

# The New York School's Real Abstraction in Dickman

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**KEYWORDS:** Poetry, Contemporary poetry, New York School, Abstract Expressionism, 1960's, Frank O'Hara, Barnett Newman, Michael Dickman, Surrealism, Art

**ABSTRACT:** This paper looks at the contemporary poet Michael Dickman's form and style through the lens of the Abstract Expressionist philosophy and art. The focus of this paper is how Dickman uses raw emotion and precise diction to convey a very real and sensitive world against New York School's poet Frank O'Hara. As the New York School poets utilized the painters of the 1960's for inspiration to get at the true essence of an event, emotion, or aspect of life, Dickman's poetry is able to evoke a surrealist world that is also very real and violent. Themes of obsolescence that threads throughout the darker pieces and images of painters and poets could not accurately be describes or portrayed without complete freedom to use images and words in connection with one another. The idea of using strong images that are also short and sharp reflects painter Barnett Newman's idea that the most abstract idea can be described in the most abstract ways, whether in lines of paint or lines of prose.



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After World War II, the way of perceiving reality was essentially shattered. Abstract Expressionist painters like Barnett Newman describe this period in time as a sensation of feeling “the moral crisis of a world in shambles, a world devastated by a great depression and a fierce world war, and it was impossible at that time to paint the kind of paintings that we were doing—flowers, reclining nudes, and people playing the cello” (Newman 287). Consequently, these artists tapped into a source of raw, emotional power, partially as a way to over-take the hugely popular art of Europe. Likewise, many poets were also in the armed forces and had experienced the brutal emotional effects of war, these artists confronted the changed world with art and words. In America, painters also embraced this rejection of old ways of seeing and the poets of the New York School embraced the same, changing the style of art that was popular for painters and poets alike. The New York School, David Lehman notes, is an “incongruous label” since there was no physical school, but a group of poets who lived in New York and adopted the “metropolitan energy and sass made its way into their writing” (Lehman 20). Frank O’Hara’s poem “Four-Rire” expresses without flourish how: “It really is amusing / that for all the centuries of mankind / the problem has been how/ to kill enough people / and now / it is how / not to kill them all (149). From painters poets learned “it was okay for a poem to chronicle the history of its own making—that the mind of the poet, rather than the world, could be the true subject of the poem—and that it was possible for a poem to be (or perform) a statement without making a statement” (Lehman 3). Frank O’Hara exemplifies this idea through his poetic statement “Personism: A Manifesto” that “You just go on your nerve,” following emotion and where the world takes you. A contemporary poet that speaks to these rules and looks for Abstract Expressionists as an influence is Michel

Dickman. Dickman's collection *Flies* mirrors the essence of Frank O'Hara's uncompromising vision of being alive and energetic but also heavily conveys the knowledge of devastation the Abstract Expressionists were inspired with.

What's important about Dickman's contemporary work is how his poems show the foundations of the New York School can be used today and create beautiful and evocative images. Dickman copies the NYS poets by drawing inspiration from, particularly, Barnett Newman. Newman felt painting had to be different from the still lifes and portraits, but felt Abstract Expressionist painters "could not move into the situation of a pure world of unorganized shapes and forms, or color relations, a world of sensation. And [he] would say that for some of [the painters], this was [their] moral crisis in relation to what to paint. So that [they] actually began, so to speak, from scratch, as if painting were not only dead but had never existed" (Newman 287). The Newman collections and pieces Dickman draws inspiration from in *Flies*, "Stations of the Cross" and "Black Fire I" use lines and color as primary modes for communicating an emotionally charged piece, called zips. Dickman's brevity of word choice and line length mirrors the minimalistic approach of Newman's paintings to combine feeling and image as a united force to show a story. In Dickman's poem, there are no long sentences and flowery images because he's evoking Barnett Newman's minimalism. In Glaser, David J. Glaswer's article, "Transcendence in the Vision of Barnett Newman," he describes how "For Newman decorative art tends to lack a 'principle of classification' by which the viewer organizes the art. Decorative art is overly organized, over-determined by its sensuous unity of relation, its concrete agreement and coherence—which is its distinctive feature" (416-7). In "Stations: V," Dickman also utilizes the idea that a unity of relation and concrete coherence isn't a goal in accurately portraying an abstract sensation:

What does the little cross ant with us anyway?  
 To grind us into diamonds  
 To make us dance  
 To tear our arms off and throw them out into the yard  
 like sticks

I need help carrying these sticks  
 The diamonds  
 Dancing  
 The little cross hunches in the corner and stares and  
     drools coughing up white petals  
 It never takes its hundred eyes off us  
 When we feint to the left the little cross feints to the left  
 To the right to the right  
 When we call to our mothers  
 The little cross answers. (50)

There's a definite nod to the NYS poets, who loved to use wit and humor to convey a message. Here, Dickman conveys the idea of being used up and torn apart, but says it humorously that this force wants to "tear our arms off and throw them out into the yard like sticks," and wittily notes "I need help carrying these sticks." The little cross here is representative of the church, or the crucifix, of Jesus that's supposed to be a watchful and protective symbol. However, the protective force here is questioned and the motivation of the higher power is questioned as well. This reflects the society Newman and O'Hara knew, of reckoning "with the human race's ability to wipe itself out—and with the knowledge of the horrors perpetrated by supposedly civilized people during the war. The populace had to make sense of an incongruous montage of images: pictures of skeletons in concentration camps, cities laid to waste, churches bombed, the mushroom cloud following the explosion of an atomic bomb. And now the era of good feelings between wartime allies had come to an abrupt end" (Lehman, 33). Everyone, in a sense, becomes animalistic and a threat, the motivations unclear. Here, the little cross is the all-seeing deity putting on a ruse to control, staring and drooling like a hungry creature, waiting for the narrator to move, feinting left and right. O'Hara also wrote about this suspicion and violent feeling in the air after the war in "In Memory of My Feelings":

My quietness has a man in it, he is transparent  
 and he carries me quietly, like a gondola, through the

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streets.

He has several likenesses, like stars and years, like numerals.

My quietness has a number of naked selves,  
so many pistols I have borrowed to protect myself  
from creatures who too readily recognize my weapons  
and have murder in their heart!

though in winter  
they are warm as roses, in the desert  
taste of chilled anisette.

At times, withdrawn,  
I rise into the cool skies  
and gaze on at the imponderable world with the simple  
identification  
of my colleagues, the mountains. Manfred climbs to  
my nape,  
speaks, but I do not hear him,

I'm too blue (102)

Immediately, a parallel is drawn between Dickman and O'Hara's work through the use of other bodies outside of themselves. O'Hara has "a number of naked selves" which shows these aspects of O'Hara working toward a kind of naked truth or sensation that is real. These other selves need to be protected from "creatures who too readily recognize my weapons / and have murder in their hearts!" although these creatures also "are warm as roses, in the desert" shows a fear, an aspect Lehman describes as an after-effect of war. Essentially, the same people that are baking your bread are bombing other countries, and "In Memory of my Feelings" shows this vulnerability of the narrator to a world full of creatures with murder in their hearts. And even as the narrator withdraws and gazes upon mountains, there's still a resignation that makes the narrator "too blue" to even hearing the romantic verses of Byron.

For Dickman and O'Hara, there's a defined struggle between the exuberance of life and the supreme sadness of it constantly being portrayed. The way these poets express these two extremes is usually by balancing or contrasting them together in a single

poem without explicitly saying “this about life is good, this about life is bad.” Lehman describes this balancing-act-style of the poets as writing “to chart out the progression of their hearts, and the movement of their minds, without the sentimentality that customarily imperils such efforts” (L 37). A progression of ideas and images is essential to the poets. Dickman’s “Barnett Newman: Black Fire I” is explicitly a poem about this process of making art and the progressions that come from the act, come with it. The process of wanting to put a grandeur sensation onto paper encompasses this poem:

What I want more than anything is to get down on  
paper  
what all the shining looks like  
All black all the time  
Black petals black leaves  
black pulse  
I like to sit in the corner  
and watch the light disappear  
with both my eyes  
God doesn’t have any eyes  
Hurricanes  
Cottonmouths  
Lakes  
The list goes on and on  
Shit gnats and  
sunlight  
But no eyes (42)

The poem opens with a yearning to put something huge and gorgeous on paper, evoking O’Hara’s concept that there is no amount of words to truly capture the idea of shining things, or the sensation one feels when realizing a deity might not be as wholesome as once seemed. O’Hara expresses this sense of struggling to get the correct things down on paper in his poem “Why I am not a Painter,” describing how the method of wanting to even write about the color orange is a large task: “I write a line /

about orange. Pretty soon it is a / whole page of words, not lines. / Then another page. There should be / so much more, not of orange, of / words, of how terrible orange is / and life" (113). A struggle for all poets and artists-- and even people--is there isn't enough words to accurately describe feelings or do describe a truth about a thing.

The narrator yearns to express all the shining, and the color black is chosen to describe these shining things. This is beautifully expressed as an opposition to prescribed terms and ideas behind the word shining. Usually, when something shines, like the sun, it's expressed as light, or whiteness. Yet the repetition of black here doesn't evoke a sense of darkness or negativity since the described black objects are parts of a plant, even the "black pulse" evokes a sense of having a pulse and feeling alive and shiny. What does evoke a sense of negativity is the shift in the poem, from the positivity as the narrator likes to "watch the light disappear / with both my eyes" to "God doesn't have any eyes." While the following objects are not necessarily negative, what is negative is how the eyes are so important to this poem. The narrator uses his eyes to see all the shining things pulse and sees all the life and what is not seen by god, a figure who is known as all-knowing and all-seeing doesn't see at all, but has a bunch of arbitrary things that aren't color, that isn't life. Another notable aspect of addressing a trait lacking in this god-figure is what Lehman describes from *The Last Avant-Garde*, how for the New York School, "the pursuit of happiness [is] indistinguishable from the relentless search for what Wallace Stevens called a 'supreme fiction'—something constructed or imagined to take the place of an absent deity" (36). The absence in this god is clearly expressed, and the something constructed to take its place is creation of art, is the poem itself.

O'Hara's "A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island" also uses the idea of light, darkness, and a higher force to convey a sensation of absence. What's intriguing about this poem is how it exhibits a profound sense of "buoyancy and glee," as Lehman describes, but there is also an uncanny sense of melancholy at the end, just as Dickman's poem builds up the beautiful black shining, O'Hara builds up morale with lines like "...even if no one reads you but me / you won't be depressed. Not / everyone can look up,



even at me. It / hurts their eyes” (147). O’Hara displays the essence of encouragement with the Sun’s advice to “always embrace things, people earth / sky stars, as I do, freely and with / the appropriate sense of space. That / is your inclination, known in the heavens / and you should follow it to hell, if / necessary, which I doubt” (147-8). O’Hara’s guidelines of Personism to “go on your nerve” rings true here with the sun praising the narrator’s “sense of space” and “inclinations.” But there is a change in this poem from light and exuberance to a feeling of the unknown and of darkness in the final stanzas of the poem:

“Sun, don’t go!” I was awake  
 at last. “No, go I must, they’re calling  
 me.”  
 “Who are they?”  
 Rising he said “Some  
 day you’ll know. They’re calling to you  
 too.” Darkly he rose, and then I slept. (148)

O’Hara evokes this idea of the unknown through the ever-elusive “they” figure, and the expectation the reader and the narrator hold for the sun, a source of trust and knowledge in the poem, to offer comfort and knowledge to the question “Who are they?” goes unfed. The warmth and security of the sun established in the numerous stanzas of encouraging words diminishes in the sun’s response, “Someday you’ll know...” If anything, this answer elicits a greater sense of awareness that society functions under the rules and calls from an unknown presence. The most evocative line of the poem is the final line, “too.” Darkly he rose, and then I slept.” Darkly he rose is such a beautiful and haunting line, because logic naturally says there’s no way for the sun to turn dark at all, but here the sun rises too darkly. The onset of the mysterious figure taking the sun away leaves the poem a melancholy image, and ends in darkness. It’s also evocative that the narrator expresses how he is “awake/ at last” but the sun leaves with mysteriousness and then the narrator compasses total darkness and “slept” right after saying he was finally awake, with an impression left from the poem that

without the sun there's a loss of a kind of definitive knowing or encouragement.

Dickman uses short lines and even shorter images to express a great amount of emotion while simultaneously eliminating access fluff and long analogies that can clutter a poem. By utilizing the ways of the Abstract Expressionists the way the New York School poets utilized them for inspiration, Dickman is able to create a surrealist world that is also very real and dangerous. The theme of obsolescence that threads throughout the darker pieces and images of painters and poets could not accurately be describes or portrayed without complete freedom to use images and words in connection with one another. The idea of using strong images that are also short and sharp reflects Newman's idea that the most abstract idea can be described, basically, in the most abstract ways, whether in lines of paint or lines of prose. Dickman is a great reminder for poets of today to look back and remember what raw, emotional power really looks like, outside of clutter and beyond the ruses.

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