

Peter Orlovsky:

An Inventory of His Papers at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Orlovsky, Peter, 1933-
Title:	Peter Orlovsky Papers
Dates:	1952-1983 (bulk 1957-1983)
Extent:	2 boxes (0.84 linear feet) and 32 electronic files (243 KB)
Abstract:	The papers of American poet Peter Orlovsky consist of diaries, electronic files, poems, sketchbooks, and correspondence.
Call Number:	Manuscript Collection MS-03115
Language:	English.
Access	Open for research. To request access to electronic files, please email Reference .
Restrictions on Use:	Certain restrictions apply to the use of electronic files. Researchers must agree to the Materials Use Policy for Electronic Files before accessing them. Original computer disks and forensic disk images are restricted. Copying electronic files, including screenshots and printouts, is not permitted.

Administrative Information

Acquisition	Purchase, 1990 (R12006)
Processed by	Matthew Darby, 1999 Born digital materials processed, arranged, and described by Chance Adams and Brenna Edwards, 2015-2022.
Repository:	Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Biographical Sketch

Peter Orlovsky, poet, musician, farmer, teacher, and companion of poet Allen Ginsberg, was born July 8, 1933, on the Lower East Side of New York City to Oleg and Katherine Orlovsky. He was one of five children who grew up in the Northport section of Long Island, New York.

As a teenager, Orlovsky's parents separated after a series of failed business ventures and bouts with alcoholism. At that time, Orlovsky moved to Queens with his mother and siblings. Orlovsky dropped out of school in his senior year and began supporting himself at age 17 due to family economic problems. After many odd jobs, he began working as an orderly at Creedmore State Mental Hospital in New York giving him an opportunity to complete the requirements for a high school diploma.

In 1953, Orlovsky was drafted into the military as the Korean War began. Due to his erratic behavior and conspicuous anti-military sentiments at boot camp, army psychiatrists ordered his transfer. He spent the rest of his military service as a medic in a San Francisco hospital.

Following his discharge from the army, Orlovsky moved in with San Francisco painter Robert LaVigne as both model and companion. In 1954, Orlovsky was introduced to LaVigne's friend, Allen Ginsberg. Soon after this first meeting, Orlovsky and Ginsberg became lovers and moved in together, defining their relationship as a marriage. Despite periods of separation, this arrangement remained intact until Ginsberg's death in April 1997.

Prior to meeting Ginsberg, Orlovsky had made no deliberate attempts at becoming a poet. With Ginsberg's encouragement, Orlovsky began writing in 1957 while the pair was living in Paris. His early compositional process began at the typewriter as spontaneous outbursts of ideas. From that point on, he often carried small notebooks to document his experiences, dreams, and impressionistic images.

Orlovsky's relationship with Ginsberg exposed him to individuals involved with the literary and artistic renaissance emerging in San Francisco during the 1950s. Accompanied by such Beat luminaries as Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Gregory Corso, Orlovsky traveled extensively for several years, both with and without Ginsberg, throughout the Middle East, Northern Africa, India, and Europe. The fragile mental condition of his brothers, Julius and Lafcadio, often abbreviated these trips, forcing his return to New York. Orlovsky and Ginsberg eventually settled into an apartment on New York's Lower East Side.

During the 1970s, Orlovsky spent much of his time on a farm in Cherry Valley, New York, writing, playing music, growing his own food, and communing with nature. In 1974, Orlovsky joined the faculty of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, to teach a course entitled "Poetry for Dumb Students." Although Orlovsky never regarded writing as a career, he received a \$10,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1979 to continue his creative endeavors.

Orlovsky has supported many social and political causes by participating in anti-nuclear demonstrations, LEMAR, a pro-marijuana organization, and the League for Sexual Freedom. Orlovsky and Ginsberg's frank and open discussion of their homosexual marriage has been credited with increasing gay consciousness in America.

To date, Orlovsky's work has been published in *Dear Allen: Ship will land Jan 23, 58* (1971), *Lepers Cry* (1972), *Clean Asshole Poems & Smiling Vegetable Songs: Poems 1957-1977* (1978), and *Straight Hearts' Delight: Love Poems and Selected Letters* (1980), a collaboration with Ginsberg. His work has also appeared in *New American Poetry: 1945-1960* (1960), *The Beatitude Anthology* (1965), as well as the literary magazines *Yugen* and *Outsider*. Orlovsky has appeared in two films, Andy Warhol's *Couch* (1965) and photographer Robert Frank's *Me and My Brother* (1969), a film documenting Julius Orlovsky's mental illness.

Sources

Charters, Ann. "Peter Orlovsky" in *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 16, The Beats: Literary Bohemians in Postwar America*. University of Connecticut: Gale Research, 1983.

Ginsberg, Allen and Peter Orlovsky. *Straight Hearts' Delight: Love Poems and Selected Letters*. San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1980.

Scope and Contents

The Peter Orlovsky Papers, 1952-83 (bulk 1957-83), include diaries, drafts of poems, dreams, and conversations, sketchbooks, correspondence, miscellaneous materials, and work by other writers. The papers are arranged in two series: I. Works, 1957-83, nd (1.75 boxes) and II. Correspondence and Miscellaneous, 1952-77, nd (0.25 box).

Works are arranged in three subseries: Diaries, 1961-83; Poems, 1957-77, nd; and Other Works, 1957-65, nd. Orlovsky's diaries comprise the majority of the collection, documenting his time in India, the Middle East, New York City, his farm in Cherry Valley, New York, and Boulder, Colorado. Entries include accounts of daily activities, dream recollections, ideas and drafts for poems, sketches, addresses and phone numbers, and appointments. Mentioned in many of the diaries are literary and artistic figures such as Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Gregory Corso, John Giorno, Robert LaVigne, Timothy Leary, Gary Snyder, and Anne Waldman. Also frequently mentioned are his parents, Oleg and Katherine, and his siblings, Julius, Lafcadio, Marie, and Nicholas.

Orlovsky's poems and other creative works also represent a large portion of the collection. Twenty poems from *Clean Asshole Poems & Smiling Vegetable Songs* are present in numerous drafts. Other poems, both titled and untitled, published and unpublished, exist in various stages of development, as well as fragments of longer poetry series and unfinished pieces. Also included are drafts of conversations with family members and Ginsberg, some of which appeared in Ginsberg and Orlovsky's *Straight Hearts' Delight: Love Poems and Selected Letters, 1947-80*. Other works include dream transcripts from his diaries and numerous drawings.

The correspondence is primarily comprised of letters from Orlovsky to family members, most notably his mother Katherine. In addition, there is an unsent, unfinished draft of a letter to Neal Cassady. Orlovsky's other letters are addressed to his father Oleg, his siblings Lafcadio and Marie, and two unidentified recipients. Incoming correspondence includes two letters from his mother and a card from Susan Joan Gorbea. Miscellaneous items include notes, illustrations, flyers, a hand-drawn map to Orlovsky's farm, a check stub from Creedmore State Hospital, and a brief note to Allen Ginsberg from Lucien Carr.

Works by other authors include a few poems by unidentified authors edited with comments by Orlovsky, possibly in his capacity as an instructor at the Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics. Other works include transcripts of poems by Allen Ginsberg, William Carlos Williams, and Sergei Esenin.

Index Terms

Subjects

Poets, American--20th century

Beat generation--Poetry

Ginsberg, Allen, 1926-

Document Types

Diaries

Electronic documents.

Sketches

Series I. Works, 1957-83, nd

Subseries A. Diaries, 1961-83

- 1961 October 16 - 1962 February 28, holograph account of time in Damascus, the Middle East, and India. Includes sketches and notes **box 1 folder 1**
- 1963 February 25 - December 31, holograph account of time in India, Eastern Europe, England, and New York. Includes notes, appointments, addresses, and phone numbers **folder 2**
- 1964 January - February, New York City, holograph notes, appointments, addresses, phone numbers, transcripts of news articles, and sketches **folder 3**
- 1966 April 12 - August 27, New York City, holograph notes, appointments, addresses, phone numbers, and news article transcripts **folder 4**
- 1974-77 (March 18 - December 31), New York City and farm, holograph diary entries with dreams and poetry drafts **folder 5**
- 1974 **folder 6**
- Typescript transcript of diary with corrections, 1974 March 18 - October 20, 45 pp.
- Typescript transcript of Journal Notebook, July 1974, 3pp.
- 1979-80 (November 18 - March 16), Boulder, Colorado, holograph diary entries with poem drafts, appointments, reading dates and lists with loose holograph note and business card **folder 7**
- 1980-83 (January 20 - September 29), New York farm, New York City, and Boulder, holograph diary entries, dream records, and poem drafts. Includes drafts of his will and a letter to Beverly Isis **folder 8**

Subseries B. Poems, 1957-77, nd

- Clean Asshole Poems & Smiling Vegetable Songs, 1957-77, nd, typescript drafts with corrections and photocopies. **box 2 folder 1-2**
- Other Poems, 1959-76, nd, typescript drafts of titled and untitled poems with corrections. **folder 3**

Cut-ups--typescript poem cut up, rearranged and pasted together with a letter to Bill of the Quite, 1960, 6pp. **folder**
4

Subseries C. Other Works, 1957-65, nd

Fragments, 1957-62, nd

Incomplete typed manuscript with page numbers and corrections. **folder** 5

Holograph and typescript drafts and unfinished poems. **folder** 6

Conversations and interviews, 1961-65, nd typescript drafts with corrections and photocopies, **folder**
7

Dreams, 1957-61, nd typescript drafts with corrections, **folder** 8

Sketchbooks and drawings, 1957, nd pen and ink and pencil sketches. Includes a dream record and a holograph description of Tangier, **folder**
9

Folders and envelopes, 1976-77, nd includes a few holograph notes, phone numbers, and draft titles, **folder**
10

Series II. Correspondence and Miscellaneous, 1952-77, nd

Correspondence, 1958-67, nd typescript and holograph letters,

Outgoing, 1959-68, nd **box 2 folder 11**

Incoming, 1958-66 **folder 12**

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Miscellaneous, 1952-77, nd includes notes, flyers, illustrations, a hand-drawn map, and a check stub, **box 2 folder 13**

Works by Others, 1955-77, nd holograph and typescript transcriptions and photocopies of poems by other writers. Includes typescript poem drafts from unidentified writers with corrections by Orlovsky, **folder 14**