

1955, October 7

Allen Ginsberg gives his first public reading of "Howl"

A GENERATION IN MINIATURE

In 1955, Allen Ginsberg was twenty-nine, ambitious for fame as a writer but completely unknown. He had recently abandoned New York to follow Neal Cassady, the first intense love of his life, westward to California. That relationship failed disastrously, but Ginsberg stayed on in San Francisco and found a job as a copywriter in a small advertising-marketing firm. He discovered a community of young artists and poets whose explorations, creative, sexual, and spiritual, provided balm for the many troubles he had suffered during the previous decade. Long-standing fears that his sexual desires must always be frustrated, that he was doomed to live isolated and lonely, melted away with a series of lovers, both men and women, who desired him as he was. The poetry he was writing changed as well. When he started drafting the lines that would take shape as "Howl," he no longer wanted to craft the orderly, erudite verse that his teachers at Columbia University lauded. He wanted to write a work that captured the wild messiness of his life. He wanted to say clearly what the experience of being expelled from school, arrested, and condemned to time in a psychiatric hospital meant to him, without fear of how anybody might respond.

While working on the first versions of "Howl," Ginsberg collaborated in planning a reading by young local poets at the Six Gallery in San Francisco, a small artist cooperative set up in an abandoned auto repair shop. Ginsberg contributed the copy for the postcard announcing the evening:

6 Poets at 6 Gallery

Philip Lamantia reading mss. of late John Hoffman—Mike McClure, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder & Phil Whalen—all sharp new straightforward writing—remarkable collection of angels on one stage reading their poetry. No charge, small collection for wine, and postcards. Charming event.

Approximately 150 people showed up to hear the reading. Of the poets on the program, only Lamantia had ever been published. Deep into exploring the relation of drugs and consciousness, Lamantia was not ready to put his experiences with peyote or heroin on paper. Instead, he read the verse of a friend who had died from a peyote overdose. McClure, at twenty-three the youngest reader on the program, read "Point Lobos: Animism" and "For the Death of 100 Whales," two works expressing the poet's developing biological mysticism. The second poem responded with rage to a recent news report of U.S. soldiers who had slaughtered a pod of whales just for the fun of it. Although the poem started out as protest, it ended with an austere religious vision of a spiritual force linking humanity to all other life. Even if the "undersoul" was desecrated in the nation, Mc-

Clure's poem asserted that its force was ever present in flesh, in plant life, even in rocks, ready to replenish the spirits of whoever acknowledged the emptiness of life in the modern United States.

Whalen, at thirty-two the oldest person on the program as well as the most deeply knowledgeable in Buddhism, read "Plus ça change," a stark if humorous set of punning images playing on the varied connotations of the word "brooding." His contribution to the then-trendy theme of ennui stressed how fear of communication, whether verbal or physical, effectively isolated Americans from each other and trapped each person in the prison of his or her unfulfilled longings. Snyder, about to head off to Kyoto, Japan, to begin an apprenticeship at the Daitokuji Monastery, concluded the evening with "The Berry Feast," a group of poems evoking the Native American mythic figure of Coyote, the archetypal trickster whose deceptions suddenly reveal hidden cosmic truths: a sardonic role model for young contemporary poets, whose messages of a divine order immanent in all things fell on deaf ears. Given the indifference they faced, poets would have to trick Americans into paying attention.

The emotional highlight of the evening was Allen Ginsberg's reading of the first section of "Howl" (the second and third sections were still incomplete). Ginsberg was probably the next-to-last participant in the program. Never having read in public before, Ginsberg was understandably nervous, but as his litany of images cataloging the bleak state of contemporary life in the United States marched forward, his voice grew stronger and more confident. He began with the soon-to-be-famous indictment that he had seen "the best minds of my generation" driven mad and left to face the world "starving hysterical naked." The phrase referred specifically to Carl Solomon, a young intellectual in New York whom Ginsberg had met when they were both living in a psychiatric hospital. More generally "the best minds" belonged to any young man that Ginsberg knew and loved. A quick succession of cinematic images describes events in his own life and in those of his closest friends that revealed the dangerous hypocrisy of modern American life. The insistent drumbeat of the word "who" is repeated sixty-one times, initiating precise but often puzzling images such as "who walked all night with their shoes full of blood on the snowbank docks waiting for a door in the East River to open to a room full of steamheat and opium." The cascading words create a collective persona of the alienated young male, who could be any young person frustrated with the hypocrisy of the times. The narrative spine of the poem protests the cruel medical treatments that doctors devised to destroy Solomon's individuality, but the poem speaks broadly and generally of drug addiction, of poverty and self-degradation, of turning to prostitution or robbery, of traveling randomly across the United States and Mexico, of boring jobs, of the anxieties that life in a militarized, death-oriented nation induces. Ginsberg spoke in direct language of sex, a source of sorrow and frustration, but also a path to redemption that revealed the powerful force of the divine within each person.

Ginsberg's themes, as well as his critique of U.S. society, were consistent in content and spirit with the work that Whalen, McClure, and Snyder presented, but Ginsberg did not balance his rage with images of a transcendent cosmological

reality nor with clever language games. All that would come later in subsequent work. The first section of "Howl" presents the author's personal descent into the inferno of contemporary America, and he used clear, direct language to describe and diagnose the catastrophe.

Against the soul-destroying forces dominating the nation, Ginsberg invoked the figure of "NC," his actual erstwhile lover Neal Cassady, eulogized as the "Adonis of Denver." NC is a divine creature in sexual union with everyone and everything he encounters. NC's voracious phallic sexuality, expressed equally in fast cars ripping between the coasts, torrents of nonstop chatter, and a view of every relationship as a chance for another orgasm, makes him pure spirit in bodily form. Society might eventually kill him, but NC will never be conquered.

Ginsberg not only confessed but celebrated his desire for NC to possess him. To be free, Ginsberg had to celebrate everything that made him different from the American norm. Yes, he was Jewish; yes, he was a socialist; yes, he was a poet. He was also a queer who desired the caresses of other men, and that made him a threat because, of all his identities, youth and sex expressed most clearly that divine force within every person—the only force powerful enough to confront social convention. His acceptance of same-sex desire as an ordinary, positive part of life made the work appear powerfully frank and particularly suspect to defenders of public morality when the poem finally reached a broader public.

At the end of the first section, the poet stands naked, as Ginsberg did literally in 1956 when, stripping off every last stitch of his clothing, he finished reading the poem to a group gathered in Los Angeles. At the Six Gallery, the audience called out to him as they might to bebop musicians who had started with a simple tune but quickly leaped into sonic explorations granting the chaotic inner movements of the soul a temporary, fragile, but excruciatingly beautiful form. The pure passion that soared from his body was as hard-edged as a solo by Charles Parker, and, in a poem that described the cry of a jazz saxophone as an angelic voice emerging from America's desire for love, it was meant to be.

Word of mouth about the reading spread quickly. The poets gathered again perhaps a half dozen times in different locations around the Bay Area to repeat the program. Lawrence Ferlinghetti contracted with Ginsberg to publish a first book, starting off with "Howl" followed by ten shorter poems. A decision in 1957 by the U.S. Customs agent at the Port of San Francisco to confiscate and destroy a set of the books printed in England drew national attention to Ginsberg's work. Ferlinghetti reprinted the book in the United States and put it on sale. The San Francisco district attorney then filed criminal charges against Ferlinghetti and his City Lights bookstore sales clerk Shigeyoshi Murao for selling obscene materials. For the prosecutor, any poem that used words like "cocksucker" or alluded to anal intercourse could not possibly contain ideas worthy of attention. A slew of expert witnesses on modern poetry disagreed, and so did Judge Clayton Horn: "Howl" was an honest expression of personal vision. Readers might not agree with Ginsberg's assessment of contemporary America, they might well find his perspective offensive, but the First Amendment protected *their* right to receive and evaluate for themselves what he had to say.

The publicity surrounding the “Howl” case helped convince a major New York publisher to issue Jack Kerouac’s novel *On the Road*, on the market without a buyer for the previous six years. Standing for what was quickly named the beat generation, after a phrase of Kerouac’s, writers as different as Ferlinghetti, Bob Kaufman, LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka), and William Burroughs found readers for works that a decade earlier might have been dismissed as self-indulgent or condemned as nihilistic.

Kerouac was the best known of the beat authors, in part because he produced a new novel almost every year. In *The Dharma Bums* (1958), written quickly at the publisher’s insistence to capitalize on the commercial success of *On the Road*, Kerouac set down what has long been the best-known account of the Six Gallery reading—but while acknowledging the power of Ginsberg’s breakthrough, Kerouac celebrated Snyder’s reading as the emotional heart of the evening. Given that Snyder’s character was the hero of the novel, the assessment reflected Kerouac’s critique in *The Dharma Bums* that Ginsberg was too personal, too self-obsessed, and too “whiney”—images that simply said that Ginsberg was too Jewish and too queer. Kerouac presented Snyder’s dispassionate rejection of Western rationalism as more genuinely radical than Ginsberg’s path of confessional redemption. In truth Snyder appealed to Kerouac as a manly, heterosexual, old-stock American from the Pacific Northwest who fit the Jeffersonian archetype of the self-sufficient, self-governing citizen.

In the mass media, stereotyped images of beats indulging their passions regardless of what others might think provided yet another opportunity to discuss whether American institutions promoted or stifled individual creativity, whether consumer society undermined personal responsibility, whether modern bureaucracy had created a mass culture that punished anyone who strayed too far from the opinions of friends, neighbors, and employers. Ginsberg’s complaints in “Howl” complemented the opinions of sociologists, psychologists, historians, novelists, and journalists. When the City Lights edition hit bookstores, it joined a broad range of books that criticized American society for repressing individual creativity. Efforts by the customs inspector and the district attorney to ban the book only confirmed the power of conformity and its deadening influence over the nation.

Discussions of conformity and individualism in the mass media typically avoided the most tangible political issues of the decade: the loyalty oaths required of educators during the McCarthy purges, the resurgent movement for civil rights fought in both the courts and in the streets of Southern cities, debates over the militarization of U.S. society during the cold war and the threat of atomic warfare, the persistent high levels of poverty in the world’s wealthiest country. The problems facing the nation were defined as existential rather than political—but when in 1957 the Soviet Union put a satellite in orbit around the world, a triumph that contrasted dramatically with several spectacular U.S. failures, the media term beatnik, synthesizing Kerouac’s beats with *Sputnik*, the Soviet space vehicle, suggested how much media interest in the nation’s bohemian enclaves was linked to fears over U.S. decline. The beatniks were objects of derision, but they emerged

as the mass media challenged readers and viewers to meet the growing Soviet threat by asserting themselves more, by pursuing personal excellence, whatever that might be, and in particular by encouraging their children to think for themselves.

The political philosopher Hannah Arendt thought that concerns over conformity were evidence that two competing ideals of social organization, equally important within the history of the United States, had once again entered into conflict. As Arendt saw it, the American Revolution had been political, with new institutions expanding the possibilities for white men to compete with each other for leadership. The pursuit of personal excellence that political liberation had broadened promoted rapid economic growth but generated fears that the country was in danger of losing its moral moorings. Liberal-minded Protestant divines promoted an ideal of social harmony to counter the negative effects resulting from increased individual mobility. As a result, Arendt noted, since Tocqueville's visit to America in 1831, European observers consistently returned home puzzled by the peculiar mixture of aggressive individualism and craven conformity in American society.

The conformism that the ideal of social harmony required endured at the cost of repressing individual ambition and channeling white male aspiration into a narrower range of competitive domains. Arendt thought that mechanisms for suppression grew increasingly costly the longer the ideal prevailed. Stalinist Russia had followed the idea of social harmony to its logical extreme, creating the ideal workers' state on the corpses of the millions who did not fit its design. The American ideal, Arendt noted, was less systematic; it still rested on the lynching, murder, and imprisonment of individuals in subordinate groups who refused to accept their inferiority. For the majority, she thought conformism meant personal isolation accompanied by unusually high rates of alcoholism and depression; periodic outbursts of mass hysteria about immigration, crime, Communist infiltration, or moral impurity; and persistently high rates of violent crime. Arendt worried that the crusade against "conformity" was likely to unleash destructive and disruptive forces. "Self-realization," to use a common phrase of the 1950s, was a matter of individual definition, not subject to collective management except through coercion. The ideal of social harmony, however repressive it could be, at least required a continuing national debate over what people were willing to sacrifice for the sake of an abstract common good. She predicted that the question of how to make personal desire morally responsible would be the greatest challenge facing the next generation.

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