

Here are some sample responses to poetry without the students' names attached. These students gave their permission for their works to be used as teaching material in the future. These are very good responses because they are insightful and supported with specific lines that show an understanding of what the poet was doing thematically and technically. You can get a pretty good sense of what the poet and the poems are about on a large scale (what really matters in the work) and on a small scale (how does the poet employ various poetic devices etc.) Both of these students also situated Ferlinghetti within a context of literary or art history.

### Lawrence Ferlinghetti: Extreme Poetics, Extreme Poet

Throughout *A Coney Island of the Mind*, Lawrence Ferlinghetti maneuvers his depiction of the poet's craft through a number of compelling stages. At times the poet is pure observer, repackaging and distributing the minutiae of what might seem, to the untrained eye, just another day in the city. At other times he waxes poetic, crafting lofty referents that stop just short of the elitism of the high-modernists. As Ferlinghetti moves through the many modes of his art, the one constant is his acute awareness of what is at stake in his project. Nowhere is this awareness more prevalent than in poem fifteen in the collection in which the nature of the creative act and the perils inherent in the same are discussed.

The poem opens with a flourish:

Constantly risking absurdity

and death

whenever he performs

above the heads

of his audience. (lines 1-5)

With this opening salvo, offset from the poem which follows by the physical boundaries created

by the tangible poem on the page, Ferlinghetti infuses the poem with a sense of urgency that is as dangerous as it is powerful. What is about to transpire risks the poet's reputation, which is to say his very lifeblood; as such, the poet's performance is easily paralleled with an acrobat's death-defying feats. As he does throughout this collection, Ferlinghetti deftly aligns the words on the page in a staggered fashion: now they are here, now they are there, hither, yon – creating in a few quick lines the sense that with each line another perilous step is being taken.

In addition to the vertigo-inducing heights and almost catlike movement the poem delivers upon the reader, there is also conveyed a fine sense of exactly who, or what, the poet actually is. This “acrobat” (6), skillfully tripping through a series of “sleight-of-foot tricks / and other high theatrics” (14-5), is consistently the focus of Ferlinghetti's gaze. While the actions depicted in the poem are fraught with tension and peril, the treatment the actor receives is notably anti-climactic. Although the poet is touted as “the super realist” (19), the loaded description of “he / a little charleychaplin man” (29-30) produces an entity who is ostensibly as unremarkable in form as his artistic creations are noteworthy in function. For Ferlinghetti, this is the poignant necessity of the poet's task: armed with weapons as laughable as a bamboo cane, bowler hat, and bottle-brush mustache, the poet is responsible for capturing, recreating, and ultimately drawing Beauty from the air. If there is no one to perform the poet's task, if no one is willing to risk the dizzying heights, then the entire world suffers through the sheer trauma of beauty lost.

## “No Birds Sang”: Modern Representations of Saint Francis

Much of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind* is a response to the preceding generation of artists, and poem number six likewise participates in this trend. The speaker explores the contrast of old and new ways throughout the poem, and he demonstrates that the fresh ways are passing by while people worship the traditional forms of artistic expression.

The speaker uses images of traditional figures to demonstrate the contemporary resistance to change. People stand around and watch a statue of Saint Francis being hoisted in front of a church. The speaker's statement that “no birds sang” is crucial to the meaning of the poem since Saint Francis was the saint who preached to the animals (line 7). The countless representations of him in Renaissance artwork show him surrounded by lively creatures. Likewise, the lack of birds in this poem is a stark contrast to the rest of the poems in this collection, for birds are a consistent symbol throughout the work. The image of the stony statue that does not evoke the meaning of its original model gives this scene a sense of deadness.

However, the deadness of the artwork does not keep people from paying attention to the statue. Old Italians, young reporters, and a young priest are all there as if the statue continued to evoke a bird's song or “Saint Francis' Passion” (31). But there is no passion or song to speak of. Likewise, the young priest is “propping up the statue with all his arguments,” which indicates that even though the priest is young, he continues to hold up the old art/tradition with arguments rather than letting its beauty be apparent to the viewer (27-28).

While the crowd's attention is on the old statue, a vibrant depiction of newness and potential passes through the crowd unnoticed. "A very tall and purely naked / young virgin [...] / wearing only a very small / bird's nest / in a very existential place / kept passing thru the crowd" (37-42). The speaker demonstrates that the birds are not singing for Saint Francis and his old ways anymore, but the virgin passing through the crowd takes the place of the bird's song, and she has the potential to bring newness and life to the dull crowd. But she does not sing to Saint Francis, his church, or his God—she sings to herself. This demonstrates the change that has been made in contemporary life.

The sixth poem in *A Coney Island of the Mind* demonstrates the speaker's frustration with the crowd's attachment to old ways of traditional values and artistic expression. He attempts to demonstrate that new forms have the potential to be born if the crowd could simply take its eyes off of the old, dead traditions.

#### Works Cited

Ferlinghetti, Lawrence. *A Coney Island of the Mind*. New York: New Directions, 1958.