

*Interpersonal Poem*

When we close read literary texts, the process of reading becomes subject to question. As readers we move away from a fluid state, interacting with a stream of text, and toward a form of cultural dissection. Close reading positions value hermetically behind words on a page. We could argue that when a text is close read, the reader entertains a number of outside possibilities, all which temporarily distract cadence or concern for the narrative. It may suggest that text is constructed less by language and more so by a literary vocabulary, defined by connotation, allusion, and the canon.

But alike to the shift toward abstraction and ambiguity in film and visual art, with artists like Yves Klein and filmmakers like Roberto Rossellini in the 1950's and early 60's, many authors began to grow frustrated with the idea that in order for writing to be good, or more thoroughly justified, it had to be close readable. The immediate presentation of the word, the sound, and the syllable grew more popular in American poetry. This was not so much a rebellion but more of an experiment. In his 1950 essay "Projected Verse", Charles Olsen argues "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION."<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting how Olsen locates writer's perception as existing in continuum, which seems to emphasize a more fluid reading of poetry. There is a "furthered" perception instead of "another" perception where in "another" may suggest an independent thought, reference, or break in description.

But perhaps to go further in considering Olsen's idea while taking up another author's work, we can look to Frank O'Hara. Gaining popularity a couple years after Olsen's essay, O'Hara's poems offer a similar "furthered" or continuous reading experience. We may not feel required to pressure certain words for allusive qualities or tricky metaphors, but can become comfortably lost in the flow of the language. Yet this fluidity does not collapse the craft in O'Hara's work; perpetrated by his knack for the surface or "everyday aesthetics", it actually seems to distract the reader from a structural craft at play in the writing. All in all, these varying levels of surface reading and structural play evoke a sensory experience from the text. This experience seeks to replicate feelings through writing and in doing so, seems to collapse the idea that close reading requires us to look beyond the language on the page for deeper meaning, allusion, and allegory.

For the most part authorial craft, even in a lot of the appropriated texts of conceptual writers decades later, is always evident to some degree in our reading. However in more communicable ways, O'Hara uses the poem's structure to subvert some craft related aspects regarding the poem's language. His 1964 piece "Personal Poem" seems to offer a lengthy questioning, or perhaps redefinition, of what is sacred to a poet. O'Hara begins with a brief description of personal objects. He writes, "Now when I walk around at lunchtime / I have only two charms in my pocket / an old Roman coin Mike Kanemitsu gave me / and a bolt-head that broke off a packing case."<sup>2</sup> In the conversational style somewhat idiosyncratic to his writing, "Personal Poem" is musing

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Olsen, "Projected Verse" in *Postmodern American Poetry*, ed. Paul Hoover (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc 2014) 1555

<sup>2</sup> Frank O'Hara, "Personal Poem" in *Postmodern American Poetry*, ed. Paul Hoover (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc 2014) 108-109

and debatably *impersonal*. The language is reflective in a manner not overly meditative. Walking around during his lunch break, O'Hara enters a mode of reflection almost for the sake of killing time. The poem opens with a reference to setting, essentially creating a mood or pace for the language. And in regard to the mood, this midday period creates a pragmatic space for the audience – more of us have probably been on a lunch break than in front of a Grecian Urn or terrified at the feet of Moloch. These type of situations, the largely pedantic everyday musings, seem to subvert and de-personalize poetic description from O'Hara's position - but in return, they engage the audience toward a shared personal experience. This poem is not overly personal to O'Hara's experience and instead situates both the author and reader with a sense of shared experience. And the banalities continue. What is personal in the first stanza is actually just attached to his person; it is inside his pocket. The personal becoming part of the person may attack a poetic language in favor of suppressed biographical information or canonical allusion. Value instead lies in what can be seen on the surface, or almost, once it's out of pocket. There is something very comical in imagining O'Hara walking and thinking about the things in his pocket, but in the same voice these objects seem to respond to a very real writerly anxiety. How much personal attachment can one put into language? While the coin and the broken bolt may provide O'Hara with some nostalgia, he is also makes it very clear that these are largely useless objects. With clearly no monetary value in New York, the coin seems to serve as a literal token of friendship between O'Hara and the abstract expressionist Mitsumi Kanemitsu.<sup>3</sup> While the implications of this friendship may be unknown, the coin maintains a position as both a literal and idiomatic token. Its physicality assumes the same literal and figurative nature. In a similar vein, the broken bolt head from the packing case does not permit us to pack or unpack the value behind its place in the poem. Although - we may have just tried. The coin and bolt are both particles from the surface. They avert putting too much meaning behind objects in language. But if one were to still think of the writing in terms packing cases, it seems O'Hara wishes to stow nothing inside, and instead carefully display his language atop the case, for all to see.

Later in "Personal Poem", we find O'Hara again comically playing with the surface value of language. He describes while walking with a friend, "a lady asks us for a nickel for a terrible disease / but we don't give her one / we don't like terrible diseases."<sup>4</sup> Again everyday situations appear to highlight the poetry in O'Hara's daily life. Instead of sensationalizing this exchange with his own sentimentality, he sensationalizes the woman's motivations in a way that lacks any sentimentality. The obvious misreading of the woman soliciting does not necessarily critique the situation at hand – it instead seems to call to question the motivations behind language. This interaction with the lady has O'Hara embracing what is on the surface of language – "a nickel for a terrible disease" – to such an extreme that it that he seems twist the woman's own purpose on the street. And a second coin appears, perhaps again to question value of language? Though O'Hara is of course self-aware of this twisting, the misreading creates a tension in regard to how one unpacks meaning. On one hand O'Hara's smart-alecky response promotes a

---

<sup>3</sup> "Kanemitsu in California during the 1960s and 1970s" last modified May 6<sup>th</sup> 2008, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2008/05/artseen/kanemitsu-in-california-during-the-1960s-and-1970s>

<sup>4</sup> O'Hara, "Personal Poem", 108-109

continuous reading of poetic language: he sees the woman, denies her money, and then goes “to eat some fish and some ale” with his friend, not thinking twice about it. But the misreading also acknowledges misinterpreted language. It exemplifies personal cause as devalued, de-sentimentalized, or redefined in its poetic existence. Misreading has us engaging in an interpretation against interpretation, suggesting the impossibility of a correct meaning behind language, all while we are left with anxiety that in this engagement, we could be misreading O’Hara entirely. While to some readers this may seem like O’Hara is throwing in the towel, writing against the possibility that poetry will be personal, for those more open to his celebration of the surface, the language imposes and investigates a tension between personal and impersonal musing.

A few lines before “Personal Poem” ends, O’Hara describes a conversation he has with his friend about other writers and writerly fame. He explains, “we decide, we like Don Allen we don’t like / Henry James so much we like Herman Melville / we don’t want to be in a poets’ walk in / San Francisco even we just want to be rich / and walk on girders in our silver hats.”<sup>5</sup> The influence of others often calls for poetic allusion and a poet, in referencing an older more distinguished poet, engages a multi-referential gesture. On one hand these allusions seem to situate the poet’s place in an historical timeline. The text draws from a larger canon, referencing influence but also displaying cultural shifts in poetry. Such referentiality also seems to justify the poet’s gesture in writing the poem; it marks the shift from examination to practice. Yet still to no surprise, O’Hara seems to be subverting the value of allusion altogether, perhaps because not everyone will find these allusions personally appealing. Similar to the way he approaches the lady asking for money, O’Hara embraces the surface of poetic language to another extreme, wherein allusions become a simple matter of likes or dislikes. He seems to poke fun at the poet who pays exorbitant respects to others as the verse whiplashes randomly from Don Allen (who years later became O’Hara’s editor) to James and Melville. One may not want to take these opinions too seriously, and rather watch them collapse as the writing becomes more preoccupied with fame and recognition. And this switch seems to mark a continued perception. The language observes authorial fame but soon transitions to the subject of fame alone. O’Hara, true to the nature of the poem, dismisses any sort of literary recognition preferring a more material acknowledgement. Wealth and walking on the beams of the Golden Gate Bridge (which in some ways displays a surface quality of San Francisco) are privileged over acknowledgement in any poetry community. There seems to be some tension in this part of the poem that has O’Hara questioning the value of relation to other poets. While poetry appears as a largely personal practice, O’Hara seems confront how much a style relies on poetic networks and past histories. In avoiding both, O’Hara opts for a different form of success. While this tidbit is debatably “materialist”, it seems approachable in same vein of how seriously we should take O’Hara’s earlier allusions. There is may be more wealth on the surface, on girders high above those poets who descend from of Blake or enroll as late students of Whitman.

Like Olsen’s “Projected Verse” influencing a number of new styles across the poetic board, O’Hara’s knack for writing what is on the surface has moved poetry toward less canonical, more immediate gestures. A decade or so later, poets were seeking to break the surface, to go above (literally) toward the reader. Movements like Language

---

<sup>5</sup> O’Hara, “Personal Poem”, 108-109

Poetry and early forms of conceptual writing developed an ethos for the readerly response and interpretation. Language Poetry was also titled L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry. In consideration of how this all fits into a “furthered perception”, and in regard to surface reading, we might look at this title as a sort of continuum. Or rather the title itself is type of poem in reference to its own definition. The word looks kind of like a train moving thoroughly through value of language and suggesting its interchangeability. L can be A which is also U and N. Except even in the metaphorical context, it is definitely not like a train, which is made of up cars functioning to their own empirical ends. Regardless out of all of this (Olsen, O’Hara, Language Poetry, Trains) we have motion. Perhaps this continuous motion is the most valuable aspect of our poetic experience, no matter where it’s located above, on, or below the surface. Because sometimes it seems in our most continuous readings we blur the lines between reference and inference; we forget that what we are doing is *reading*, and move toward a state of pleasant disinterest.