

Still Howling: Allen Ginsberg's Howl at Fifty and Counting

For years tumbling on top of each other, and I assume this still holds true today, “Howl” has been America’s best-selling poem, an entrenched phenomena that half the country revels in while the other half shrinks from in mild or deep disgust, longing to see the ashes of beatnik and hippie America buried forever. For better or worse, it has become part of our literary anatomy, our national discussion of poetry, which itself is a rare thing, and it has become a prime part of a book-snob debate that jostles the merits of biography, ecstatic visions, and protest. There’s no doubt that many people have encountered the poem, usually in English class taught by post-beatniks, post-hippies, and post-punks, or heard some song by Bob Dylan or Patti Smith, even Ministry or the Clash, that could not be imaginable without that fiery template at the heart of the 1950s, when most Americans were more interested in a modern home than surveying the underbelly of America with a keen eye and a knack for wheeling, unkempt language.

My brother gave me a copy during high school. Since I was already knee-deep into the Ramones and Sex Pistols, it was the very first collection of poems (we often forget it does not stand alone, for it was an intrinsic part of a stupefying, uninhibited paperback) that sideswiped me with its urgency. I can’t recall if I knew the sound of Allen’s voice first, due to the Clash’s “Rock the Casbah” album, in which he shows up on “Ghetto Defendant” and seemingly shapes the sensibilities of most of the album, if not by pen, then by his hovering presence alone. Joe Strummer was a busking street musician all along, soaking up the sounds of the city, and in the 1970s Ginsberg was a true ragtag connoisseur of the street too, mostly Frisco at that point, where people like Peter Case of the Plimsouls remembers seeing him and Orlovsky in 1974. Ginsberg even wrote a poem about Mabuhay Garden punks when he wasn’t in NYC hovering around St. Marks Church, admiring Patti Smith, the boheme Jersey Girl and fleet-footed Miss Rimbaud. Allen Ginsberg never quite belonged in the punk camp, per se, and I think he cherished his blues and jazz far more than the harried and hectic truthsayers of the teenage void and wasteland, but he had an open mind and heart, and um, other appendages ready for giving, if Jim Carroll’s work holds true.

What still most amazes me, and I don’t use that word lightly, is when I sent Ginsberg a Xeroxed chapbook, a mess heap of poems, by me and a local friend, within one week (I mean that literally, within six or seven days) there was a postcard in the mailbox,

thoughtful and transcendent, from the muse himself, at home in NYC. I was dumbfounded, ecstatic, and in disbelief, so I sent him more, and he wrote back another postcard, then I sent him more, and finally, still kind and generous, he sent me a small letter, suggesting that he was appreciative but busy. He didn't brush me aside because I was a kid, but because I needed an outlet, and he alone could not fill that need, when he had, well, a life, and I had a lukewarm talent that showed some promise here and there, but I needed a kick, and he did what he could. It was time to move into a wider circle of readers. He suggested some quirky, offbeat underground zines, and I tackled them, one by one, even had my poems published alongside Bukowski and Carl Solomon, the anti-hero and epicenter of "Howl." It was at this time that my brother befriended Herbert Huncke, but that is a story he should unveil to you.

Jason Shinder's new collection "The Poem That Changed the World" emits very personal recollections on the poem by noted current authors and is already gaining steam and notoriety, but I'd like to highlight just a few ideas sifting their way through the click-clack insomnia of the Web, where the poem's birthday has become a tug of war between the believers and non-believers, between the legions of people who feel the poem was the beginning of Whitman's reincarnation while for others it evoked the loss of America's well-honed poetic identity, representing another volley in a low level war between taste, form, and attitude.

First, the culturally moribund Bartleby world of the Wall Street Journal offers up this analysis by James Bowman, whose focus is the absence of Truth in the poem: "Factual information, along with other kinds of truth, regularly fell away, leaving nothing but the subjective and the emotional, which were all that mattered to him. The subjective and the emotional are not nothing, but when thus cut loose from more strictly accountable kinds of truth they take on that special Ginsbergian quality of hysteria and self-pity. Originally the word 'hysterical' in the first line was 'mystical,' but Ginsberg thought it not, well, hysterical enough. Anyway, for him the hysterical was the mystical." Well, from what I understand, even in the during the MC5 thunder-fest, police truncheon marathon, and Weatherman circus called the 1968 Democratic Convention, Ginsberg chanted Om to pacify the crowd and ease tension before Mayor Daley's thugs swept in for the kill. I don't equate the man, his prosody, or his actions with hysteria. Yes, the poem has hi-octane energy, volcanic energy even, though Ginsberg is not whimpering on the edge of a breakdown.

In terms of factual versus actual, Robert Pinsky actually suggests, not exactly in response to Bowman, but in general, that, "Rereading now the work of art that inspired me with its freedom, directness, and ebullience when I was a teenager, I

marvel more than ever at how dire it is, how wholeheartedly tormented, meaning every word, with no implied quotation marks. A howl: that is, utterly the opposite of doubt about the efficacy of language. The sex, for example, is not "camp" or coy, it too is unironic, tormented, and ecstatic and actual." The language of Ginsberg's bombastic howl, I assume he means, is not one of doubling back, or doubts; it is a robust, nearly all-encompassing cinema of the self. Still, in this light, Ginsberg's version of the truth also leans heavily on the "tormented," which Bowman posits as hysterical. However, if anything was hysterical, I would suggest it was the U.S. in South Korea under the barely restrained guidance of generals who wanted to set off nukes and manhandle China like brute bulls, and Ginsberg was the voice in the whirlwind, trying keep from seeing his body fragmented by war, alienation, jazz riffage, handfuls of drugs, and visions of Blake when the rest of America was lulled by mortgages and balanced check-books and can openers and plastic furniture. The poem is only dire when juxtaposed against beehive hairdos and four star generals.

I also worry about the easy use of the word truth, and it's not because I am beset by the truthiness of the Colbert report every night, but because what is the truth of "Howl," or as Gwendolyn Brooks says in her poem "Mother": "How is the truth to be told?" Sure, Carl Solomon threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism; sure, someone burned money in wastebaskets; sure, Blake appeared to Ginsberg in a Harlem apartment, but the language is conveying not the whole truth but vehicles for truth. For instance, the line "dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix" was originally written as "dragging themselves through the angry streets at dawn looking for a negro fix." So, the truth is blurry and bleary-eyed. An angry fix and a negro fix have very different connotations, for me.

Perhaps, at best, Greil Marcus (writing for the New York Times) actually makes the most sense when he quotes Luc Sante, NYC's beloved lit man of the street: "Was 'Howl' the last poem to hit the world with the impact of news and grip it with the tenacity of a pop song?" The language is burning, the ideas are jumping and, finally, you are brought into the adventure of the poem, Ginsberg and his fellows turning New York City into their own frontier, then heading west, through Kansas, into Colorado, to the coast, then back again, discovering, you can feel, more of America in the decade before Ginsberg wrote the poem in 1955 than de Soto, Daniel Boone or even Lewis and Clark did in the centuries before them." Sante goes on to write, "'You could feel the poem giving you supernatural powers, the ability to punch through brick walls and walk across cities from rooftop to rooftop' — faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, as George Reeves was doing on TV as Ginsberg wrote, just like Scotty Moore's second guitar

break in Elvis Presley's "Hound Dog," on Ginsberg's hydrogen jukebox the year that "Howl" first made it into print."

Sherman Alexie has argued that Superman taught him to read via vivid comic book cells and gave him the power, in a roundabout though very real way, to smash down walls of every kind. So, maybe it was Ginsberg who gave more than one entire underground generation the ability to smash the state, metaphorically, though sometimes, say in Czechoslovakia, in a very real way, like when the gates of freedom were swung ajar accompanied by the too cool tuneage of the Velvet Underground. Sante is smack dab right on many levels: The poem is the adventure, one that follows the ever-widening contours of consciousness. This held true for the romantics/realists/naturalists/transcendentalists/ symbolists and modernists, at least in their heads, and many important writers embodied such cerebrum-tickling "Wild Nights" until minimalism literally put its foot down, nailing the notion of a mise-en-scene to a kitchen or armchair and fell victim to the crux of meta-language. "Howl" does feel like a pop song, one that is a bit heftier than Elvis at most junctures, but also one that fits alongside hip hop, where a four minute song can become a wily, unbounded throwback to language-explosion, biographic tenacity, and poetic license.

Some call hip hop "legit," some call it bullshit, some call it being wise, and some call it the sons and daughters of Ginsberg scribbling their messages on the digital subway walls.