



2021

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Recommended Citation

Stenseth, Parker (2021) "Past Manifesto," *Floodwall Magazine*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 3 , Article 25.
Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/floodwall-magazine/vol2/iss3/25>

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Past Manifesto

Parker Stenseth

RUNNER-UP, JOHN LITTLE FICTION SCHOLARSHIP

Parker Stenseth is an undergraduate student studying English, Economics, and French. He has a special interest in film studies. At this point, he's just trying to figure out how to have a less successful version of Paul Auster's career.

On Parker's fiction, the Creative Writing Scholarship Committee observed: "The hallmarks of Parker Stenseth's 'Past Manifesto' are its precise dialogue, its vivid portrayal of a college campus, and its meditation on themes of belief and disbelief. The story delivers these—and more—with a subtle and trenchant wit."

There were twenty of us in the apartment, legs grazing legs as we sat on couches and countertops. Unfiltered cigarettes were passed around. Nobody smoked. We liked the atmosphere they evoked as smoke glanced off wood-panel walls and seeped into shag carpet. It validated us. People wore turtlenecks. They wore corduroy. Everything was sepia toned. A gramophone played in the corner. Low strings rumbled out the brass horn. Occasionally a scratch would send the record tumbling back a few seconds. The music was too quiet to listen to. It was loud enough to embolden.

Parmenides stood in the center of the room, speaking down. That wasn't his real name. It was, but not the one he'd been given. He changed it. That's why he was our leader. He was the one who taught us old ideas and how they could never die. We were seduced and begged for more. He always had more: endless stories, schools of thought, and notions nearly extinct. We held his words in our mouths and appreciated their weight. Through the teachings of Parmenides our foundations were firm. New ideas weren't as substantial or textured; in fifty years they might be. The modern world was flimsy and concerned us little. We'd have just as soon disappeared from it, collectively, and left the apartment empty, save for receding vapor trails and a basket of phones collected at the door. The past existed, but we couldn't retreat to it. We had to remain at our vantage, staring back and observing it. This was advantageous, I suppose, because the further forward you are, the more there is to

look back on. We had more than enough material to keep stimulated as we churned through mountains of historical pay dirt. Our hunger was relentless. We wanted more. This is because we didn't believe in any ideas but cherished them all. We collected them. The sole qualifier of value was how much history had imprinted on them. People had a hard time understanding this. Anyone who would've understood was long gone. We were displaced, but likely right where we were supposed to be.

Parmenides closed his lecture, as he always did, with a nod. He shook hands with those seated in the front row. He'd make his way around the room as everyone milled about, exchanging books and compliments. We did those sorts of things. A voice broke across the room, claiming he'd heard someone say we were a cult. This was met with raucous laughter. We knew about cults, they had aims and aspirations. We did not.

I was paging through a book someone had handed me when Parmenides broke off to my corner of the room.

"Dear friend, how are you?" he asked.

"Fine as ever."

"You look well. And your classes?"

Most of us were still in school and those who weren't were always inquiring about our classes.

"I'm learning a lot, hardly anything substantial. That's where you come in. But listen, there's something I wanted to speak to you about." I had his full attention. If you were talking to Parmenides, you always had his full attention. It made you realize how rare that was. "I started on a document, a manifesto of sorts, for us. It began as a composition for class but branched off. I've been working on it in the evenings. It's a description. It describes us, how we exist. This was hubristic of me, I'm only a disciple, but I was wondering if you'd look at it, my fledgling manifesto, and tell me what you think?"

I made sure to use the word manifesto twice. I knew he'd like this. He liked words that carried their own power and didn't need to be superficially charged.

"What inspired this?" he asked.

"We're devoted to old ideas," I said. "That's our contribution to time. Ideas have to be recorded to age properly. If they aren't, they're in danger of being lost. I don't want us to become lost because we've been too busy finding."

"It can't hurt to look. The mark of an educated mind is to be able to entertain an idea without accepting it."

"Aristotle?"

"Misquoted Aristotle, but it certainly sounds nice."

I pulled a collection of papers from my jacket and handed them over. This was

my only copy because I'd written longhand, but I wasn't nervous, not giving it to Parmenides. He stowed them in the back pocket of his jeans.

"Now I'll ask something of you," he said, "a return favor. We've been operating in our members' interior lives. That's where our organization was born, where it survives. There's no room for us in the physical world. Look how cramped we are in here. It's time for us to expand, incite interest, engage the public. There's a hunger for substance in the present. Substance doesn't exist in the present. We've always known this. I made pamphlets." Pamphlet, like manifesto, was a word that excited him, although its power had been widely forgotten. "I've been working on them for weeks," he said, "in secret. Secrecy is important. The pamphlets highlight several ideas, some of the oldest, most beautiful, aesthetically or otherwise. Wait until you see them. I put contact information on the back for those who understand. Contact information is a relatively new concept, admittedly, but one of the best. I can't wait until it ages."

"And with these pamphlets, you'd like me to..."

"Distribute them. You're a young person. You have access. Hand them out at the university where we can encounter fresh minds. They're without convictions. So are we. It works out that way."

He guided me to his bedroom where he dug through outdated maps and scrolls in languages he didn't speak to uncover a cardboard box of glossy pamphlets, about a hundred of them. He gave them to me and told me to come back when they were gone, and we would discuss my writing. I thanked him profusely and we shook hands again. Our whole organization shook hands frequently. The apartment was clearing out by then, so I gathered my things and took my leave, exchanging pleasantries out the door.

The following day I went to campus early, cardboard box in hand. It was warm out but not oppressively so. I walked across trim lawns to the library. To distribute the pamphlets, it seemed sensible to go to a place where people were willing to read. I was wrong, mostly. I stationed on a pathway just off the front entrance. The clock tower's shadow fell over me but receded as the sun climbed. I wanted to empty my box before the shadow disappeared, leaving me exposed. I didn't know how much time I had, but knew it wasn't long.

Passively, the stream of students swept by. Passersby had to be intentional to avoid me. Many of them were. Those caught unaware perked up at the offer of something free before shying away from the resource materials. I saw Parmenides's plan was ill-equipped to engage the public. His notion of the pamphlet was outdated. This is why he loved it, but it's also why the students couldn't understand it. Parmenides

saw pamphlets as the literature of revolutions, thrown about the streets or raining down from the sky. They had the potential to overturn political and economic systems. The students surrounding me had a different context. To them, pamphlets were the epitome of banality; they were the furnishing of guidance counselor offices, filled with information on safe driving and STIs. Students saw them as dull and sanitized while Parmenides saw them as explosive and dangerous. It is difficult to convince someone whom you don't understand and who doesn't understand you.

I began to push my wares forcibly so as not to be stuck perpetually offering the past between the library and the clock tower. I doubted anyone would read what I gave them, but I was completing my assignment. It was out of my hands after I'd shoved the pamphlet into theirs. That was the one thing I learned over the course of the morning; people were unlikely to take the pamphlets, but if I placed it into their hands before they were aware of what was happening, they were unlikely to give it back. More simply put, they were unlikely to commit to an action because, as we know, doing nothing is always easier.

I was halfway through my stock—a fair portion of the distributed half were crumpled in the garbage twenty feet to my right—when a student cutting against the crowd, knocking shoulders with his peers, caught my attention. He was directed toward me, intentionally it seemed. I couldn't tell if he was looking at me—he wore the variety of glasses that darken outdoors—but I figured he must have been.

"Hello, what a delightful day it is," I said as he approached, opting for pleasantries since it was apparent he intended to speak with me.

"What is this?" he asked, raising a pamphlet that'd been trampled and smeared with dirt. His brow furrowed. His eyes were little black orbs behind their lenses.

"It's information from an organization I'm involved in. It's difficult to describe, but if you read—"

"This is misinformation," he said, flipping to the first page and pointing at text accompanied by a hand-drawn diagram. "Here it advocates for a geo-centric universe model."

"Yes, a beautiful system, isn't it?" I said, admiring Parmenides's drawing.

"But it's not true."

"I don't believe it says anywhere that it *is* true." I wasn't completely sure. I hadn't read too closely.

"Why would you advocate for a belief that's inherently wrong?"

"People may want to know. There's a beauty to it, perfect circles, man at the center of everything. It appeals to more than one aspect of human nature."

"You're corrupting people."

"How?"

“With lies.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” I said. “We have no intention of causing harm. I don’t believe we *are* causing harm.”

“Here, here,” he said, turning the page, “it outlines Plato’s Utopia.”

“A brief overview, yes.”

“Plato championed the aristocracy. He believed in slavery.”

“Unfortunately true.”

“Do you support those things?”

“Of course not. That’s horrendous.”

“But it’s in your pamphlet.”

“People ought to know it.”

“But you don’t believe in it.”

“Absolutely not.”

“What do you believe?”

The clock tower struck eleven. I paused long enough to count the chimes, a nervous habit of mine. And when I say nervous, I really do mean it. I become anxious every time they start to sound, because once a chime has chimed, you can’t count it anymore. They’ve vanished, which I find terribly depressing. It’s worse when I consider the number of hours each day, I don’t have the wherewithal to count. I’ve let so much slip away. The student speaking to me must have seen a glaze pass over my eyes because he asked his question a second time.

“What do you believe?”

“I believe in the past. I can’t explain the metaphysics, but I know it exists. There’s nothing larger than the past. It’s getting bigger, swallowing the present and chasing us as we run away. I want to stop running, to embrace the past and learn from it. Hopefully it will swallow me whole.”

He took off his glasses. His eyes were small. They flicked back and forth, searching my face. I smiled for him. He tore his pamphlet down the middle and threw it onto the ground.

“That has got to be the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Please don’t litter,” I said.

He ripped the box out of my hands, shoving me to the ground in the same motion. I landed on the grass, jarring my neck. The sun broke over the clock tower and struck me in the face. I couldn’t look at my assailant without squinting desperately. He tensed his body, the pamphlets tucked under one arm, waiting to see how I’d react.

“Why would you do that?”

“You hate truth.”

“I don’t hate anything.”

“You resist truth.”

“I don’t resist anything.”

“These,” he said, brandishing a handful of pamphlets, “are barbaric.”

“How so?”

“They’re intentionally misguiding, leading away from progress.”

I sat cross-legged on the ground to make myself more comfortable. I would have rather been standing but that struck me as an admission of defeat.

“I think I see our misunderstanding. We’re not attempting to guide anyone. We don’t care about results. We have no expectations for the future. It doesn’t concern us.”

“But you must make plans, to come here today for instance.”

“Yes.”

“Then your ideology is full of contradictions.”

“Most things are if you look at them too closely. We try not to let it worry us.

May I have my box back?”

“Of course not.”

“It’s not kind to steal things.”

“You were giving them away.”

“True, but one per person. You may take one. I’d be delighted if you took one.”

“I’m going to take all of them. You’re irresponsible, unfit to share your thoughts.”

“Because we disagree?”

“Because you disagree with yourself. If you want these back, which I suspect you will, come to the library’s tech support desk. I work weekday evenings. Bring one of your superiors—I hope their competency exceeds yours—and maybe we can work something out. Don’t hold your breath though, you might pass out. I suppose I’ll be seeing you in the future,” he said with a smirk.

“Future present,” I corrected under my breath as he walked away, into the library. I gathered the torn halves of his pamphlet and threw them, amidst the others, in the trash. My greatest disappointment was at having failed Parmenides, until I realized that the limitation of one pamphlet per person was something I’d placed on myself. In a broad sense, I’d accomplished what he’d sent me to do.

I went to Parmenides’ apartment after my classes. It was always unlocked, and he insisted that we enter without knocking, to treat his apartment as our own. He was in his office when I walked in but came into the living room as soon as he heard the door rattle shut behind me.

“Wonderful to see you again,” he said, “and so soon! The pamphlets, are you

finished with them?”

“It was a pleasure to hand them out.”

I settled onto a stool at his kitchen counter. He busied himself by the sink, putting away cleaned dishes.

“I’m curious to know,” he said, “how did people react?”

“Across the board. It would be impossible to summarize, but I’ve been left optimistic.”

“Wonderful news. Can I get you anything to drink, to eat?” He prided himself on being a conscientious host and considered this to be one of the great callings of the present.

“I’m alright.”

“How about music?” he said, crossing into the living room. I swiveled on the stool to track him. “I was going to put something on anyway. Debussy? Rossini? I have both ready.”

“Either would be excellent.”

He put one on—I couldn’t tell which—midway through a song.

“Now I supposed you want to talk about your manifesto.”

“That was just its beginning, but yes. Did you get a chance to read it?”

“Several times.” He sat on the couch, casting his eyes to the floor. His head bobbed in time to the music. “It raised concerns.”

I couldn’t understand. I had downplayed the effort that had gone into my writing. If it was good, I wanted it to be viewed as a stroke of genius, not a labored effort. If it was bad, I wanted it to be a work in progress, not a misstep. Still, I didn’t know how it could have been bad. I considered myself a sound writer, and this was the subject matter I was most versed in.

“Was it not comprehensive? Did I miss the mark?” I asked.

“On the contrary, I doubt I myself could have produced a better account of our implicit bylaws.”

“What’s the issue?”

He looked at me, searching my eyes, searching himself.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to come up with. It’s unsettled me, seeing ourselves expressed like this, in a written form. I’m unsettled. It becomes too easy to compare ourselves with the ideas we collect. I’m afraid we don’t hold up well. You said the purpose of this was to preserve ourselves, to allow our thoughts to age, but now I’m not sure if that’s wise, if we’re worthy of being maintained. I’ve seen my reflection in ink and paper, and I didn’t much care for it. This is heresy against my own sect, but I believe we’ve been looking back too long to see what we’ve become. Introspection has become our antithesis.”

“Know thyself.”

“It was on the temple wall and we never saw it.”

“But the manifesto, it was good?”

“It described us perfectly. I saw the mess that we are. I don’t know what this means, the implications, but something has to be done.”

“You can’t be implying a reformation,” I said.

“It’s necessary, inevitable. Thoughts evolve over the course of time. We know this better than anyone. It’s our turn.”

“That’s only for ideas of their age. *They* shift with the times. We’re removed from that nonsense.”

“Dear friend, you can’t believe that.”

“Unless the past changes, neither should we.”

“The past is always changing.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I’m afraid I don’t.”

I meant the nature of the past, of course. I could have clarified but chose not to. We regarded each other in silence, unsure of what came next. The music swelled. It hit a scratch and swelled again. It hit a scratch and swelled again.

“I’m going to need my manifesto back,” I said.

He clutched it to his chest.

“I have to hold onto it a bit longer. It will be the measuring stick we use to gauge progress.”

“There will be no progress,” I said a bit too loud, “only past.”

I stood before him with my hand extended, willing to do whatever it took, unsure how far this went. I was frightened by the potential I felt. I was excited by it. We were men of thought who lived inside ourselves. This encounter was unprecedented. My nerve had caught fire. He saw this and withered before me. The papers were back in my possession and I was disdainful of how easy he’d made it. I felt as though I needed to say something to him before I left, something to punctuate our relationship, because, as far as I was concerned, his omission had cost him his title. I would ascend in his stead

“Your days as our leader are behind you. Be thrilled by that.”

My brain vibrated as I burst into the world. Appendages and amendments to the manifesto spawned rapidly, defenses to ensure our form was unalterable. I was in control, dictating our identity. All it took was my deciding so.

The sun had set but there were traces of its light painting the sky. I noticed this while walking into the library. My body had directed me there. I had forfeited planning.

I anticipated looking back on what I'd done.

I pushed through double doors, past shelves brimming with hardcovers, past study groups huddled around tables, past the computer lab, and planted myself before the tech support counter. My assailant greeted me with my box. He placed it on the counter between us, his hand resting on top, protecting it.

“So you came,” he said.

“I was bound to.”

“You haven't brought a superior along like we discussed.”

“I have. It's me, I've decided.”

“The purpose was for you to bring along someone who might be able to compose a more competent argument as to why—”

I slapped him across the face, my open hand connecting with his left cheek. He didn't cry out, although the sound of the blow drew the attention of those around us. His hand still rested on the box. I slapped him again, more recklessly. He shouted and jumped back. I snatched my pamphlets and promptly departed. I had nothing to say to him. Bystanders made way as I charged forward. They were horrified. I would have been too, but I'd come to a conclusion in those frenetic moments that absolved me; present actions hardly mattered when preserving the past. The end outweighed the means. This was set to be the first extension of my manifesto, a past manifesto, and it revealed our true source of power. Parmenides was too constrained to ever realize it. We were justified in our actions in the present, however grotesque, because immediately after, they would fall into our domain, where our authority resided, where we were the collectors and the curators. It would all be in the past. It was already in the past. The past was inexorable and so too were we.