

The Advancements of O'Hara

Frank O'Hara's *Lunch Poems*, 1964 collection, was a read that came at a convenient time. A time I found myself questioning my own work, which wouldn't be new for me, but in this specific spell, I had been especially challenging what a poem could be. A self-proclaimed not-poet, I do not write poems; I just write. I detail experiences; I go on about colors; I criticize the world; I paint my being *as* the world; I embarrass myself by spilling out my feelings onto a page; I give my babies off to the day and accept when the night doesn't return them to me. At the time of *Lunch Poems*' release, with movements like modernism and poets like Pound, it was a common consensus that if poetry wasn't anything, it was careful, technical. This collection was one that not only challenged this norm – because anyone can challenge anything – but actually changed people's conception of poetry itself, showing them that serious, technical, methodical, and machine writing wasn't what was exclusive to poetry.

A few of the *Poem* pieces are representative of this experimenting with seriousness (and intentional lack thereof) and allowing the stream of consciousness to flow within present temporality. The third *Poem* piece is simply...

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

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

Ploop!” (O'Hara, 27)

Before reading *Lunch Poems*, if one had presented this to me and called it poetry, I would've had half a mind to call it some Rupi Kaur-comedic-instapoetry – not one piece of a whole experimental (which by contemporary standards is not experimental at all) approach to poetry. There aren't many strong technical poetry elements here that we think of when we think of poetry. Nothing rhymes, there's no emphasis on a syllabic structure, there's no concrete imagery, there's no philosophical qualms with life...and yet it is titled *Poem* in a collection of poetry.

The fifth *Poem* piece follows a similar fashion. It relays the moment the speaker learned of Lana Turner's collapse at her 42nd birthday party. Lines such as "it started raining and snowing / and you said it was hailing / but hailing hits you on head / hard so it was really snowing and / raining and I was in such a hurry / to meet you but the traffic..." (O'Hara 78) reflects this seamless flow of thoughts onto the page. We are reading something that seems ultra-close to what the speaker (presumably O'Hara himself) was thinking at the time, what they were doing at the time, and what they were feeling at the time. The poem ends with, "I have been to lots of parties / and acted perfectly disgraceful / but I never actually collapsed / oh Lana Turner we love you get up" (O'Hara 78). Again, those lines read like a Twitter feed or a casual conversation with a friend. Throughout this piece, like the third *Poem*, there's an absence of typical poetic elements, which makes it seem as if this wasn't a serious or careful effort – as if the author simply left his thoughts bare on the page. But why shouldn't this be poetry, I wonder? And O'Hara questioned this criticism as well.

What strikes me further about *Lunch Poems* is how intrapersonal it is – not simply to O'Hara but to the times, but to New York itself. Even 60 years later, in the age of technology, where one can find out so much about O'Hara's life, all you'd need to do is flip through *Lunch Poems*, where he chronicles his daily life, incorporating his livelihood and friends and inspirations, all throughout his work. There are countless examples of this throughout the collection, nearly on every page, but one example can be found in the fourth *Poem* piece, where at the top of the page, I wrote "so...many...allusions..." Take lines such as "and five different girls I see / look like Piedie Gimbel" and "Ionesco is greater / than Beckett, Vincent said, that's what I think" (O'Hara, 28). In this poem, there's a heavy inclusion of allusions (nearly 15, in just two pages, to be more exact) that don't seem to serve as turning points or meanings to uncover within the poem. Looking up Piedie Gimbel or Vincent doesn't lead anywhere and thus provides no additional context to the poem – they're simply real people in O'Hara's life and, as such, have had various influences on him. While one day they may not be here – as O'Hara, unfortunately, isn't – he's chosen to immortalize them through his work. But his method of doing so isn't particularly poetic – he decides to mention them casually, which furthers his advance on what poetry can be.

In this collection, the poems are quite meta: we read exactly what Frank O’Hara had been doing; we’re his conscience, the pages of his journal. In *Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul*, O’Hara starts with...

“It is 12:10 in New York and I am wondering
if I will finish this in time to meet Norman for lunch
ah lunch! I think I am going crazy
what with my terrible hangover and the weekend

coming up

at excitement-prone Kenneth Koch’s
I wish I were staying in town and working on my poems” (O’Hara, 34)

Here, we are inside the mind of O’Hara, but rather than obscure this perspective through dizzying imagery, tight syllabics, repetition, alliteration, and the like, we are given this scene of O’Hara in his environment as it is. In this poem, O’Hara mentions Norman and Kenneth Koch (a friend of his and another prominent New York school poet/artist/creator). These poems are similar to diary or journal entries as O’Hara doesn’t burden himself to explain who or what he’s referring to – he expects us to know – or be okay with not knowing, because poetry isn’t about knowing, for O’Hara (or for me either). In *Lunch Poems*, O’Hara paints poetry as an experience to be shared, as a scene in a play, as a single second instant in the infinite expanse of time wherein existence is as large as the Moon drifting away from the Earth 1.5 inches each year to “pausing for a liver sausage sandwich in the Mayflower Shoppee” (O’Hara, 1). Poetry is everything.

With that being said, rather than writing something new in response to my time with O’Hara’s poetry and style, I thought I’d dig up something I wrote a long time ago. I called it a *freestyle* not specifically because it was one truly (I had spoken it aloud as it came to me and recorded it into the Voice Memos app on my phone and then transferred it to the page later) – but I called it a freestyle because at the time I had a more limited view of poetry. The thought that poetry could be something so effortless that came to me, rather than time spent hunched over a keyboard, one eye to the dictionary, the other to the stars, just didn’t feel right. But, thankfully, O’Hara and other writers such as Langston Hughes and Elizabeth Bishop have broadened my horizons.