn’t demand attachment and obligation. Just as one can “casually” be born, one can as well “casually” develop new intimate relationalites. Open-ended poetics, paratactic sentences, incoherence and illogicality, a constellation of proper names, as well as a fanatic imagination of non-familial possibilities—all these landmark characteristics of O’Hara’s poetry offer an occasion for queer critics to see how such traditional categories as kinship, reproduction, intimacy can be reconfigured. If we say O’Hara is a queer poet, it is probably to say that his poems can so radically reimagine the heteronormative time and space despite his very non-intention to engage
the queer future: “I’m the opposite of visionary,” he proclaims. In the subsequent chapter on Isherwood’s *A Single Man*, we will also consider this lack of vision—or, precisely, invisibility—as a way of cultivating intimacy, even among strangers.
Chapter Two
On Lessening: Christopher Isherwood’s A Single Man

When you get to a situation where everybody is a subversive, sabotage becomes status quo.

-- John Ashbery

I.

We have been telling a few lies about what gay sex can do for society, Leo Bersani asserts in “Is the Rectum a Grave?”, a 1987 essay that is probably the most infamous work in queer theory. What makes the essay so infamous, besides its antisocial thesis, is perhaps its very honesty—its rejection of “a slogansque approach” to gay sex as the model of democracy, of a “sentimentalizing” of sex grounded on “political sympathies” for homosexuals (12-13). In revealing the secret identification of gay man with that which oppresses him, Bersani urges us to rethink whether gay sex is at all, as it were, “subversive” of the brutal power structure of heterosexuality, or rather complicit with the structure that simultaneously condemns it. Having grown accustomed to such political vocabularies as “diversity” and “pluralism,” Bersani claims, we have lost the ability to recognize the pleasure of sex—the fact that being conquered by one’s own oppressor, though immensely dishonorable, can be immensely enjoyable. Those who pastoralize gay sex for the sake
of political correctness, then, are precisely the so-called “liars”: it is as though, for Bersani, what we would call “subversion” in gay sex is really but a “subversive” (and dishonest) mode of reading of gay sex. So much alteration, from shame to pride, depends on the critic.

The perpetual infamy of Bersani’s essay also lies in its perpetual encounter of the oppositional criticism which he has long foreseen, criticism whose “strategic value” for promoting “radical pluralism” he claims to be fully intelligible. In Disidentifications, José Muñoz argues that such seeming identification with the oppressor could be, in fact, seen as a disidentificatory move if one is able to resist the “encoded directives” as accepted meaning. Munoz’s suggestion that disidentification is that which “resists, demystifies, and deconstructs the universalizing ruse of the dominant culture” (26) shares the same vein as Richard Dyer’s assertion, quoted by Bersani, that “much mischief” can be done to the heterosexual world if the “signs of masculinity” are eroticized in a “blatantly homosexual context” (13). For Bersani, however, the challenge is not so much the level of damage that can cause to the heterosexual world as the representational capacity of such utopian criticism. Munoz’s call for “decoding” the dominant culture often indeed relies on a strategic positioning of the critic who is already equipped with the right political knowledge: “For the critic, disidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy” (25 emphasis mine). In such a
reading, a minority subject’s “perspective” is rendered posterior to, and thus filtered by, the “perspective” of the critic, and the subject’s secret passion, if there is any, is also hermetically sealed by the critic’s heroizing act. Bersani’s proposal of anti-communitarian criticism and later Heather Love’s caution not to “fix injuries” precisely seek to eliminate this redemptive re-invention by calling for a critical inquiry into the most secret, shameful passion of queer subjects.

Admittedly brutal and ugly, then, is the “honesty” with which Bersani’s essay is armored. Of all examples of “lies” that populate the essay, gay baths probably best exemplify how gay sex utterly fails to “re-invent” the power structure of heterosexuality. In response to the sentimentalizing claim that gay baths created “a sort of Whitmanesque democracy […] far removed from the male bondage of rank, hierarchy, and competition that characterize much of the outside world,” Bersani argues that gay baths, stripped of the “civilizing hypocrisies” of the outside world, are exactly the space that manifests—rather than “deconstructs”—the “brutal and misogynous ideal of masculinity” (12). Male heterosexual power, aped nontransformatively as gay-macho style and sadomasochism in the bathhouse, is only reproduced in a different arena. For Bersani, though, this brutality of power is the very precondition of sexual pleasure, a pleasure expostulated from Freud’s argument, in *Three Essays of Sexuality*, that sexual intensity is reached only when the psychic organization of the subject is shattered (24). This is the long-denied value of powerlessness, the immense pleasure dependent on the subject’s slavishness, his
submission to the imperative that “he should be enslaved because he is enslaved, that he should be denied power because he doesn’t have any” (15). In asserting that the “war” begins as soon as persons are posited, Bersani implies that relationality, in governing sexual desire, is inherently sexual (25). At the same time, however, this “war” as a term is slightly aberrant, since the bottom “loser,” for example, doesn’t really need to fight before his knees weaken to the penis. If we assume this rooted positonality—one that must imply a “pre-knowledge” that one is necessarily attached to a certain rank, we may well postulate that a bathhouse is “invented” as such only when it is characterized by the gay men’s preawareness of their own positions—of who the “winners” and “losers” are going to be.

There may, however, be a “detached relationality,” one that doesn’t designate individuals as beings who feel they must belong to the activity going on around them. By this I do not mean ignorance or denial, but rather a mode of ordinary being that seems, at times, capable of superseding the pleasure of sex. Ordinariness doesn’t deny the pleasure of shattering; rather, its demand of a lessening of individuality, of a desubjectification of agency, promotes the self to be shattered by all that comes to it. There is, I argue, a non-possessive pleasure of one being able to spread out and absorb, without the kind of promissory optimism that possession assumes, and the affirmative impulse that the pace of modernity entails. In “Critical Inquiry, Affirmative Culture,” Lauren Berlant argues that our presumption of the clarity of the senses has made us somehow fail to pay adequate attention to a kind of “negative”
emotion that is disorganized, incoherent, and ambivalent. We may sometimes make an ostensibly affirmative action, she claims, without optimism for the kind of transformative agency that the action ought to have been a possibility (450). This latent agency with which we keep up our habitual routines is more often experienced as “disconnection, consciousness at a distance.” At the heart of ordinariness is a refusal of linear teleology that cultivates a person’s concentration, coherence, and certain prescribed affect—affect that is usually meant to be noticed, to be dramatic and useful for persuasion. But an affective ordinariness will, too, depart from the rubric of “negativity” under which Berlant groups all the incoherent and temporally lagging emotions. If ordinariness is precisely defined by its receptivity to the incoherent matters, it is not helpful, I think, to limit it to a state that would preclude the possibility of restful happiness or gone-out-of-the-mind imagination, however intermittent these might be. Is there, then, a new way to talk about non-utopic feelings that are at the same time not “negative”?

II.

Consider George, the middle-aged protagonist in A Single Man, entering the steam room with a greeting by a sixteen-year-old “nodding casually at him.” George feels this is “the most genuinely friendly greeting he has received all day” (107). At first wondering if he should peel off his tee-shirt to “seduce,” but with the young man beginning doing his sit-ups, George follows his example and suddenly feels, amidst
this strange reticent impersonality, “an empathy growing between them.” Isherwood’s delineation of their growing togetherness—their panting bodies lying “side by side” and their pastoral simplicity—is strikingly reminiscent of the “Whitmanesque democracy” that Bersani effortlessly debunks. Is George “telling lies”? As readers we are not told the ontological state of George’s bathhouse as a ruthlessly hierarchized place, mostly because the novel, told by a pseudo-omniscient narrator, unfolds from the perspective of George himself. What we can know, however, is the way in which George positions himself in a place that we assume to be ruthlessly ranked and the way he adjusts a sociability with the others. That George, in the locker room, chooses to follow the young man’s sit-ups rather than possess his “golden beauty” exemplifies a mode of being that doesn’t rely on the logic of conquering and being conquered; not thinking and not attaching, George is connected to the ambiance by simply becoming part of it, without the romantic and high-sounding “desire to know and trust other men” that defines brotherhood or “Whitmanesque democracy.” This directionless and mindless motion is the way of resting and spreading out, of finding, as George later ponders, an “uncomplicated relaxed happy mood” that overcomes the anxiety of old age, loss and death.

*A Single Man* (1964) is Christopher Isherwood’s last novel, and arguably his finest one. The title is intriguing: it suggests a man, an English professor, of singular importance at the same time implying that he could be any ordinary man. Writing in an autobiographical fashion, partly to express his fear of losing Don Bachardy, an
eighteen-year-old college student, when he was struggling to become an independent artist, Isherwood had to nonetheless make sure that *A Single Man* is not an accurate replication of himself. In conceiving the novel he wrote to his friend that the novel will be “fundamentally about me, at my present age, living right here in the Canyon, but under rather different circumstances […] It isn’t in the first person!” The narrator, born out of Isherwood’s determination not to reproduce himself, becomes what the author would later reflect as “a non-personal seemingly disembodied narrator [who] knows everything that George feels and thinks and is present with him at all times. But he is not a part of George” (164). One of the advantages of this narrative technique is that it is well-attuned to a description of characters that are depersonalized, like George’s appearance at the very opening as a clinical “it,” a depersonalization that wouldn’t have been possible had the story been told in first person: “Obediently, it washes, shaves, brushes its hair, for it accepts its responsibilities to the others” (11). Speaking with George, as if he knows everything about him, the narrator can at once speak about George—to describe his depersonalization.

George as a depersonalized entity remains metaphorically constant throughout the novel, with his loss of individuality emblematized at its peak when George dies, presumably, from a heart attack at the end and becomes one of the “rock pools” bound with the universe. George’s passivity has been widely interpreted by critics as “loneliness,” a claim that is supported by two dominant facts: that his lover Jimmy is dead, and that there is no gay community around George in 1960s Los Angeles.
Indeed, except for the brief and unexpected erotic encounter with his student Kenny, his single day is pervasively bland: waking up, taking a shower, going to school, lecturing, eating lunch, working out, going to a supermarket, dining and drinking. Yet to say this unsensationalized mode of being is a sign of “loneliness” seems to assume, erroneously, that George is feeling “negative” and somehow yearns to become not lonely. Not being attached, as we should know, is not the same thing as being lonely. In enhancing George’s absorption of the world in which he lives, Isherwood has to strip George of an “assertive” sovereignty that would make him outshine his world. This deprivation of a recognizable (and memorable) subjecthood is demonstrated most powerfully when George, pressed by Kenny to tell what “experience” is, compares himself to a book: “I’m like a book you have to read. A book can’t read itself to you. It doesn’t even know what it’s about. I don’t know what I’m about” (176). Not knowing what it is, George is a book authored by the other—it is aloof from the other at the same time being the other.

To an extent, George’s passivity is shaped by Isherwood’s practice of Hindu meditation, a daily practice that was introduced to him when he first met Swami Prabhavananda in the summer of 1939. Although Isherwood has never become a Hindu monk—and indeed has never forfeited Catholicism he loathed so much—his Hinduism has over the years cultivated a strict discipline of self-detachment; he “japam” every day, which is to understand the meaning of mantra and to repeat it, while counting the repetitions on a rosary as a means of achieving oneness with the
universe. His faith in Hinduism has palpable effect on his writing. The following tongue-in-cheek prayer for writers is what he wrote on July 14, 1940 in his diary:

Oh source of my inspiration, teach me to extend toward all living beings that fascinated, unsentimental, loving and all-pardoning interest which I feel for the characters I create. May I become identified with all humanity, as I identify myself with these imaginary persons. May my art become my life, and my life my art. Deliver me from snootiness, and from the Pulitzer prize. Teach me to practice true anonymity. Help me to forgive my agents and publishers. Make me attentive to my critics and patient with my fans. For yours is the conception and the execution. Amen (106).

Taken from a religious context, to be “truly anonymous” is to let go of one’s identity: one is required to be involved, while at the same time divested of the possibility of recognition. Isherwood is particularly interested in portraying George as a “public utility”: as a driver on a freeway he is described as an “impassive anonymous chauffeur-figure with little will or individuality of its own” (35); to the college students he is “an actor […] hastening through the backstage world of props and lamps and stagehands to make his entrance” (44); “to please Charley,” his old English friend, he has to keep up the “magic” of conversations and “force of habit” (134); to teach Kenny, he becomes a “book” from which Kenny will find the knowledge (176). Nonidentity, then, is perhaps also multiple identities—George as a being is marked so pervasively in other people’s lives that it becomes somehow unremarkable.

Isherwood, however, opens the novel not with a George spreading out to the lives of others. Rather, the first two chapters deal with two relatively “heavy” topics

---

1 For a fuller biography of Isherwood, see the Introduction to The Isherwood Century, ed. James J. Berg and Chris Freeman. (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 3-30.
that would reoccur throughout the novel: fear of old age and loss of a lover.

Isherwood’s decision to introduce these two matters at the beginning of a relatively light-weighted book is not surprising, if we consider Berlant’s claim that all people are necessarily located at the juncture between “being historical” and “feeling ahistorical.” Sensing the historic, Berlant argues, doesn’t necessitate thinking of history, the cultivation of attentiveness that interrupts the flow of consciousness.² If, however, ordinariness is made palpable only through the occasion of certain crises, it may well be said that our felt encounter with the ordinary is conditioned by our being simultaneously located at a point where our “world-building” processes are getting destroyed or interrupted. In the novel, aging and the death of a lover, both of which imply certain irrevocable temporalities which George can’t simply “escape,” are set as the backdrop for George’s affective ordinariness to develop. While George is turned into a depersonalized entity “it” at the opening, it is, paradoxically, anthropomorphized in return as a being deeply anxious about its own aging. As it stares into the mirror, it “sees many faces within its face—the face of the child, the boy, the young man, the not-so-young man—all present still, preserved like fossils on superimposed layers, and like fossils, dead” (10). It seems as though its anxiety of aging betrays its depersonalized existence as one that must mechanically obey the order of waking up. Its consciousness of time is enhanced further when it “becomes” George, who, in the following chapter, begins the everyday tasks of getting dressed

and cooking in the kitchen. In some examples above, we see that ordinariness is liberatory in its drive; ordinariness here is somehow revised as that which fixates George onto a temporality: his domestic moments with Jim, the dead lover. Spaces that George passes by daily—the small study room, the “narrow and steep” staircase, the “small stove” and the “narrow doorway” into the kitchen—are that which must inevitably evoke his memories with Jim; these ordinary spaces can be more aptly described as the site of loss, the site where he “stops short and knows, with a sick newness, almost as though it were for the first time: Jim is dead. Is dead” (13). The fact of Jim’s death is refreshed every day by the encasing familiarity of George’s ordinary surroundings.

There are, then, two competing conceptualizations of ordinariness in the novel: as an ontological term it keeps reintroducing to George the restrictive patterns that pervades his everyday life; as an affective term it enables the possibility of detachment that liberates George from the patterns’ binding nature. As the novel develops, so much of George’s effort to connect to other people’s everydaynesses can be seen as a way of cultivating an affective mode of being that can de-fixate him from Jim’s spectral resurfacing and the recurrent anxiety of aging. Some critics, however, would argue that affective ordinariness is that which creates the very “mood” of negativity: the inability to feel negative attests to an even greater, more pervasive negativity. In “Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness,” Sara Ahmed argues that suffering does not always enter as a “self-consciousness,” but as a “heightening of
consciousness, a world-consciousness in which the suffering of those who do not belong is allowed to disturb an atmosphere” (588). In her analysis of Mrs. Dalloway, Ahmed argues that what instills the deepest sadness in the novel is not Septimus’s suicide, but rather the fact that his death can be flung away—that it can be “bearable” for those who don’t “belong” to his world: “The party might expose the need to keep busy, to keep going in the face of one’s disappearance. So much sadness revealed in the very need to be busy! So much grief expressed in the need not to be overwhelmed by grief!” (588). For Ahmed, the ostensible ordinariness with which Clarissa keeps busy is the expression of a sadness being contained, of a “heightening” of consciousness that spreads to the elusive spaces of everyday life. Clarissa’s preoccupation with the quotidian matters only occasions a heightened consciousness of what is being poignantly missed.

But, as I would argue, Ahmed’s formulation of mood building—“a thickness in the air” created through our transformation of the “tasks of the everyday” into a pervasive mood—is dependent on how much we invest ourselves emotionally into the ordinary ambiance. This process of mood building requires a relational coherence between subjectivity and ambiance, and assumes that everydayness is somehow too underwhelming to “defeat” the mood that one expects and aspires to create. This “thickness in the air” doesn’t shatter individuality, but rather attunes the individual to an actualized expression that is the result of his projection. In A Single Man, to the contrary, mood is often disconnected from emotional expectation. Although George’s
domestic setting often invokes his memory of Jim, Isherwood refuses to turn such memory into memorialization by amplifying the thingness of George’s immediate surroundings—the “audience of objects” that have “no part in the kingdom of evolution” (13). A spread-out visuality enables the built environment, rather than George’s own subjectivity, to take charge of the process of mood building. Far from being “thick,” the air in the novel is deliberately unsensationalized, preventing George’s vexed consciousness of temporality from dominating the ambiance. Lisa M. Schwerdt’s analysis of the novel’s structure also explains how this spread-out visuality works. Without conventional chapter stops, Schwerdt notices, the novel employs “large visual breaks” in creating a “cinematic impression of fade-in and fade-out” (166). Fragmented and incoherent visuality permits George to scatter his consciousness to other spaces that must leave Jim’s specters behind.

In creating George, Isherwood perhaps wants to show us to be one with the universe is to abandon the desire to possess it. One must, following the Hindu belief, “let go” of worldly attachments in order to be liberated. This liberation is not only a spatial one, but fundamentally a temporal one. After a hospital visit to Doris, an old friend who is now “absorbed in the business of dying,” George drives down the Los Angeles boulevard, and is enraptured by all sorts of Christmas decorations—reindeer, jingle bells, Christmas trees, stores, advertisement. This bustling landscape contrasts immediately the preceding setting in the hospital that is characterized by isolation and desertion. It seems almost as if all the Christmas decorations are meant for George to
consume, as a way to compensate for the utter lifelessness and noiselessness in the hospital. But George’s panoramic gaze is a non-posessive one, a detached gaze of knowledge that contrasts the frantic way the shoppers consume. Creating the image of Christmas as much as Christmas creates them, these shoppers are described, almost like caricatures, as ignorant consumers; their hyperfocused “panic spending” makes them unable to see what they themselves are doing. Detached from these shoppers, George can see what the shoppers cannot: the young hustlers who shares George’s “peripheral vision” (103). These hustlers are described erotically, as ready to be consumed as the Christmas products, but George chooses instead to be with them, to be “counted in their ranks—the ranks of that marvelous minority, The Living” (103):

I am alive, he said to himself, I am alive! And life-energy surges hotly through him, and delight, and appetite. How good to be in a body—even this old beat-up carcass—that still has warm blood and live semen and rich marrow and wholesome flesh! The scowling youths on the corners see him as a dodderer, no doubt, or at best as a potential score. Yet he still claims a distant kinship with the strength of their young arms and shoulders and loins. For a few bucks he could get any one of them to climb into the car, ride back with him to his house, strip off butch leather jacket, skin-tight levis, shirt and cowboy boots and take part, a naked, sullen young athlete, in the wrestling bout of his pleasure. But George doesn’t want the bought unwilling bodies of these boys. He wants to rejoice in his own body—the tough triumphant old body of a survivor. The body that has outlived Jim and is going to outlive Doris.

The “distant kinship” with the hustlers is enabled only through George’s refusal to “consume” them. In order to be with hustlers, who are unseen by the crowds of consumers, George must also become invisible—to abandon his being as a recognizable spectator. But the “kinship” that the narrator describes suggests that
George’s identification is something more than a cultivation of sameness; there is something intimate about this communitarian identity. But how can George be intimate with people he has never met?

To answer this question we may retrace Bersani’s notion of self-shattering and what are later developed in his career: “homo-ness,” correspondences and intimacy. From a violent project of anti-communitarianism to the reconceptualization of intimacy, Bersani’s “transition” has been observed by many queer critics. Yet while these two projects may seem irreconcilable at first sight, they are also intimately and, for Bersani, logically, related: one must be lessened in order to be connected with all. “The multiplication of the individual’s positionality,” Bersani and Ulysee Dutoit argue, “is necessarily a lessening or even a loss of individuality” (5). Their 2004 book *Forms of Being* can be seen, in many ways, as a supplement to the Freudian notion of the death drive as that which offers human beings the greatest ecstasy: that of destruction. While the ecstasy of shattering the boundary between the self and the world can perhaps never be done away with, they argue, we might develop “a relational discipline capable of A yielding an ascetic pleasure” that supersedes the *jouissance* of the “blindest fury of destructiveness.” (177). Such ascetic pleasure, which can only be articulated outside of the psychoanalytic language, fundamentally

---

relies on one’s receptiveness to the being of the world—on one’s being shattered and “recycled” as “allness.” Bersani’s radical movement from self-shattering to self-extension, from masochism to universality, from destructiveness to intimacy, from psychoanalysis to aesthetics all seem to point toward a departure from queer theory; one wonders what these “new modes of rationality” have to do with sexuality, if not with sex at all. In his recent essay, “Sex and the Aesthetics of Existence,” however, Tim Dean reasserts Bersani’s early emphasis that aesthetic experience, with its capacity to stimulate “affective intensities,” can “replicate” erotic preferences in the dissolution of selfhood. Such intensities, as Dean refers to Freud, include such unpleasurable feelings as apprehension, fright or horror—feelings whose traumatic qualities are essentially “erotogenic.” One thus need not be shattered masochistically, but rather by certain feelings that, in dissolving the individual psyche, intimately bounds together individuals in a connectedness beyond sex. In queer criticism, shame may be said to be one of the affective intensities that traumatize the self in the production of what Adam Phillips calls “impersonal intimacy.” In shame, which he argues is most nakedly exposed in barebacking, “the personal is beginning to give way, and the abjection, the mortification, the humiliation is a literal form of self-holding” (115); while no one should promote nonconsensual barebacking, he claims, the “pursuit” of consensual barebacking—or other forms of shaming or shameful experience—presents us with a new way of talking about intimacy that is open to “the ultimate in impersonality” (117).
The web of shame, self-shattering, impersonality and intimacy is complex, but these elements, according to Bersani, Phillips and Dean, are also casually linked, with each one dependent on the former’s existence. Yet the question is, how can shame, probably the incipient force, be “pursued? To say that a shattering force can be strategically grasped paradoxically suggests that it is integral to the individual’s psyche. Ellis Hanson writes specifically about the elusive nature of shame; it is shame that embraces you, not vice versa. The stake, I think, is to discover new ways of talking about intimacy that is not built on our (impossible) deploying of shame—or on other traumatic intensities. Here I share in particular with Peter Coviello’s idea of “stranger intimacy” in his explication of Whitman’s deliberate opacity over the sexual connotation in his *Calamus* poems. For Coviello, what infuses the strangest intimacy in Whitman’s poems is not his generation of homoerotic “codes” for readers to decipher, for Whitman is never shy describing the explicit details of homoerotic encounters; rather, it is what Whitman would do next—his “attenuation” of these explicit materials into ambiguity, secrecy and opacity—that permits readers to enter the second level of recognition, “an achieved confidence, a hard-won intimacy with a poet whose secrets one comes, by one’s own efforts, to share” (106). A queer bond is formed not by recognizing homosexuality *per se* through something like a “gaydar,”

---

4 In “Teaching Shame,” Hanson writes, “Even the thrill of shame is elusive, tantalizing, the erotic intensity of degradation quickly devolving into banality with the repetition of any transgression, any obscene occasion, that might seek to reproduce it and command it, such that it seems at once an ever-retreating limit and ever-surprising intrusion, the cheeks aflame cooling ever more to paleness with each failed attempt at mastery. Shame embraces me like a siege, a suffocation, but I cannot embrace it. I cannot address it at all.” See *Gay Shame* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009), 134.
but by recognizing the “inexplicitness, occlusion, encryption” that the abject homosexuals share. Coviello’s formulation of “stranger intimacy” hinges on the queer subject’s abandonment as a unique being, in a way that is akin to Bersani’s project of ego-dissolution and correspondences; yet it doesn’t depend on an affective intensity like shame for shattering, but, rather, on recognition of shared unintelligibility, of a togetherness beyond epistemology.

Constituted by inexplicitness, opacity and ambiguity, “stranger intimacy” can be said to be built on the realms of existence, encounters, ambiance that normally evade our attention and are obtuse to be understood and analyzed. In A Single Man, George’s identification with the hustlers on the street and his realization of a “distant kinship” growing between them suggest how intimacy can be cultivated on a familiar platform with unfamiliar strangers. George is connected to them through recognizing the hustlers’ opacity that George himself shares; to be invisible together by the heteronormative public is itself an intimate moment, and to know, to decipher, to understand is essentially to destroy this intimacy. Isherwood aestheticizes this stranger intimacy perhaps even more brilliantly when he describes a pair of non-strangers, George and Kenny, engaging in an intimacy similarly built on misrecognition and unintelligibility. In a random fade-in of Kenny buying pencil-sharpeners for George, Kenny asks innocently,

“What was it you wanted to get, sir?”
“Well, nothing, actually.”
“You mean, you walked all the way down here just to keep me company?”
“Sure. Why not?” (81)

This “sure” is not necessarily true, partly because George does have some erotic fantasy for him. But the certainty of the word must also betray the certainty that George is looking for something more. The subsequent conversations are characterized by their inability to understand each other, by guesswork and by symbolism. There remains, throughout the quick fade-in, a lasting distance that palpably pervades the encounter. One might perhaps regard this lack of emotionality as George’s repression, but for George himself, this is the most intimate moment: “They remain silent, grinning almost intimately. George feels that, even if all this doubletalk hasn’t brought them any closer to understanding each other, the not-understanding, the readiness to remain at cross-purposes, is in itself a kind of intimacy” (82). George recognizes the misrecognition between them, but he doesn’t intend to pry further. This impersonal intimacy is achieved through what we may call distanced connectedness: they become together by their refusal to bother with the extent to which the other really knows about them, the knowledge that is normatively required for communication.

The second and also final time George and Kenny meet is when, after having dinner with Charley, George goes to a bar alone and finds that Kenny has been following him after. The setting, again, is characterized by its utter lack of particularity: as George enters the bar, most people are resting their elbows on the bar and “go[ing] into a cowdaze,” watching television. It is as though this setting
prophesizes the subject matter (of subjectlessness) that George and Kenny will soon engage. George reflects:

Well—to put it crudely—it’s like Plato; it’s a dialogue. A dialogue between two people. Yes, but not a Platonic dialogue in the hair-splitting, word-twisting, one-up-to-me sense; not a mock-humble bitching match; not a debate on some dreary set theme. You can talk about anything and change the subject as often as you like. In fact, what really matters is not what you talk about, but the being together in this particular relationship. (154)

And this being-togetherness, George thinks, is necessarily based on the difference of the two individuals:

You and your dialogue-partner have to be somehow opposites. Why? Because you have to be symbolic figures—like, in this case, Youth and Age. Why do you have to be symbolic? Because the dialogue is by its nature impersonal. It’s a symbolic encounter. It doesn’t involve either party personally. That’s why, in a dialogue, you can say absolutely anything. (155)

The way George explains seems to suggest that their dialogue can be nothing but impersonal because they simply don’t match: one is too old and the other too young.

But in concealing this fact from Kenny, an act that could be seen as concealment of concealment, George feels that there is “an electric field” surrounding and “irradiating” them. The greatest moment of impersonality is perhaps occasioned by their mutual thinking of the other’s unknowingness. George, for example, is at once amused and bemused by why Kenny insists on calling him “sir.” Kenny’s explanation, reinitiating George’s idea of the symbolic opposite, is: “What’s so phony nowadays is all this familiarity. Pretending there isn’t any difference between people […]. If you and I are no different, what do we have to give each other? How can we ever be
friends?” The “giving” is exactly exemplified by Kenny’s “giving” to George, in return, the knowledge of the value of difference which George thought he doesn’t know: teaching what friendship becomes in itself the development of “friendship,” of their unknowing connectedness.

But perhaps their impersonal relationship is fated to fail, for Kenny is too inquisitive of the private life of his teacher. As Kenny asks George what “experience” is, George can only articulate what his “own” experience is: that which cannot be spoken. “I can’t speak,” he says, “but, personally, I haven’t gotten wise on anything” (160). It is at this point that, as the narrator remarks, their relationship becomes no longer symbolic; their dialogue, in forming itself into a coherent subject of “experience,” immediately fades away. To validate George’s claim that experience cannot be of use, Kenny dares George to swim in the ocean, but for George himself, swimming is less an “experience” than what can be regarded as a rite of lessening, of propitiating the heat, anger, resentment, melancholy that Kenny’s inquiry must provoke. On jumping into the ocean, George “washes away thought, speech, mood, desire, whole selves, entire lifetimes; again and again he returns, becoming always cleaner, freer, less” (162-163). George’s purification, invoking Freud’s “oceanic feeling,” marks the very image of his being one with the universe, an image enhanced.

---

5 In Civilization and its Discontents, Freud explains “oceanic feeling” as a feeling of one having an “indissoluble bond” with the universe. This is a feeling most intimately felt in infancy, when the ego has not developed into that which persists in separating the self from the external world. See The Freud Reader, ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1997).
by the trope of the “apocalyptically great wave” that keeps pulling him further into the ocean and almost drowns him.

If we consider the fact that George dies of a heart attack and is united (imaginarily by the narrator) with the ocean again at the very end of the novel, which is very close to the drowning scene, we might wonder why Isherwood doesn’t simply end the story in George’s drowning. It seems, to me, that Isherwood is determined to let us know what a George that must deal with the extremely personal must feel. What is it like to be unable to be detached—from all the hates, secrets, helplessness that characterize the life of a homosexual? If there is ever any “climax” in the novel, it wouldn’t be the drowning or the heart attack, but rather this pseudo-showdown, pseudo because, intriguingly, there isn’t an audience even though Kenny’s presence is assumed. The narrator tells us that George and Kenny have entered a “communication that is much person-to-person,” and yet, paradoxically, Kenny seems “farther away, not closer” (173). The entire chapter of George’s showdown is constituted by all his dialogues, without Kenny’s participation. The sentiments of hatred, complaint and disappointment with which George reveals his “experience” are noticeably contrastive to the ordinariness that characterizes much of the rest of his day, as though he is saying that such ordinariness is but, like what Ahmed argues, the contained expression of a deafening scream. To an extent, this may be true. In magnifying the personal aspect of George to the extreme, Isherwood seems to suggest that the idea of impersonal intimacy is only a romantic but utterly hollow fantasy, a bittersweet self-
persuasion. “Doubletalk” misrecognition or misunderstanding, in George’s outburst, is recast as the very mark of impossible love—the impossible exchange of real meanings. He says to Kenny, “Are we to spend it identifying each other with catalogues, like tourists in an art gallery? Or are we to try to exchange some kind of a signal, however garbled, before it’s too late? You answer me that!” Intimacy, then, seems to be only a momentary comfort insofar as we are from each other blocked by the insuperable barrier of personal secrets.

In the wake of George’s outburst of hate, the narrator conjures a George that is (re)united with the ocean (a scene that must evoke George’s swimming and drowning). George’s reconnection with the ocean is intriguing in that, with the ocean now poignantly flavored with unspeakable secrets, it probes us to think how the personal and the impersonal can co-exist, or, perhaps more complexly, how hate and intimacy can find room to accommodate each other. As the novel is drawing to a close, the narrator becomes further removed from his life, approaching a distance that seems to directly address the reader:

Up the coast a few miles north, in a lava reef under the cliffs, there are a lot of rock pools. You can visit them when the tide is out. Each pool is separate and different, and you can, if you can, if you are fanciful, give them names, such as George, Charlotte, Kenny, Mrs. Strunk. Just as George and the others are thought of, for convenience, as individual entities, so you may think of a rock pool as an entity; though, of course, it is not. The waters of its consciousness—so to speak—are swarming with hunted anxieties, grim-jawed greeds, dartingly vivid intuitions, old crusty-shelled rock-gripping obstinacies, deep-down sparkling undiscovered secrets, ominous protean organisms motioning mysteriously, perhaps warningly, toward surface light. How can such a variety of creatures coexist at all? Because they have to. The rocks of the pool hold
their world together. And, throughout the day of the ebb tide, they know no other. (183-184)

This passage is perhaps the most telling of the novel; the narrator doesn’t deny the fundamental difference of people, and the fact that what lies beneath the difference can be something that is ugly, hideous and secretive. Yet we are bound with each other because “we have to.” Isherwood refuses to heroize universal intimacy as though it were a utopian state to be aspired after; it is not exactly “we” who are held together, but, recalling Coviello, our lack of clarity, our “deep-down sparkling undiscovered secrets,” and our shared and inarticulate rejection of (or inability to strive for) connection, that connects us to a state beyond understanding and love. The figural muteness of rocks, their routine encounters with the ocean, and their ubiquity all suggest how simple, lacklustre and ordinary this connectedness is.

If we compare the rock pools in Isherwood with those in O’Hara’s poem “Cornkind,” we can find how much of the idea of kinship or of intimacy is built on offhand connection—on unintentional fertilization by the rain (in O’Hara) and on the inevitable touch of the ocean that binds the rock pools together (in Isherwood). While O’Hara emphasizes the generative and erotic potency of the “water” that figures literary influences, Isherwood emphasizes its capacity to rarefy the ostensibly insuperable differences of the rock pools by bringing up their shared “anxieties,” “greeds,” obstinacies” and “secrets.” Yet although Isherwood seemingly refuses to characterize kinship ancestrally as a linear mode of production, he implicitly
acknowledges that the consciousness of oceanic connectedness is a transtemporal worlding experience, a consciousness “which is no one in particular but which contains everyone and everything, past, present and future, and extends unbroken beyond the uttermost stars.” Oversentimentalized this poetic desire for universal oneness might be, Isherwood nonetheless pushes the reimagination of space and time to the extreme, connecting the contemporary reader to an infinitely extendable kinship, not by having virtual sex as O’Hara proposes, but by sharing a non-epistemological space in mutual strangeness, obstinacy and opacity. If the extendibility of O’Hara’s kinship is occasioned by literary knowledge, Isherwood seems to suggest that it is “not-knowing” that makes kinship ever expansive. With this radical imagination of “strange kinship,” Isherwood challenges not only the heteronormative imperative of reproduction, but also the Enlightenment imperative of rationality, of deciphering codes and meanings in order to know, to make sense.

Queer ordinariness, after all, is about the extraordinary capacity of the low, the everyday, the near, the pervasive, the unacknowledged, the underdescribed, to cultivate kinship and intimacy beyond the heteronormative prerequisites of love, sex, and biological reproduction. This thesis has investigated, amongst other things, the power of forgettability to shatter the pernicious demand of attachment and obligation in O’Hara, as well as the power of anonymity (or unrecognizability) to spread out to ordinary spaces in Isherwood. Neither of these registers can be comfortably settled in the current unitary labels in queer criticism like pride or shame, optimism or
pessimism, utopianism or negativity. Though unable to mobilize the intractable qualities of ordinariness, this thesis has shown what their aestheticized lack of coherence and teleology can create: how the metaphysics of time and space that define the heteronormative order can be both erotically and wildly reimagined, and how intimacy can be reshaped with an all-encompassing quality. If the twisting power of ordinariness is one of the greatest assets of queers, and if a radical twist is what we need for a politics that tend to taxonomize us, we simply cannot afford to write off queer ordinariness from our history, a history that is, for a large part, a struggle against labels.
Bibliography


