Allen Ginsberg's "Howl": Fifty years later and in its own time

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Last year marked the 50th anniversary of the publication of American poet Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," one of the most influential poems of the twentieth century. Very few poems sell over a million copies and get translated into virtually every language in the world. Where a generation could repeat from memory that two roads "diverged in a yellowed wood" that may at other times be "lovely, dark and deep" though there be miles to go before you sleep, so the laconic opening line of "Howl," "I have seen the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness," is widely known.

The poem has been annotated, every episode labeled by Ginsberg scholars, who have also written fat biographies and testify to Ginsberg's greatness in documentaries and the better web sites supporting American education. The tykes at the elementary school near the boarding house where "Howl" was pecked out on a second-hand typewriter in 1955 enter a new century with an Allen Ginsberg Poetry Garden, where annually during National Poetry Month children recite their own compositions. There was a "Transatlantic Howl" employing major universities and the resources of the Web. But undoubtedly, the central event in "Howl's" anniversary year was the widely reviewed collection edited by one of many Ginsberg secretary/editors, Jason Shinder, *The Poem That Changed America: "Howl" Fifty Years Later*.

A particularly nice feature of Shinder's book is the photograph of Allen Ginsberg as he was in 1955 at the time of the second reading of "Howl" at San Francisco State University. In a desperate attempt to go straight, Ginsberg held for a time, just before writing "Howl," a responsible position in market research, entered a heterosexual relationship and started psychotherapy. In the photograph, Ginsberg is beardless, neatly combed, wearing a Brooks Brothers jacket, horn-rimmed glasses, very proper, exactly as a graduate student registered at the University of California's Berkeley campus would look at the time. There are too few on Shinder's list of contributors who have a genuine feel for the person in that picture and the sadness so characteristic in Ginsberg's writing at the time, and even more pronounced in Jack Kerouac, who was to come out with another account of the events recorded in "Howl" in *On the Road*, published a year later, in 1957, making this year the novel's 50th anniversary.

The original teletype copy of *On the Road* has been sold for a cool two and a half million dollars, and is presently touring the country. Kerouac is on an American stamp, and, for a long while, Gap could announce that "Kerouac wore khakis" against the picture of an open road, assured that the young knew of whom they spoke. In fact, it is very hard to wipe away layers of iconic images of the Beats to get to real people writing in a particular place and time, but precisely this historical grounding is needed to understand the poem in its nakedness as Ginsberg proposed so often, in one celebrated instance taking off his clothes at a public reading to make his point.

Andrei Codrescu's "Howl in Transylvania" tries to put his finger on why the poem brings together such varied devotees—for instance, a Romanian who reads the poem in translation and follows it to Greenwich Village to meet its author, becoming a leading American poet in the process. "At midcentury, in the middle of the twentieth century," he writes, "something had given way, something was collapsing into the underworld, and a whole generation was doing its best to stay up until dawn hysterical and naked, and I was ready." Here is the problem: if your next door neighbor were up hysterical and naked at dawn seeing Mohammedan angels floating by rooftops, you may not respond with any eagerness to share the experience or join him. It all seemed attractive to the next generation after Ginsberg, the ones born during and after the war, who were very different from the "scholars of war," Ginsberg's cast of characters in "Howl."

Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), writes in "Howl and Hail" that having come across "Howl" while serving in the American army, impressed by its audaciousness and defiant stance toward the American culture of the period, he wrote to Ginsberg, then in Paris, on toilet paper, asking if Ginsberg was for real, receiving a reply from Allen Ginsberg on toilet paper, a French one better for writing, that he was tired of being Allen Ginsberg. There is in this reply a kind of desperation and feeling of loss and emptiness we find in the letters the Beats wrote to one another and an important component in the literature they created in the post-war period, even more pronounced in Jack Kerouac's novels at the end, and altogether missing in Allen Ginsberg's writing in the last three decades of his life.

We see an updated version of the photograph of Ginsberg reading "Howl" in 1955 in Jason Shinder's portrait at the beginning of the collection, the poet chicly buttoned by one button second from the top, designer shirt open, hands in pocket, serious jeans. Shinder received his first invitation to join Ginsberg, as he tells us in his introduction, on the back of a postcard featuring the Ginsberg of the Seventies chanting up a storm over the grave of Jack Kerouac beside Bob Dylan, who left Hibbing, Minnesota, and wrote his best songs under Kerouac's influence. By this point, Ginsberg was all show biz, and most contributors of Shinder's generation report sighting the poet on campus for one of his performances.

Among them are some of the leading young writers and scholars of the present, usually in the same person as poet/professors. Alice Ostriker catches Ginsberg at two campus sessions, the second of which allows for a brief personal exchange after she fights her way through a crowd of adoring boys. Luc Sante actually lived in Ginsberg's building while completing his doctorate in English for

Columbia University, but has only one personal meeting when Ginsberg appears at his door to tell him to turn down the volume on his stereo. Philip Lopate actually didn't like "Howl" much but wrote a poem in imitation of it in high school which got him into the counselor's office. Later, he decides to resist an attraction to the beat life and stay in grad school. Still later, a rising star of the New York school of poetry, he sees Ginsberg at varied affairs and feels no great urge to make the Bard's personal acquaintance. None of the above had heard "Howl" read at Ginsberg's many readings. Ginsberg never read the poem publicly after the first readings, though it is reported by Shinder he asked everyone visiting him at the end of his life whether they had read it.

The five decades since " Howl" was published might cover up precisely what makes the poem so powerful, at least if we look at its shadow in the other direction, the decade before "Howl" was written, the post-war years. Anne Waldman, born to parents like the Beats, tells us from bitter memory how much the post-war experience was no fun, as both Kerouac's and William Burroughs' children have testified. Born to bohemian parents in Greenwich Village, growing up aware of the drug and sex problems of her parents and their circle, friends incarcerated or in mental hospitals, Waldman recognizes in the poem the experience of her father, a contemporary of Ginsberg: "Going to Columbia in the late forties, suffering a kind of postwar trauma. This was the turf of the American psyche before the Vietnam War—-still caught in the grey post-World War II doldrums, a time constructed of false material promise."

In the first chapter of *On the Road*, Ginsberg in the character of Carlo Marx is excitedly sharing with Dean Moriarity as Neal Cassidy, the now mythic tales of "Old Bull Lee, Elmer Hassel, Jane; Lee in Texas growing weed, Hassel on Riker's island, Jane wandering on Times Square in a Benzedrine hallucination, with her baby girl in her arms and ending up in Bellevue [the public mental hospital]." The poet Robert Pinsky got it just about right in his essay in Shinder's collection, "No Picnic." Indeed, it was not.

Marjorie Perloff's essay, "Howl and the Language of Modernism," compares a formalist poem by Louis Simpson to demonstrate how much Ginsberg's poem is in the modernist tradition of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, and why the poem made so many enemies among the established literary critics. Both poems are angrily anti-imperialistic and challenging of America's role in the world, but one is structured in the utterly conventional manner of what was called "academic" verse at the time, while the other belonged to an "open" form of composition. Leaving aside the differences between the two poems, it may be worth pausing over the fact that Louis Simpson, a soldier in the Second World War, suffered a nervous collapse in 1947 as a result of his war experiences.

A Columbia University classmate of Ginsberg and Kerouac, Simpson is, in fact, one of the mad in "Howl" "who threw their watches off the roof to cast their ballot for Eternity outside Time, & alarm clocks fell on their heads every day for the next decade." "Howl" is a protest poem, but the resistance is turned inward toward self-destruction and madness of those "who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of capitalism,/ who distributed Supercommunist pamphlets in Union Square weeping and undressing while the sirens of Los Alamos wailed them down, and wailed down Wall, and the Staten Island ferry also wailed/ who broke down crying in white gymnasiums naked and trembling before the machinery of other skeletons." Ginsberg is writing of registration for the draft and Ban the Bomb demonstrations in a place you could find good political talk into the Sixties.

"Howl"'s politics had influenced the communalism of the Sixties as Robert Polito explains in " Holy the Fifth International," and Ginsberg served along with C. Wright Mills and Erich Fromm as one of the major influences on the New Left of the period, as Robert Katz states in " Radical Eyes: Poetical Politics and 'Howl'" But that was all the later Ginsberg. Actually, the politics of "Howl" makes no sense from the point of view of the radical ferment in the Sixties. Ginsberg wrote the poem in an era of repression and conservatism in which mysticism, drugs and madness, however wrongheaded, seemed a comprehensible reaction for those who saw and felt no alternatives in a world gone crazy.

There is a great deal of literature of pain to study for a full understanding of this period. The novel that Kerouac started at the end of the war, *The Town and the City*, may be a good place to begin. Set in the fictional city of Galloway, representing Kerouac's Lowell, Massachusetts, the autobiographical novel begins with a rather idealized, very American small town to which Kerouac returned repeatedly in *Dr. Sax* and *Maggie Cassidy*. Then comes the war, such as we now have with all its lies and our own neighbors dead or returning shattered beyond redemption. First come the letters from friends, and Kerouac quotes one from a friend soon to die, as had a great many of his friends. Kerouac himself was a merchant seaman on boats under torpedo attack.

He returns to New York where Ginsberg and he ride the subway with Ginsberg as Levinsky explaining "the atomic disease" that is devouring people. Kerouac writes in the character of Peter Martin: " 'I have a feeling like that,' stammered Peter almost blushing, 'that is... of being guilty, but I don't know, it's the war and everything, I think, the guys I knew who got killed, things like that. And well, hell!—things aren't the way they used to be before the war.' For a moment he was almost afraid that there was some truth in Levinsky's insane idea, certainly he had never felt so useless and foolish and sorrowful before in his life." There will be many Americans in Iraq, Afghanistan and in future areas of conflict who will come back in that mood. Howl, indeed.

The poem itself: http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/howl/