

PERSONISM: A MANIFESTO

In his 1959 essay, Frank O'Hara parodically deflates the pretensions of other poetic manifestos proliferating at the time and yet offers a valuable point of entry into his poetry and the work of the New York school (which also includes John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch). In contrast to the prophetic exhortations and moralistic tone of many manifesto writers, O'Hara humorously concedes that a manifesto is unlikely to make people who dislike poetry read it and that discussions of formal structures often stray from the essential energy at the heart of good poetry—"You just go on your nerve." But O'Hara also outlines a poetics, and if his implied claims were recast in the standard rhetoric of manifestos, they might read thus: the poet must be witty, never boring; the poet must communicate the spontaneity of imaginative creation; the poet must be effortlessly allusive (this essay nimbly leaps from Romantic poets to surrealist painters to the French New Novel); and the poet must convey a robust sense of personal immediacy and yet not be dully confessional. O'Hara encapsulates this last idea in his self-mocking rubric of "personism," hinting at the strange combination of almost erotically charged intimacy and depersonalized abstraction that characterizes his poetry. Composed on September 3 for Donald Allen's *New American Poetry*, but turned down as too frivolous, the manifesto first appeared in *Yugen*, No. 7 (1961) and has been reprinted from *The Selected Poems of Frank O'Hara* (1972).

FRANK O'HARA

Personism: A Manifesto

Everything is in the poems, but at the risk of sounding like the poor wealthy man's Allen Ginsberg¹ I will write to you because I just heard that one of my fellow poets thinks that a poem of mine that can't be got at one reading is because I was confused too. Now, come on. I don't believe in god, so I don't have to make elaborately sounded structures. I hate Vachel Lindsay,² always have; I don't even like rhythm, assonance, all that stuff. You just go on your nerve. If someone's chasing you down the street with a knife you just run, you don't turn around and shout, "Give it up! I was a track star for Mineola Prep."

That's for the writing poems part. As for their reception, suppose you're in love and someone's mistreating (*mal aimé*)³ you, you don't say, "Hey, you can't hurt me this way, I care!" you just let all the different bodies fall where they may, and they always do may after a few months. But that's not why you fell in love in the first place, just to hang onto life, so you have to take

1. American poet (1926–1997). In "Abstraction in Poetry," *It Is*, No. 3 (1959), Ginsberg had argued that O'Hara's work was developing an abstraction similar to that of painting.
2. American poet (1879–1931), who employed powerful rhythms and emphasized poetry's oral

character.

3. Poorly loved (French). Cf. "La Chanson du Mal Aimé" (1913), by Guillaume Apollinaire (1880–1918), French avant-garde and early surrealist poet.

your chances and try to avoid being logical. Pain always produces logic, which is very bad for you.

I'm not saying that I don't have practically the most lofty ideas of anyone writing today, but what difference does that make? They're just ideas. The only good thing about it is that when I get lofty enough I've stopped thinking and that's when refreshment arrives.

But how can you really care if anybody gets it, or gets what it means, or if it improves them. Improves them for what? For death? Why hurry them along? Too many poets act like a middle-aged mother trying to get her kids to eat too much cooked meat, and potatoes with drippings (tears). I don't give a damn whether they eat or not. Forced feeding leads to excessive thinness (effete). Nobody should experience anything they don't need to, if they don't need poetry bully for them. I like the movies too. And after all, only Whitman and Crane and Williams,⁴ of the American poets, are better than the movies. As for measure and other technical apparatus, that's just common sense: if you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you. There's nothing metaphorical about it. Unless, of course, you flatter yourself into thinking that what you're experiencing is "yearning."

Abstraction in poetry, which Allen [Ginsberg] recently commented on in *It Is*, is intriguing. I think it appears mostly in the minute particulars where decision is necessary. Abstraction (in poetry, not in painting) involves personal removal by the poet. For instance, the decision involved in the choice between "the nostalgia of the infinite"⁵ and "the nostalgia for the infinite" defines an attitude towards degree of abstraction. The nostalgia of the infinite representing the greater degree of abstraction, removal, and negative capability (as in Keats and Mallarmé).⁶ Personism, a movement which I recently founded and which nobody knows about, interests me a great deal, being so totally opposed to this kind of abstract removal that it is verging on a true abstraction for the first time, really, in the history of poetry. Personism is to Wallace Stevens what *la poésie pure* was to Béranger.⁷ Personism has nothing to do with philosophy, it's all art. It does not have to do with personality or intimacy, far from it! But to give you a vague idea, one of its minimal aspects is to address itself to one person (other than the poet himself), thus evoking overtones of love without destroying love's life-giving vulgarity, and sustaining the poet's feelings towards the poem while preventing love from distracting him into feeling about the person. That's part of Personism. It was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones⁸ on August 27, 1959, a day in which I was in love with someone (not Roi, by the way, a blond). I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it I was realizing that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born. It's a very exciting movement which will undoubtedly have lots of adherents. It puts the poem squarely between the

4. Walt Whitman (1819–1892), Hart Crane (1899–1932), and William Carlos Williams (1883–1963), American poets.

5. Title of painting by Italian surrealist Giorgio di Chirico (1888–1978).

6. Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898): French Symbolist poet. British Romantic poet John Keats (1795–1821) identified his own creative talent as negative capability, the ability to tolerate uncertainty and identify with other people and things.

7. Pierre-Jean de Béranger (1780–1857). French political and satirical poet, whose work is contrasted here with *la poésie pure*, Symbolist doctrine according to which poetry is, like music, patterns of sound. Similarly, the poetry of Wallace Stevens (1879–1955) is contrasted with O'Hara's personism.

8. American poet and playwright (b. 1934); now Amiri Baraka.

poet and the person, Lucky Pierre⁹ style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages. In all modesty, I confess that it may be the death of literature as we know it. While I have certain regrets, I am still glad I got there before Alain Robbe-Grillet¹ did. Poetry being quicker and surer than prose, it is only just that poetry finish literature off. For a time people thought that Artaud² was going to accomplish this, but actually, for all their magnificence, his polemical writings are not more outside literature than Bear Mountain is outside New York State. His relation is no more astounding than Debuffet's³ to painting.

What can we expect of Personism? (This is getting good, isn't it?) Everything, but we won't get it. It is too new, too vital a movement to promise anything. But it, like Africa, is on the way. The recent propagandists for technique on the one hand, and for content on the other, had better watch out.

September 3, 1959

1961

9. Having sexual intercourse with two other people simultaneously.

1. Experimental French writer (b. 1922) and theorist of the *nouveau roman* (new novel).

2. Antonin Artaud (1896–1948), French writer

associated with the experimental "theatre of cruelty."

3. Jean Dubuffet (1901–1985), French painter associated with *art brut* (raw art).

NOTES WRITTEN ON FINALLY RECORDING *HOWL*

In this essay, a version of which appeared as a liner note to the 1959 recording of "*Howl*" and *Other Poems*, Allen Ginsberg, the central figure of the Beat movement, explains the poetic innovations, such as "wild phrasing" and "rhythmic buildup," of "*Howl*"—an important long poem that combined the use of breath units with oracular proclamations and exceptionally long lines. Tracing his development, Ginsberg credits William Carlos Williams' measures based on units of breath and American speech patterns with inspiring him, as did the cadences, tonalities, and visions of William Blake, Walt Whitman, and Jack Kerouac. He also finds sources for "*Howl*," "*Kaddish*," "*Sunflower Sutra*," "*America*," and other poems in such heterogeneous sources as drug use, a madhouse wail, the Hebrew prophets, and the haiku. Ginsberg emphasizes the rapidity, associative psychology, and Romantic spontaneity of his initial outpourings, which—particularly in such long poems as "*Howl*" and "*Kaddish*"—he reshaped and carefully edited before publication. First published in *Evergreen Review* 3.10 (1959), the essay has been reprinted from *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952–1995* (2000), ed. Bill Morgan.

ALLEN GINSBERG

Notes Written on Finally Recording *Howl*

By 1955 I wrote poetry adapted from prose seeds, journals, scratchings, arranged by phrasing or breath groups into little short-line patterns according to ideas of measure of American speech I'd picked up from William Carlos Williams' imagist¹ preoccupations. I suddenly turned aside in San Francisco, unemployment compensation leisure, to follow my romantic inspiration—Hebraic-Melvillean² bardic breath. I thought I wouldn't write a *poem*, but just write what I wanted to without fear, let my imagination go, open secrecy, and scribble magic lines from my real mind—sum up my life—something I wouldn't be able to show anybody, writ for my own soul's ear and a few other golden ears. So the first line of *Howl*, "I saw the best minds etc.," the whole first section typed out madly in one afternoon, a tragic custard-pie comedy of wild phrasing, meaningless images for the beauty of abstract poetry of mind running along making awkward combinations like Charlie Chaplin's walk, long saxophone-like chorus lines I knew Kerouac³ would hear *sound* of—taking off from his own inspired prose line really a new poetry.

I depended on the word "who" to keep the beat, a base to keep measure, return to and take off from again onto another streak of invention: "who lit cigarettes in boxcars boxcars boxcars," continuing to prophesy what I really knew despite the drear consciousness of the world: "who were visionary Indian angels." Have I really been attacked for this sort of joy? So the poem got awesome, I went on to what my imagination believed true to eternity (for I'd had a beatific illumination years before during which I'd heard Blake's⁴ ancient voice and saw the universe unfold in my brain), and what my memory could reconstitute of the data of celestial experiences.

But how sustain a long line in poetry (lest it lapse into prosaic)? It's natural inspiration of the moment that keeps it moving, disparate things put down together, shorthand notations of visual imagery, juxtapositions of hydrogen jukebox—abstract *haikus* sustain the mystery and put iron poetry back into the line: the last line of *Sunflower Sutra* is the extreme, one stream of single word associations, summing up. Mind is shapely, art is shapely. Meaning mind practiced in spontaneity invents forms in its own image and gets to last thoughts. Loose ghosts wailing for body try to invade the bodies of living men. I hear ghostly academies in limbo screeching about form.

Ideally each line of *Howl* is a single breath unit. My breath is long—that's the measure, one physical-mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of a breath. It probably bugs Williams now, but it's a natural consequence, my own heightened conversation, not cooler average-daily-talk short breath. I get to mouth more madly this way.

1. In the early twentieth century, Imagism emphasized cadenced free verse and direct language. William Carlos Williams (1883–1963), American poet.

2. Herman Melville (1819–1891), American poet, novelist, and author of *Moby-Dick* (1851). *Hebraic*: here, recalling the Hebrew prophets.

3. Jack Kerouac (1922–1969): American novelist

and spokesman for the Beat movement. Charlie Chaplin (1889–1977): English actor and film producer, famous for his "tramp" character.

4. William Blake (1757–1827), English visionary, poet, and printmaker. Ginsberg reported having heard in 1948 William Blake's voice reciting "*Ah Sun-Flower*" and "*The Sick Rose*."