



“LANA TURNER”: THE SWINGING MODE OF FRANK O’HARA’S POEM

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**Summary.** Frank O’Hara, one of the post-modern poets, as well as his friends and poets John Ashbery, Barbara Guest and Kenneth Koch, is a representative of the co-called New York School of Poetry. The purpose of this article is to analyze O’Hara’s poem ‘Lana Turner’ from the structural point of view (which has been little done so far) and to study its philosophical expression in the poet’s aesthetics.

**Keywords:** post-modern; The New York School of poets; Frank O’Hara; ‘Lana Turner’; structural analysis.

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The New York School of poetry and works of Frank O’Hara (1926–1966) specifically, is increasingly experiencing much attention not only among scholarly experts of American poetry but among public audience as well. With O’Hara’s poetry, it is both intrinsic and extrinsic reasons to this. As R. Hampson points out: “For one thing, there is the grace and wit of his best known poetry, which has chimed with a postmodern celebration of irony, pastiche and playfulness. There is also the relationship with the art world, the evocation of 1950s’ New York in his poetry, which attracts readers to his work” [1, p. 11].

Not only does O’Hara describe the contemporaneity in his poems, thus making that time vivid and visual for readers, but he also largely explores the possibilities of Modern Art and Pop culture. One of the topics he focuses on is the cinema: its brand-new visual technique and its influence. Poem entitled later by its first words ‘Lana Turner’, being one of his so-called cinematic poems, reveals O’Hara’s ambivalence towards film industry. Cinema as an equivalent to make-believe affecting people’s lives, virtually shaping their selves in their longing to be like the film-stars – “the soul / that grows in darkness, embossed

by silvery images” [4, p. 42] – that is one side of O’Hara’s attitude.

At the same time ‘Lana Turner’ – as well as many his poems – shows how strong and powerful the connection and interchange between poetic and visual forms of art were. Needless to say, the history of this relationship began not from the works of The New York School Poets, but well long before it, since the Lumière’s train had arrived at the station at La Ciotat and the modernist poets H. D., Gertrude Stein, W. C. Williams and many others, it seems, became its ardent passengers, travelling in the realms of new poetic techniques and forms.

The poem «Lana Turner» was written on the way to Wagner College on Staten Island where O’Hara and Robert Lowell were to give a reading on February 9, 1962. The impulse for this impromptu was given by a short newspaper column, about a famous actress, Lana Turner, who had tired out and collapsed. As O’Hara’s friend Joe LeSueur points out: «Frank was merely responding to a New York Post headline – impulsively, unpretentiously, with humor» [3, p. 265]. While the original article is still open to question, most likely one, found by an American scholar Paul Stephens, states that Lana Turner collapsed during her



42-d birthday party and was taken to hospital where 'her condition was considered not serious' [2].

Lana Turner (1921–1995), who started her filming career since 17, was not simply a popular and successful actress, but an icon of the film industry. Her image of a glamorous *femme fatale* was achieved both by the movies (today, perhaps, among the best remembered ones is *The Postman Always Rings Twice* 1946), and, not to a lesser extent, by her stormy personal life. On the February day at issue, her fifth husband, Fred May, told the reporters of the New York Post that she'd been exhausted after the previous week's intense movie shooting. O'Hara's poem, though being an instant reply to the news, is simultaneously a combination of a much more complex nature – deeper attitudes and aesthetics – covered in his casual and humorous style.

Lana Turner has collapsed!  
I was trotting along and suddenly  
it started raining and snowing  
and you said it was hailing  
but hailing hits you on the head  
hard so it was really snowing and  
raining and I was in such a hurry  
to meet you but the traffic  
was acting exactly like the sky  
and suddenly I see a headline  
LANA TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!  
there is no snow in Hollywood  
there is no rain in California  
I have been to lots of parties  
and acted perfectly disgraceful  
but I never actually collapsed  
oh Lana Turner we love you get up [4, p. 64]

This poem is included in O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* collection. The events presentation – careful description of what the poet and his companion were doing – may resemble the “I-do-this-I-do-that” style, inherent to these poems. Notable instances, which have now become popular cases for scholarly analysis, are “A Step Away

From Them», “On the Way”, “A Song [Is it dirty]” and others. In ‘Lana Turner’, however, there is more of a certain likeness to the style than a real example of it, since the events are mingled with the snapshots of constantly changing weather; the description goes to and fro about particular images, coming back in slightly altered words and lines.

The poem bursts forth with a shot-like line: it is both an impulse to the poem and its title. At the same time it is an emotional reaction expressed (punctuated) by the exclamation mark. It is said up front what's happened and how, because of what reasons the poem came into being.

Next six lines can better be described in terms of swinging. The swinging mode of the poem allows the reader to follow the trajectory and reverberation of the poem in its multifold changing planes of tones and images. Already fast pace of *trotting* in «I was trotting along and suddenly / it started raining and snowing» is reinforced not by the adverb *suddenly* alone, but also by rapid increase of the weather change. Not only is it in terms of speed, however. It is also the visualization and, in a way, physical perception, that work together to achieve this effect. While *rain* is transparent and wet; *snow* is much more visible, colder and sharper. Then this image transforms into yet a denser one: “and you said it was hailing / but hailing hits you on the head / hard...” The image metamorphoses have achieved its apex: rain – snow – hail.

As swinging motion has its backward trajectory, so does the poem go back though the same landmarks. Peculiar phonetics of the hail line makes it a harbinger of such a return. *Hail – hits – head – hard*: [ei] – [i] – [e] – [a:]. It is clear enough that the extreme sounds of the line are long sounds (a diphthong and a long monophthong), so phonetically the line ends at something similar to what it starts with. Semantically, it is also a point of emphasis, because the premise “hits you... / hard” justifies the conclusion: “so it was really snowing”. And



again we see familiar images: “snowing / raining and I was in such a hurry...”

The hail line is also specific for *you* pronoun which appears here for the first time in the text. As it has been indicated before, the pronoun refers to Robert Lowell, who Frank was with, on that day. Nonetheless, being incorporated into the poem, the pronoun obtains metacharacteristics, inherent to this poetic genre. As Marjorie Perloff points out, “in O’Hara’s lyric, meditation or description generally gives way to overheard conversation: the address to a “you”, whether overt or not, shifting in the course of a given poem even as it everywhere controls the discourse” [5, p. 165]. Stepping aside from the real-life origins of the poem can help grasp this poetic text as an autotelic unity, the text itself as it is. Thus *you* will inevitably spread its meaning and morph not necessarily into the poet’s companion, but somebody else, – the ultimate goal of the poet (indeed, any poet) – the reader.

While in “you said...” *you* formally indicates O’Hara’s friend and only implicitly hints at other possibilities, next line: “but hailing hits you on the head” – where ‘you’ can be substituted with ‘one’ – introduces more openly *you* as a complex, loaded character. It becomes a union of concepts and in its denotative nature moves backwards, as the poem itself. Making the whole circle round and referring to the poet, who gets hit on the head by the news, the pronoun reveals its multifold referential capacity, which makes it metapoetic in the post-modern text.

The distinctive moment of the poem, where trajectories converge and so prepare the vigour of the forthcoming lines is: “the traffic / was acting exactly like the sky”. This comparison indicates the mode progression: from a descriptive to emotional one. Horizontal line of the traffic morphs into one of the sky, thus not only telling the reader what is happening, but showing it. The poem swings rapidly back and bumps right into ‘LANA

TURNER HAS COLLAPSED!’ Capitalized line differs much from the first line of the poem. It shows the exact, moment of present when the poet learns about the news. Emotions hit him on the head with their suddenness and strength, as hail would do. Now, we are not given the prehistory, rather we literally feel the effect of the headline.

O’Hara’s poem transforms the initial reality impulse into a new, personal aesthetic vision. “His writing “crushes” the quotidian into the framework of poetic discourse and therefore problematizes traditional conceptions of beauty and art. O’Hara avoids abstraction in a way that is akin to a deconstructive “lens” through which the poet views and interprets experience, where the events of his life become the “action” and the subject of the poems, as well as the “art” of the poetry” [6]. The poem calls into question the notion of ‘celebrity’, the singularity of the ‘icon of the screen’. It does so lightly, mischievously even, with a tone of humour and light-heartedness so typical for O’Hara.

Last part of the poem paraphrases the technique of the first one. There are such particular features as a starting point – LANA TURNER – which eventually is repeated in the last line; elements of progression “there is no snow... / there is no rain...” However, the function of the hail, (that is overwhelming emotional apex), doesn’t merely segue or transforms into another image. The progression of rejections “no snow / no rain” introduces the upside-down effect. ‘Hollywood – California – parties..’ there is the burst of emotions, the burst of laughter: “oh Lana Turner we love you get up”.

Noteworthy, indeed, that nowadays this last phrase of the poem has become a recognizable sign of both sympathy and irony. It can be addressed to anyone (with the change of name) with the effect of cheering the person up and laughter. At the same time Frank O’Hara’s poem, with



its swinging mode and peculiar syntactic structure, touches upon much more problematic issues, such as cultural influence and ambivalent significance of pop icons in the modern world.

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