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"A Lost Battalion of Platonic Conversationalists":

"Howl" and the Language of Modernism

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In 1957, just a year after the publication of the City Lights edition of *Howl*, Louis Simpson wrote a poem called "To the Western World":

A siren sang, and Europe turned away
From the high castle and the shepherd's crook.
Three caravels went sailing to Cathay
On the strange ocean, and the captains shook
Their banners out across the Mexique Bay.

And in our early days we did the same,
Remembering our fathers in their wreck
We crossed the sea from Palos where they came
And saw, enormous to the little deck,
A shore in silence waiting for a name.

The treasures of Cathay were never found.
In this America, this wilderness
Where the axe echoes with a lonely sound,
The generations labour to possess
And grave by grave we civilize the ground.¹

Simpson had been a classmate of Ginsberg's at Columbia University in the late forties. He was older and "wiser"—a World War II veteran who had served in the 101st Airborne Division in Europe. When the newly celebrated author of «Howl» returned to Manhattan in 1956, he sought out Simpson, who was then editing, with Donald Hall and Robert Pack, *New Poets of England and America*, which was to become the standard anthology used in undergraduate classrooms. Ginsberg recalls giving Simpson «this *great* load of manuscripts of [Robert] Duncan's, [Robert] Creeley's, [Denise] Levertov's, mine, [Philip] Lamantia's, [John] Wieners', [Gary] Snyder's, [Philip] Whalen's, [Jack] Kerouac's, even [Frank] O'Hara's —everything. And he didn't use any of it.»²

Two decades later, when Simpson reviewed Ginsberg's *Journals: Early Fifties Early Sixties* for the *New York Times Book Review*, he admitted he had been wrong—«not merely wrong, obtuse,» to have ignored Ginsberg's poetry in the fifties.³ Indeed, antithetical as the two poets were—the GI-Bill graduate student who already had ties with the Establishment versus the Beat poet, one of those «who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull»-- Simpson, according to Ginsberg himself, makes a cameo appearance in *Howl* in strophe 55:

who threw their watches off the roof to cast their ballot
for Eternity outside of Time, & alarm clocks
fell on their heads every day for the next decade⁴

In Ginsberg's note for this passage we read:

As author remembers anecdote, friend Walter Adams visited poet Louis Simpson's high-floored apartment near Columbia in 1946:

L.S.: Do you have a watch?

W.A.: Yes.

L. S.: Can I have it?

W. A.: Here.

L.S. (throwing watch out of window): We don't need time, we're already in eternity.

In letter November 21, 1985, kindly responding to query from author, Louis Simpson writes:

It seems this does apply to me. I say "seems" because I don't remember doing this, but a man whose word I could trust once wrote me a letter in which he said that I thought "that technology had destroyed time so that all lives ever lived were being lived simultaneously, which was why you should ask Walter Adams for his watch, throw it out the window and remark that we didn't need such instruments any more."

This must have happened shortly before I had a "nervous breakdown"—the result of my experience during the war. There may have been other causes, but I think this was the main. I have no recollections of the months preceding the breakdown, and if people say I threw watches out of windows, OK. (HH 134)

It seems that, for a brief moment, Simpson too was one of the "angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection." Like Ginsberg, for that matter, he was an outsider at Columbia, a native of the West Indies who was half-Jewish. But to become a *poet*, in postwar New York, meant to give up the "starry dynamo" in the "tubercular sky" in favor of the formal (and indeed political) correctness that would characterize the Hall-Simpson-Pack anthology. By the time Simpson published his first book *Good News of Death and Other Poems* (Scribners, 1955), he had mastered the genteel mode almost perfectly.

If we want to understand just how extraordinary a poem *Howl* was at the time of its performance and publication, we might profitably read it

against a poem like Simpson's "To the Western World." Sound is the first differentium: Simpson's poem is divided into three five-line stanzas rhyming *ababa*. The regularity of its iambic pentameter from

/ / / / /

A siren sang, and Europe turned away

to the final:

/ / / / /

And grave by grave we civilize the ground

distinguishes this midcentury poetry sharply from its more daring Modernist antecedents, whether the syncopated rhythms of Eliot, where "the ghost of a meter . . . lurks behind the arras," to the open tercets of Stevens's *The Auroras of Autumn*, the syllabics of Marianne Moore, or, of course, the free verse of Pound and Williams, the latter serving as a model for Simpson in his later poetry.

Within this tight form and its perfectly chiming and conventional rhymes ("same"/ "came"/ "name"; "found"/"sound"/"ground"), the poet presents us with a carefully depersonalized capsule history of American imperialism. Irony and indirection are all: like Odysseus, "Europe," it seems, "was seduced by a siren," and this Europe, the synecdoches of line 2 tell us, was turning away from the "high castle" of its medieval aristocracy as well as the "shepherd's crook" of its then dominant peasant population. The "three caravels went sailing" on a "strange ocean"-- strange because it was the wrong one and also, no doubt, because the journey that led them not to the longed-for Cathay but to Mexique Bay took place on the stormy Atlantic.

In the second stanza, "they" merge with "we," as the poet compares the *Conquistadores* to "our" Pilgrim ancestors, who in their "early days . . . did the same," crossing the sea to "a shore in silence waiting for a name." To complicate things, Simpson introduces, in line 7, a buried allusion to

Ferdinand in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, "weeping again the king my father's wreck," a line appropriated by Eliot in *The Waste Land*, where it provides contrast to the tawdry present in the collage of "The Fire Sermon."

But despite the double allusion, "To the Western World" is perfectly straightforward thematically. "The treasures of Cathay were never found," we are told somewhat redundantly in stanza 3. But—and here is the moral—"we" are still at it: our "generations labour to possess" "this America, this wilderness." The poem's final line provides the punch line: "And grave by grave we civilize the ground." The only way we seem to be able to build a "civilization" is by killing, whether killing off the Indians who owned this wilderness or, by implication, killing our enemies in the recent wars. No wonder "the axe echoes with a lonely sound."

"To the Western World" is a well-made poem on a theme that no doubt resonated in the wake of the atomic bomb and the Korean War--the imperialist path that prompted the original discovery of America as well as its later settlement, is still with us; ours is a civilization built on death. Truth, it seems, is accessible to the poet, the point being to express that truth with measured irony: "And grave by grave we civilize the ground."

Irony, indirection, third- rather than first-person reference, allusion, moral discrimination, tight metrical form: these constituted the Hall-Pack-Simpson signature, in contradistinction to the poems collected in Donald Allen's oppositional *The New American Poetry*, published just three years later and featuring the Beats, Black Mountain, New York poets, and the San Francisco Renaissance. But *The New American Poetry* unwittingly gave rise to another myth—the myth, put forward by Allen himself in his preface-- that the central conflict of the day was between "closed" and "open" verse, between the formal and the improvisatory-spontaneous, the "cooked" and the "raw." I say myth because the irony is that Ginsberg (like many of the "New American" poets) was probably a much truer Modernist than were

mandarin poets like Louis Simpson or Donald Hall. Indeed, Ginsberg had so thoroughly internalized the aesthetic of the Modernists he revered—Eliot, Pound, Williams, Hart Crane,—that “Howl” unwittingly makes the case for *showing* rather than *telling*, for the inseparability of *form* and *content*, and even for Cleanth Brooks’s theorem that “the language of poetry is the language of paradox.”⁵ Even Ginsberg’s fabled rejection of metrics for what was ostensibly the mere piling up of “loose” free-verse or even prose units can be seen, from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, as formal continuity rather than rupture: the use of biblical strophes, tied together by lavish anaphora and other patterns of repetition.⁶

But in 1956, critics and fellow-poets were sidetracked by the nasty subject matter of “Howl,” its angry diatribes and metaphoric excesses, and its use of four-letter words and slangy diction. Not surprisingly, formalist poets such as John Hollander, another of Ginsberg’s Columbia classmates and a poet included in *The New Poets of England and America*, took an instant dislike to *Howl*. In his now infamous review for *Partisan Review* (1957), reprinted in Appendix 1 of the Harper facsimile edition, Hollander declares:

It is only fair to Allen Ginsberg . . . to remark on the utter lack of decorum of any kind in his dreadful little volume. I believe that the title of his long poem, “Howl,” is meant to be a noun, but I can’t help taking it as an imperative. The poem itself is a confession of the poet’s faith, done into some 112 paragraphlike lines, in the ravings of a lunatic friend (to whom it is dedicated), and in the irregularities in the lives of those of his friends who populate his rather disturbed pantheon.

And, having quoted the poem’s first two lines, Hollander shrugs, “This continues, sponging on one’s toleration, for pages and pages” (HH 1961).

Among the major critics of the period, Hollander's view was to prevail. In 1961, Harold Bloom pronounced both "Howl" and "Kaddish" "certainly failures," lacking all "imaginative control over the content of [the poet's] own experience." Similarly, Denis Donoghue declared that in "A Supermarket in California," "Ginsberg has done everything that is required of a poet except the one essential thing—to write his poem." And in *Alone with America* (1980), Richard Howard observed that "Ginsberg is not concerned with the poem as art. He is after the poem *discovered* in the mind and in the process of writing it out on the page as notes, transcriptions."⁷

None of the above seems to have changed his mind in the intervening years. Meanwhile, other prominent critics—Frank Kermode, Hugh Kenner, Geoffrey Hartman, not to mention theorists like Adorno or Derrida or Julia Kristeva—have simply ignored Ginsberg's poetry. We have, then, the anomaly of a poem that has become iconic around the world (*Howl and Other Poems* had sold over 800,000 copies and been translated into at least twenty-four languages by 1997, the year Ginsberg died,⁸ even as the book continues to be dismissed, or at least ignored, in discussions of postmodern poetics.

To rectify this curious situation, we might shift the discourse from the biographical/cultural preoccupation, which continues to dominate most studies of Ginsberg's work, to a close look at the actual texture of "Howl," especially vis-à-vis its earlier drafts, as presented in Barry Miles's elaborate Harper & Row edition of 1986, lavishly annotated by Ginsberg himself and including a wealth of relevant documents.

Part I of the City Lights edition opens with the lines:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by
madness, starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn

looking for an angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly
connection to the starry dynamo in the machin-
ery of night,
who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat
up smoking in the supernatural darkness of
cold-water flats, floating across the tops of cities
contemplating jazz (H 9)

Frank O'Hara, hearing Ginsberg declaim these lines in the Manhattan of 1956, evidently turned to his neighbor and whispered, "I wonder who Allen has in mind?"⁹ But extravagant as the poet's claim may be, we now know, thanks to Ginsberg's own annotations and those of his biographers, just whom he did have in mind, beginning with William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and Herbert Huncke. Again, the poet's careful choice of place names-- Fugazzi's bar on Sixth Avenue in the Village or the neighboring San Remo's or the "Paradise Alley" cold-water-flat courtyard at 501 East 11 Street, cited in line 10 above—give "Howl" its air of documentary literalism (see HH 125).

But O'Hara was on to something important: persons and places in "Howl" are so much larger than life that they come to occupy a mythic, rather than everyday, domain. The effect is achieved, I would argue, by a consistent use of tropes of excess--catachresis, oxymoron, transferred epithet--as well as rhetorical figures of incongruity such as zeugma and the catalogue of *seriatim* items containing one discordant member, all these laced with self-mockery and deflation, as in "who plunged themselves under meat trucks looking for an egg," or "who scribbled all night rocking and rolling over lofty incantations which in the yellow morning were stanzas of gibberish." This peculiar paradox--the "lofty incantations" that are also 'stanzas of gibberish"—is established at the very opening of the poem.

Consider, for starters, the adjective string “starving hysterical naked” in line 1. The first version read “starving mystical naked.” Ginsberg notes:

Crucial revision: “Mystical” is replaced by “hysterical,” a key to the tone of the poem. Tho [sic] the initial idealistic impulse of the line went one way, afterthought noticed bathos, and common sense dictated ‘hysteria.’ One can entertain both notions without “any irritable reaching after fact and reason,” as Keats proposed with his definition of “Negative Capability.” The word “hysterical” is judicious, but the verse is overtly sympathetic. . . . The poem’s tone is in this mixture of empathy and shrewdness, the comic realism of Chaplin’s *City Lights*, a humorous hyperbole derived in part from Blake’s style in *The French Revolution*. . . .HH 124)

When I first read this commentary, I found it somewhat irritating: isn’t it pretentious of the poet to inform us that the replacement of a single word is “crucial” and “judicious,” creating the “mixture of empathy and shrewdness” found in Chaplin or Blake? But rereading “Howl” in 2005, I think Ginsberg’s explanation is quite just. Paul Breslin, in an essay otherwise quite critical of “Howl,” was perhaps the first to remark how odd the use of the phrase “starving, hysterical, naked” is in context since all three adjectives designate bodies, not “minds.”¹⁰ “Hysterical” derives from the Greek *hystera* (womb), and Freud, who wrote so much about hysterics, considered it a somatic illness, usually of women. It thus is a more accurate term than “mystical,” the three-adjective unit providing a graphic image of a mental hunger so intense as to seem literally physical. The consonance of “starving” and hysterical,” moreover, intensifies the coupling of these adjectives.

The second line underwent a similarly judicious revision. In the original version, it reads, “who dragged themselves thru the angry streets at dawn looking for a negro fix,” (HH 13). Ginsberg’s note tells us that he had in mind his pathetic friend Herbert Huncke, “cruising Harlem and Times

Square areas at irregular hours, late forties, scoring junk” (HH 124). But the revision exchanges the adjectives so that it is the streets that are “negro” and the fix “angry.” Why? Perhaps because “negro fix” resorts to the cliché that it is blacks who are drug users, and the streets are perhaps too predictably those of the “angry” poor. More accurately, the scene is the “negro streets” of Harlem, and now it is the “fix” that is “angry” in its defiance of the social order by which it is outlawed. And the third strophe sets up the paradox that permeates the poem. The “hipsters” are “angelheaded,” the starry sky a “dynamo in the machinery of night.” On the one hand, the yearning for spirituality, for mystical knowledge, on the other, the clear-eyed recognition of the fallen technological world in which we live. And again, the sound structure is carefully wrought, “angel” chiming with “ancient,” “hipsters” with “heavenly,” “dynamo” leads to “night,” the heavy trochaic rhythm revising itself in the anapests of:

/ / / / / / /
 angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection

And further, in the fourth line, Ginsberg introduces the syntactic peculiarity that becomes a kind of signature in “Howl.” Instead of saying, “who poor and ragged and hollow-eyed and high. . .” he ungrammatically juxtaposes nouns and adjectives:

who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high. . . .

The shift underscores the artifice of the passage: this is hardly, as Ginsberg’s critics have often complained, unformed speech. No one, whether rich or poor, sober or stoned, New Yorker or foreigner, talks this way; no one, to take another example, says, “who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene odes on the windows of the skull” (line 7). Not, “for crazy behavior” or “crazy pamphlets”: “crazy” can apply to just about anything these “angelheaded hipsters” do. And, as in the case

of “poverty and tatters,” the syntactic distortion and ellipsis remind us that this is a poem, not real life, that this text is very much a made object.

Indeed, the unsettling clash of nouns and adjectives, with the heavy compounding of words like “angelheaded,” “hollow-eyed,” and “Blake-light tragedy,” played out in the syncopated rhythms of the anaphoric “who . . .” clauses— produces an air of gridlock. *Loading* and *oxymoronic jamming*: these give “Howl” its particular feel. Contrary to Hollander’s stricture, the poem does not just ramble on and on, but, as perhaps that first audience at the Six Gallery in San Francisco understood better than Ginsberg’s mentor, Lionel Trilling (who pronounced “Howl” just plain “dull,” “all rhetoric without any music,” HH 156), its larger structure depends on semantic /rhetorical suspension that produces continual *surprise* and hence demands re-reading. Take strophe 7 again:

who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing
obscene odes on the windows of the skull

The allusion is evidently to Ginsberg’s own sophomoric prank, his inscription on his dorm window of the phrase “Butler has no balls,” with its reference to Nicholas Murray Butler, Columbia’s revered octogenarian president (see Raskin 60). But in the poem, the “windows” oddly become those, not of the Columbia dorm or storefront, but of the *skull*, as if to say the graffiti permeate the very being of the poet. Such extravagant conceit characterizes “Howl” throughout. “Mohammedan angels stagger on tenement roofs illuminated,” the “incomparable blind streets” are full “of shuddering cloud and lightening in the mind,” and the “crack of doom” emanates from the “hydrogen jukebox.”

The elaboration of such devices can be quite complex, as in strophe 57:

who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge this actually hap-
pened and walked away unknown and forgotten

into the ghostly daze of Chinatown soup alley-
ways & firetrucks, not even one free beer (H 17)

Again, Ginsberg is thinking of a real incident: in 1945, his friend Tuli Kupferberg made a drunken suicide attempt by jumping off Brooklyn Bridge but was saved by the crew of a passing tugboat (see HH 128). But in "Howl," the victim who "walked away unknown" recalls not Tuli but the poet most significantly associated with the Brooklyn Bridge, Hart Crane, who was, of course, one of Ginsberg's heroes. The dreamlike "ghostly daze of Chinatown" gives way to the realism of "soup alleyways & firetrucks," and then to the absurd conclusion of "not even one free beer," as if such a state of affairs could actually prompt people to jump off bridges.

The literal ("this actually happened") bumping against the "ghostly": Ginsberg's "language of paradox" is found within lines as well as between them, as in strophes 59-60:

who barreled down the highways of the past journeying
to each other's hotrod-Golgotha jail-solitude
watch or Birmingham jazz incarnation
who drove crosscountry seventytwo hours to find out
if I had a vision or you had a vision or he had
a vision to find out Eternity. (H 17)

Here "barrel[ing] *down* the highway is juxtaposed to the ascent *up* Golgotha, literally, the hill of the skull where Christ's Crucifixion took place. "Hótród-Gólgótha jáil-sólitúde" –a nine-syllable unit that has seven primary stresses and intricate alliteration of /'s and assonance of o's—describes the suffering of "hotrod" drivers, who have been placed in "jail-solitude watch." But the phrase also "juxtaposes the hotrod "speed" and pleasure of the open road and the quietude of Christ on the Cross. And further: the "Birmingham jazz incarnation," far from being parallel to the "jail-solitude," is its

antithesis: if you're lucky, the poem says, you may achieve the former rather than the latter. The word "incarnation" is carefully chosen: it is the afterlife of Golgotha, the redemption that follows the Passion.

But—another opposition--this densely packed, clotted, allusive passage now gives way to the simplicity and ease of strophe #60, the poet chuckling, so to speak, as he recalls the mad scramble of the Beats to *get* away, to transcend the daily round, to find "if I had a vision or you had a vision or he had a vision to find eternity." The desperation is almost comic, but as the catalogue continues, the poem darkens, turning to the world of the mental hospital:

and who were given instead the concrete void of insulin
Metrazol electricity hydrotherapy psycho-
therapy occupational therapy pingpong &
amnesia (strophe 67)

In the notes, Ginsberg tells us that "Author received hydrotherapy, psychotherapy, occupational therapy (oil painting) and played Ping-Pong with Carl Solomon at N.Y. State Psychiatric Institute, July 1948-March 1949" (HH 131). The poem complicates the therapy list by the absurd inclusion of ping pong as well as by the addition of particular drugs ("insulin," "Metrazol"), the substitution of the neutral term "electricity" for "electro-shock-therapy," and the non-parallel item "amnesia," as if to suggest that the final result of the terrifying treatments catalogued will indeed be no more than this.

The mental hospital thread continues, culminating in the listing of "last" things ("the last fantastic book flung out of the tenement window, and the "last door closed at 4 A.M. and the last telephone slammed at the wall in reply. . . ."), only to explode suddenly with a parenthetical address to Carl:

ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe, and
now you're really in the total animal soup of

time—

H 19)

Here, after all the hyperbole, all the anaphoric phrasing and hallucinatory imagery, the poet interjects a low-key moment of ordinary intimacy between two friends, who know they're in this "animal soup" together. It is the poem's epiphany, and so, in the last few strophes, Ginsberg introduces his poetics directly:

and who therefore ran through the icy streets obsessed
with a sudden flash of the alchemy of the use
of the ellipse the catalog the meter & the vibrat-
ing plane. . . .¹¹

The "vibrating plane" and, in the next line, "the syntax and measure of poor human prose"—these give way, in Part II ("Moloch"), to a simpler, incantatory invective against cultural and political evil, but in Part III, the mode of the opening section returns in the brilliant counterpoint of refrain and exemplum, shifting from the comic burlesque of:

I'm with you in Rockland
where you've murdered your twelve secretaries. . . .
I'm with you in Rockland
where your condition has become serious and
is reported on the radio. . .

to the pathos of

I'm with you in Rockland
where fifty more shocks will never return your
soul to its body again from its pilgrimage to a
cross in the void (H 24-25)

and coming full circle, with the final Whitman reference, to the actual scene of writing in Berkeley:

I'm with you in Rockland

in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-
journey on the highway across America in tears
to the door of my cottage in the Western night.¹² (H 26)

"Howl," I have been suggesting, is in many respects a poem that honors the principles of Modernism-- *le mot juste*, the objective correlative, the use of complex semantic and rhetorical figures—even though the critics, put off by its "bad taste," didn't see how fully Ginsberg was working within the tradition. "It is a howl," wrote Richard Eberhart in the *New York Times Book Review*, "against everything in our mechanistic civilization which kills the spirit, assuming that the louder you shout the more likely you are to be heard" (HH 155). Here Eberhart reinforces Hollander's critique of the poem's "utter lack of decorum" (161).

From the distance of fifty years, the "bop kabbalah" "Howl" can be seen as a natural development out of Modernism. But there is another aspect of "Howl" that continues to be misunderstood. This so-called Cold War poem, with its "howl" against the Moloch of "skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! . . . monstrous bombs!" (H 22), must be understood, I would argue, as very much a poem of World War II, the war Ginsberg, born in 1926, narrowly missed. Unlike Simpson poems such as "The Battle," which recounts how "At dawn the first shell landed with a crack, / Then shells and bullets swept the icy woods" (CP 53), "Howl" is not overtly about combat, but it is surely the presence of that war, at its height when young Allen arrived at Columbia in 1942, and studied in classrooms and dorms filled with returning GIs, that accounts for the displaced violence at the heart of "Howl."

Consider the strangeness of the poem's diction. Here human beings don't walk: they "drag themselves," "stagger," "cower," "leap," "chain

themselves to subways," "jump off the Brooklyn Bridge," "pick themselves up out of basements," "plunge themselves under meat trucks," "barrel down highways," and "crash through their minds in jail." Again, these "angelheaded hipsters" don't meditate or contemplate; they "burn for the ancient heavenly connection," "bare their brains to Heaven under the El, "hallucinate Arkansas," "listen to the crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox," "howl on their knees in the subway," "sing out of their windows in despair," and spend their day "yacketayakking screaming vomiting whispering facts and memories and anecdotes." And sex in "Howl" is always related to demonic energy and violence: "who copulated ecstatic and insatiate with a bottle of beer . . . and fell off the bed, and continued along the floor and down the hall," "who went out whoring through Colorado in myriad stolen night-cars," "who balled in the morning in the evenings in rose-gardens and the grass of public parks and cemeteries scattering their semen freely to whomever come who may."

It is usual to say that such violence—the violence of those "who burned cigarette holes in their arms" or "bit detectives in the neck"-- was endemic to the protest against "the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism" (H 13). But in 2005, capitalism is more ubiquitous than ever and yet no one today writes this way; indeed, Ginsberg himself, in his later Zen period, wrote a much more muted poetry. Rather, from the distance of fifty years, we must understand "Howl" as at least in part a reaction to those, like Louis Simpson, who had *been there* and wrote odes to the "heroes" who "were packaged and sent home in parts" (CP 54). If others could write of chained prisoners, Ginsberg would celebrate those "who chained themselves to subways for the endless ride from Battery to holy Bronx on benzedrine." If others, trained as war pilots, crashed their planes, the "heroes" of "Howl," "crashed through their minds in jail."

The violence of the war heroes was honored by the public; the violent acts of Ginsberg and his Beat friends, with their drugs and daredevil adventures, were often ridiculed. Indeed, the poet himself laughs at the exploits of those

who cut their wrists three times successively unsuccessfully, gave up and were forced to open antique stores where they thought they were growing old and cried (H 16)

"Denver," we read a page later with reference to Neal Cassady, "is lonesome for her heroes." And not only Denver: "Howl" is itself "lonesome" for its heroes, those "heroes" willing to take on the "shocks of hospitals and jails and wars." Ginsberg's great hyperbolic-comic-fantastic-documentary poem thus memorializes that brief postwar moment when the lyric imagination, however exuberant, wild, fanciful, or grotesque, was subject to the reality check of actual events, the urge to assure the audience that "*this actually happened.*" The trope of choice continued to be that of Ginsberg's New Critical contemporaries--paradox. But in "Howl," paradox no longer goes hand in hand with the impersonality and indirection of late Modernist poetics. Indeed, Ginsberg's is a paradox curiously devoid of irony. The litany of Part III—"I'm with you in Rockaway"--concludes, after all, with the poet's extravagant dream that his friend Carl Salomon has crossed the continent and arrived at «the door of my cottage in the Western night.» It is the mythic promise of that «arrival» that, fifty years after its publication, continues to captivate its readers.

Footnotes

¹Louis Simpson, «To the Western World,» in *Collected Poems* (New York: Paragon House, 1988), p. 90. The poem is included in Donald Hall, ed., *Contemporary American Poetry*, revised and enlarged edition (Baltimore: Penguin, 1972), p. 117.

²² See Allen Ginsberg, *Journals Mid-Fifties 1954-1958*, edited by Gordon Ball (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 176.

See Barry Miles, *Ginsberg* (London: Virgin, 2000), p. 470. In his memoir *North of Jamaica* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), Simpson recalls the furor triggered by *New Poets* and explains, «we had not intended to imply that these were the only poets in England and America. We were trying to make a representative selection.» As for «Howl,» Simpson notes that Ginsberg's poem had not yet been published when the Hall-Pack-Simpson anthology was being put together (pp. 176-77). Later, in *A Revolution in Taste: Studies of Dylan Thomas, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath, and Robert Lowell* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), Simpson writes sympathetically of such early poems as «Paterson» and of *Kaddish*.

⁴Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1956), 16. I use the City Lights text, subsequently cited as H, so as to reproduce the original typography of *Howl* but for documentation, line numbers, and notes, see *Howl: Original Draft, Facsimile, Transcript & Variant Versions* edited by Barry Miles (New York: Harper & Row, 1986). Subsequently cited as HH. Simpson describes his stay in the mental hospital in *North of Jamaica*, chapter 25.

⁵ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1947), p. 3.

⁶ In its first draft, the poem that was to become «Howl» was called «STROPHES.» In 1956 Ginsberg told Gary Snyder, «these long lines or Strophes as I call them came spontaneously as a result of the kind of feelings I was trying to put down, and came as a complete surprise to a metrical problem that preoccupied me for a decade»(HH 154).

⁷ See Harold Bloom, «On Ginsberg's *Kaddish*,» *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 213-14; Denis Donoghue, *Connoisseurs of Chaos* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 49; Richard Howard, *Alone with America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), p. 149.

⁸ See Jonah Raskin, *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's **Howl** and the Making of the Beat Generation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. xxi-xxii.

⁹ See Marjorie Perloff, «A Lion in Our Living Room,» in *Poetic License: Essays in Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), p. 199, and chapter 10 passim.

¹⁰ Paul Breslin, *The Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry since the Fifties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 24.

¹¹ In the Final Text, 1986, this line becomes «and who therefore ran through the icy streets obsessed with a sudden flash of the alchemy of the use of the ellipsis catalog a variable measure and the vibrating plane,» HH 6. «A variable measure» is Williams's term, and «ellipsis» clarifies—perhaps overclarifies--the meaning of «ellipse.»

¹² I am here discounting the «Footnote to Howl» (Holy! Holy! Holy!), as an unneeded addition, an anticlimax to the great third part. The Footnote was not read at the Six Gallery in October 1955; it was written a few months later.