

# AN ESSAY ON THE MOST FAMOUS POETRY READING EVER TO OCCUR IN CALIFORNIA AND ON THE MOST FAMOUS SINGLE POEM EVER WRITTEN THERE

## HOWL AND THE HOWLERS: GINSBERG'S POEM FIFTY PLUS YEARS LATER

If it's true that the road to originality lies in imitation, then it wasn't an utter waste of time for a Catholic high school boy from the suburbs to try to sound in his poems like a downtown homosexual Jewish beatnik intimate in the ways of pot and Benzedrine.

—Billy Collins, "My 'Howl'" (2006)

Don't hide the madness.

—Allen Ginsberg, "On Burroughs' Work" (1954)

"The Beat Generation" was one of the most publicized, misunderstood, attacked, understood, deeply considered, cannibalized, ripped-off art movements of the twentieth-century. Its influence extends from the adolescent troubled about sexuality and identity to the dry-as-dust scholar looking for history and significance in old books and papers. Whereas the "hippies" seem somewhat passé, sentimental, and—worst of all—old, the even-older Beats (some of whom were also hippies) have passed into history as American artists of considerable importance. Like Elvis, Jack Kerouac is now forever young, intense and handsome—a symbol of American success—and only occasionally remembered as the middle-aged, fat, lonely man he became. He has in fact become exactly what he wished to be: a great American writer. But he has become more than that: an icon. If America has secular saints, he is surely one. But, like many prophets perhaps, he has become a saint of a religion he would have despised: his image is used to sell things; he is the American bourgeoisie raised to cosmic proportions.

From its inception, the Beat Generation was a testimony to the power of the fuzzy definition. Intensely meaningful—and with certain aspects continually but not always manifesting—"Beat" has never been adequately defined. Had it been adequately defined, it might have been long dead as a movement. Though everyone would agree that *something* took place in the middle of the twentieth century, after the war, it would be difficult to find agreement about exactly what that something was. Was it a rebellion, as people often claimed? Kerouac announced, with some justice, that he was never a "rebel." In his late bitterness but with some irony still, he told Bruce Cook in *The Beat Generation*, "The Beat Generation?—That was just a bunch of guys trying to get laid." He also wrote,

The Beat Generation, that was a vision that we had, John Clellon Holmes and I, and Allen Ginsberg in an even wilder way, in the late Forties, of a generation of crazy, illuminated hipsters suddenly rising and roaming America, serious, curious, bumming and hitchhiking everywhere, ragged, beatific, beautiful in an ugly graceful new way.

“About the Beat Generation” (1957)

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On October 7 or October 13, 1955, a poetry reading was held at The Six Gallery, a cooperative art gallery in San Francisco. Different sources list different dates. Allen Ginsberg’s postcard announcing the event says October 7th—and that is almost certainly the correct date—but his biographer, Barry Miles, says October 13th. (I’ve been told that Ginsberg claimed that the reading had to be postponed for six days—so the postcard was inaccurate. No one else seems to mention the postponement.) The featured readers were Allen Ginsberg (the organizer), Michael McClure (whose first reading it was), Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Philip Lamantia. Jack Kerouac was visiting Ginsberg at the time and attended, though he did not read. Kenneth Rexroth was Master of Ceremonies.

Ann Charters writes in *The Beat Reader*, “The ‘Six Poets at the Six Gallery’ reading was the catalyst that dramatically revealed what Ginsberg later called the ‘natural affinity of modes of thought or literary style or planetary perspective’ between the East Coast writers and the West Coast poets.”

Both Jack Kerouac and Michael McClure wrote about the Six Gallery event, Kerouac in *The Dharma Bums* (1958)—in which he calls the Six Gallery the Gallery Six—and McClure in *Scratching the Beat Surface* (1982). The event soon became famous as the first public reading of “Howl” (though Ginsberg read only the first section of the poem that night). Ginsberg’s poem created a sensation. Kerouac collected money for wine and passed around gallon jugs of California Burgundy. When Ginsberg’s turn came, writes Barry Miles, “he read with a small, intense voice, but the alcohol and the emotional intensity of the poem quickly took over, and he was soon swaying to its powerful rhythm, chanting like a Jewish cantor, sustaining his long breath length, savoring the outrageous language. Kerouac began cheering him on, yelling ‘Go!’ at the end of each line, and soon the audience joined in. Allen was completely transported. At each line he took a deep breath, glanced at the manuscript, then delivered it, arms outstretched, eyes gleaming, swaying from one foot to the other with the rhythm of the words.”

All descriptions of the Six Gallery event emphasize the transformative character of Ginsberg’s reading. Michael McClure writes that “‘Howl’ . . . was Allen’s metamorphosis from quiet, brilliant, burning bohemian scholar trapped by his flames and repressions to epic vocal bard.” Kerouac’s communal wine-drinking gave the event a Bacchanalian, Dionysian quality. (Wine is of course associated with various religions, including Kerouac’s own, Catholicism; in a 1958 letter to John Hollander, Ginsberg himself refers to “Howl” as “rather like a jazz mass.”) Barry Miles too attests to both transformation and religious associations. These various elements coalesce into a single image: *what the audience at the Six Gallery was witnessing was the metamorphosis of*

*Allen Ginsberg, “hornrimmed intellectual hepcat with wild black hair” (in Kerouac’s phrase), into Allen Ginsberg, “epic vocal bard.”*

Ann Charters remarks that Ginsberg “found the audience so fervently sympathetic to his words that he discovered his unrecognized talents as a performance artist”; his “predecessor as an incandescent performer of poetry was the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, whose widely acclaimed reading tours of American cities in the early 1950s . . . and his best-selling recordings had revolutionized the way his audiences thought of poetry.”

True enough, but Kerouac’s and the audience’s shouts of “Go!” indicate that Ginsberg had taken on the persona not only of the rhapsodic poet but of the jazz musician. Though Ginsberg wasn’t reading his poem to jazz accompaniment (as Ruth Weiss, Kenneth Rexroth and others were soon to do at The Cellar), his unaccompanied reading was alive with a sense of music—even with a sense of bebop: “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.”

In his notes to the LP album, *Allen Ginsberg Reads Howl and Other Poems* (1959), Ginsberg describes his poem as full of “long saxophone-like chorus lines” and suggests that writing it was equivalent to the experience of a jazz musician improvising. Like the hipster, who, Norman Mailer wrote in “The White Negro” (1957), “absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro,” Ginsberg’s performance at the Six Gallery took on the aura of the hippest of public performers: in Mailer’s formulation, “for practical purposes [he] could be considered a white Negro.” Instead of being the observer of what Kerouac called in *On the Road* “the happy, true-hearted Negroes of America,” 1/ Ginsberg became the authentic conveyer of their power. Like Neal Cassady—the “secret hero of these poems”—the sensitive, gay, bespectacled, hustling, funny, lonely, fiercely intellectual, convivial, drug-taking ex-student of Lionel Trilling’s stood before his audience as something equivalent to Charlie Parker. For one of the very few times in the twentieth century, poetry seemed *cool*.

*And—most importantly—if Ginsberg could do it, so could we.*

Kerouac’s *Mexico City Blues* had already presented the jazz musician as analogous to the poet, but Kerouac was not yet widely known. (*On the Road* did not appear until 1957; *Mexico City Blues* was not published until 1959.) “Howl” was written at a time when influential critics such as Arthur Mizener were saying, “The age of Yeats is over; we are in the age of Auden”—by which Mizener meant that Romanticism had been replaced by irony and *sotto voce*. Ginsberg sent “Howl” to a critic even more distinguished than Mizener, his old Columbia mentor Lionel Trilling. Trilling was—as the poet knew he would be—horrified:

I’m afraid I have to tell you that I don’t like the poems at all. I hesitate before saying that they seem to me quite dull, for to say of a work which undertakes to be violent and shocking that it is dull is, I am aware, a well known and all too easy device. But perhaps you will believe that I am being sincere when I say they are dull. They are not like Whitman....

Poet John Hollander, writing in the *Partisan Review*, was even harsher:

It is only fair to Allen Ginsberg...to remark on the utter lack of decorum of any kind in his dreadful little volume.

In “The White Negro,” Norman Mailer asserted that after the Second World War and the revelation of what went on in concentration camps “one could hardly maintain the courage to be individual, to speak with one's own voice”: these years, he complained, are “the years of conformity and depression. A stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life, and we suffer from a collective failure of nerve...The only courage, with rare exceptions . . . has been the isolated courage of isolated people”:

If the fate of twentieth century man is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self.

In such a climate, Ginsberg could appear not only as an immensely talented poet but as a harbinger of cultural change. “Howl” too “lives with death as immediate danger” and insists on “the rebellious imperatives of the self.” The poet’s LP liner notes indicate that writing “Howl” was a kind of conversion experience, a personal transformation: “I suddenly turned aside in San Francisco . . . to follow my romantic inspiration—Hebraic-Melvillian bardic breath.” The extraordinary thing about the event at the Six Gallery was that the audience could *witness* Ginsberg’s transformation: they could actually *see* the poet become jazz musician. Ginsberg’s powerful reading, “arms outstretched, eyes gleaming,” was not only the presentation of a poem but a living emblem of the possibility of change. Through rhythm (the “beat”) it turned being “beaten down” (“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness”) into, in Kerouac’s French pun, “*béat*”—blessedness. The poet’s longing for the visionary transforms him, *through* the jazz musician, into active, epic, Whitmanic, visionary bard. This transformation experience is at the absolute center of “Howl” and is in fact its primary subject. The “Footnote to Howl,” completed after the Six Gallery reading, makes the transformation explicit:

Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!  
Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!  
The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! The nose  
is holy! The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy!  
Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity!  
Everyman's an angel!  
The bum's as holy as the seraphim!

“A human voice and body,” commented McClure, “had been hurled against the harsh wall of America.”

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And what of “Howl” these days—more than fifty years after the poem was written?

On October 7, 2005—the opening night of “Litquake,” San Francisco’s city-wide celebration of literature—“Howl Redux” was presented at the city’s elegant Herbst Theater. “Redux” means brought back, coming alive again, and “Howl Redux” took

place exactly fifty years after the Six Gallery event. The event was meant not only as a celebration but a mirroring of the Six Gallery event. Unfortunately, one was constantly reminded of the differences between the two events. The Six Gallery was an auto repair garage that had been converted into an art gallery. The building still stands. It was not a small space, but it boasted a kind of cavernous intimacy. You could see the people who were listening to you and the crowd was active—encouraging readers, making remarks. This was not the case with Herbst Theater, in which the audience—some of whom had paid two hundred dollars for the privilege of attending—was largely passive, as if it were attending a concert of Classical music. There were “refreshments” in the lobby, but certainly no one was passing around a jug of homemade “Dago Red,” as Jack Kerouac had done at the original reading. Michael McClure remarked, “There are a lot more people here tonight” than there were at the Six Gallery. There were indeed about a thousand people in Herbst Hall’s ample, packed space, though no one had to stand, as they had at the Six Gallery reading. Earlier in 1955, McClure writes in *Scratching the Beat Surface*, the Anarchist poet Robert Duncan had performed at the Six Gallery and “had stripped off his clothes at the end of [his play, *Foust Foutu (Faust Fucked)*].” One could have the sense of doing something *illicit*, even “subversive” at the Six Gallery. Not at Herbst Theater.

“Howl Redux” was subtitled “Allen Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’ and Other San Francisco Revolutionary Writings.” Scarcely a month goes by in San Francisco without a newspaper article announcing that “The Beat Goes On”: literature, and particularly Beat literature, has become part of the city’s tourist industry. San Francisco *wants* “Howl” to be “Redux,” and so it isn’t surprising that a genteel, officially-sponsored, city-wide event like Litquake should celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Ginsberg’s great, anarchic, thumb-nosing poem—a blast of language directed precisely *against* gentility, “overturning,” Ginsberg wrote to Richard Eberhart in March 1956, “any notion of propriety, moral ‘value,’ superficial ‘maturity,’ Trilling-esque sense of ‘civilization.’” The poem celebrates those

who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Ar-  
kansas and Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war,  
who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene  
odes on the windows of the skull,  
who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money in  
wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through the wall,  
who got busted in their pubic beards returning through Laredo with a belt  
of marijuana for New York,  
who ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise Alley, death, or  
purgatoried their torsos night after night  
with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock and  
endless balls....

The event at Herbst Theater was unfortunately more like the embalming of “Howl” than like its revivification. There was certainly no mention of “drugs”—even though drugs (heroin and peyote in addition to marijuana) were an important aspect of the early work of both Lamantia and McClure, who were celebrated along with Ginsberg. Beat historian Ann Charters attended the first complete reading of “Howl” in March, 1956 in Berkeley—the first attempt to “repeat” the Six Gallery reading—and remarked to me in an interview that, while she was impressed with the poetry of Ginsberg, Whalen,

Snyder, and McClure, she was “unnerved by the drunken wildness of their friends in the audience and Robert LaVigne’s drawings of Orlovsky [her date for the evening] making love with Ginsberg.” Robert LaVigne corrected Charters’ remark—Ginsberg’s partner in the drawings was not Peter Orlovsky but someone else—but wildness, nakedness, drunkenness, and eroticism were all aspects of what the Six Poets at the Six Gallery were doing. Like Ginsberg’s poem, the event was meant to shock. It was certainly not meant to assure a city’s bourgeoisie that Great Literature continued to be produced within city limits. The audience at Herbst Theater tittered when mention was made of U.S. Customs Officer Chester McPhee’s opinion that “Howl” was “obscene,” but none of the poem’s genuine and deliberate obscenities—imagination’s grenades hurled at propriety—were present in Herbst Hall. The people in Ginsberg’s poem

howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the roof  
waving genitals and manuscripts...  
let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and  
screamed with joy...  
blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of  
Atlantic and Caribbean love....

No one was doing anything like that at Herbst Theater. Though we were shown film of Ginsberg reading from the first section of “Howl”—which was all that was read at the Six Gallery—such passages were edited out of the footage. The “secret hero” of the evening was definitely not “N.C....cocksman and Adonis of Denver” who “sweetened the snatches of a million girls trembling in the sunset” and “went out whoring through Colorado in myriad stolen night-cars.” At Litquake, all of the rough edges—where subversion happens—were carefully smoothed over. The organizers of Litquake undoubtedly meant well, but Jack Kerouac’s Allen Ginsberg—“Allen Ginsberg in an even wilder way”—was definitely not present. “Howl” is a wonderfully subversive poem—and part of what it is subverting is “literature,” what Ginsberg called “civilization.” *Tout le reste est littérature* (Verlaine)—but not “Howl.” It maintains its power not through genteel public presentation but through the secret, quasi-illicit longings of generations of readers who believe that the poem speaks precisely, and uniquely, to them. For all its fame, “Howl” is not a public poem—though it became a public poem in every possible way. As Ginsberg himself understood, “Howl” is fundamentally a “guilty pleasure”:

I thought I wouldn’t write a *poem* but just write what I wanted to without fear, let my imagination go, open secrecy, and scribble magic lines from my real mind—sum up my life—something I wouldn’t be able to show anybody, writ for my own soul’s ear and a few other golden ears. So the first line of *Howl*, “I saw the best minds etc.,” the whole first section typed out madly in one afternoon, a huge sad comedy of wild phrasing, meaningless images for the beauty of abstract poetry of mind running along making awkward combinations like Charlie Chaplin’s walk, long saxophone-like chorus lines I knew Kerouac would hear *sound* of—taking off from his own inspired prose line really a new poetry...Have I really been attacked for this sort of joy?

(Notes to the LP, *Allen Ginsberg reads HOWL and Other Poems*)

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But even a guilty pleasure can be a testimony to human freedom. “Howl” is closer to the writings of the Marquis de Sade than it is to *The Waste Land*. It is not surprising that such a poem, like the writings of de Sade, should run afoul of the law, but it is certainly ironic that “Howl” had to be defended not as a great blast of anarchic (even pornographic) freedom—which is what it is—but as an outstanding piece of “literature,” a monument to the “civilization” that good liberals like Lionel Trilling were strenuously upholding. (The difference between Trilling and Kerouac is immediately apparent if you compare the titles of their novels: both titles invoke the metaphor of travel, but Trilling wrote “The Middle of the Journey,” with its quietly genteel reference to Dante; Kerouac wrote the more demotic—and memorable—“On the Road.”)

It’s not that “Howl” isn’t “literature”—of course it is—but it is not genteel literature; it is in some deep sense *illegal*, but it had to be defended as if it were *A Tale of Two Cities*. The people who attacked it were in a certain sense correct. Ginsberg (who did not attend the trial) is saying “Yes, I am being obscene—and I don’t care if you think so.” Of course the book should not have been banned, but the terms in which it had to be defended were necessarily to some degree a betrayal of the very energy which gave the poem life. David Gates is surely correct when, in “Welcoming ‘Howl’ Into the Canon” (in *The Poem That Changed America: ‘Howl’ Fifty Years Later*, ed. Jason Shinder), he writes, “Ginsberg meant the poem to be obscene”:

not merely offensive in its forbidden words describing forbidden acts but offensive to intellect, to common sense, to all our consensual realities, to all the boundaries we believe necessary to civilized life. This is not, at bottom, a poem holding up liberal, or libertarian, pieties against conservative pieties, although that’s how it had to be sold to the judge and the public, and it’s what Ginsberg himself sometimes seemed to argue when he put on his crusader-for-free-speech hat. It’s a *radically* offensive poem, or used to be—offensive even to received notions of what poetry is, and it needs offended readers whose fear and outrage bring it most fully to life.

Ginsberg always insisted on “Howl”’s structure and tirelessly pointed it out: “The Poem,” he told Richard Eberhart, “is really built like a brick shithouse.” But in fact the thrill of “Howl” does not reside in its structure but in its astonishing and exhilarating approach to sheer chaos, to madness—its “*radical* offensiveness.”

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City Lights’ new *Howl on Trial: The Battle for Free Expression*, edited by Bill Morgan and Nancy J. Peters, definitely wears the crusader-for-free-speech hat. But this too is an aspect of Ginsberg’s poem—if not exactly of what he originally wrote, at least of the poem’s tangled, intricate history.

The book begins with a brief introduction by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. The celebrated poet/publisher reminisces about his involvement with the publication of “Howl”—“the repressive, conformist, racist, homophobic world of the 1950’s cried out for it”—and denounces “this time of rampant materialism, militarism, nationalism, and

omnivorous corporate monoculture eating up the world.” It’s interesting to note that Ferlinghetti didn’t really “get” “Howl” until he heard Ginsberg read it: “Ginsberg handed me ‘Howl’ with some hesitation, as if wondering whether I would know what to do with it. I didn’t. But later that week when I heard him read it at the Six Gallery, I suddenly knew what had to be done.” (In a 1956 letter to Lucien Carr, Ginsberg himself notes that “Howl” is “very good read aloud cause it’s got swing.” And Gregory Corso’s review of the poem—included in *Howl on Trial*—asserts, “‘Howl’ is essentially a poem to be read aloud, but only by the Howler...any other Howler would screw it up....”)

Ferlinghetti’s remarks are followed by a useful chronology of “Howl” and then by Nancy J. Peters’ searing essay, “Milestones of Literary Censorship.” “And so it went,” she writes, “American law continuing to be shaped by a small group of evangelistic zealots that claimed to represent everyone in the country.” The essay gives us a fascinating chronology, “The Struggle for Free Expression,” which begins in 1821 with John Cleland’s *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* and ends with the chilling assertion, “Under present law, Allen Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’ could be subject to censorship once again if offered on City Lights’ web site.”

One of the dates mentioned in “The Struggle for Free Expression” is 1978:

*F.C.C. v. Pacifica Foundation.* The Court held that the F.C.C. could create time, place, and matter restrictions on literary and other material to be broadcast. For example, Ginsberg’s “Howl” was among the works restricted to the early morning hours when children would presumably be asleep.

This twenty-eight-year-old ruling continues to create problems for people attempting to broadcast literature on stations such as KPFA.

The longest sections of *Howl on Trial* are “The *Howl* Letters,” edited by Bill Morgan, and “Excerpts from the Trial Testimony.” The letters extend from August 16, 1955, when Ginsberg was living at 1010 Montgomery in San Francisco—where he wrote the opening section of “Howl”—to September 7, 1958, when he was living in New York and wrote a long letter in defense of his poem to his friend John Hollander, who had reviewed *Howl and Other Poems* unfavorably. The letters are for the most part written by Ginsberg but there are also letters from friends such as Gregory Corso and from Ginsberg’s publisher, Lawrence Ferlinghetti. The letters cover the period when “Howl” is read at the Six Gallery (October 7, 1955); when it finally makes its way into print (November 1, 1956); when 520 copies of the book are confiscated by San Francisco Collector of Customs Chester MacPhee (March 25, 1957); when City Lights employee Shigeyoshi Murao is arrested for selling a copy of the book (June 3, 1957); when it comes to trial (August 8, 1957); and when Judge Clayton W. Horn issues his enlightened decision finding Lawrence Ferlinghetti not guilty of publishing and selling obscene writings (October 3, 1957). *Howl on Trial* includes passages from Judge Horn’s decision. In part the decision reads,

The theme of “Howl” presents “unorthodox and controversial ideas.” Coarse and vulgar language is used in treatment and sex acts are mentioned, but unless the book is entirely lacking in “social importance,” it cannot be held obscene...The book or material must be judged as a whole by its effect on the *average adult* in the community.



If the material is objectionable only because of coarse and vulgar language which is not erotic or aphrodisiac in character it is not obscene...The People state that it is not necessary to use such words and that others would be more palatable to good taste. The answer is that life is not encased in one formula whereby everyone acts the same or conforms to a particular pattern. No two persons think alike; we were all made from the same mold but in different patterns. Would there be any freedom of press or speech if one must reduce his vocabulary to vapid innocuous euphemism?

Ginsberg's letters are enjoyable and interesting. Many of them are about money, which was a factor for both Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg. Ginsberg defends his work but occasionally has doubts about it too: "The poems are actually sloppy enough written," he admits, "without sloppiness made worse by typographical arrangement." He generously credits Jack Kerouac for "Howl"'s technique: "I realize how right you are, that was the first time I sat down to blow, it came out in your method, sounding like you, an imitation practically." There are amusing moments, tech talk about poetry ("The technical problem raised and partially solved is the break-through begun by Whitman but never carried forward, from both iambic stultification and literary automatism, and unrhythmical shortline verse, which does not yet offer any kind of *base* cyclical flow for the build up of a powerful rhythm"), and the long, impassioned defense of his work to John Hollander. In fact, one could wish for even more letters. Louis Ginsberg's 1956 letter to his son, for example, in which the father commends the son's "wild, rhapsodic, explosive outpouring" but deplors his foul language: "I still insist...there is no need for dirty, ugly, words, as they will entangle you unnecessarily in trouble. Try to cut them out..." Or Allen's 1955 letter to his previous mentor William Carlos Williams—a poet noted for his "shortline verse":

The key is in Jazz choruses to some extent; also to reliance on spontaneity & expressiveness which long line encourages; also to attention to interior unchecked logical mental stream. With a long line comes a return [to], (caused by) expressive human feeling, it's generally lacking in poetry now, which is inhuman. The release of emotion is one with rhythmical buildup of long line.

Or for a more generous selection from Ginsberg's important letter to Richard Eberhart. (The line about "Howl" being "built like a brick shithouse" is not included here.) These letters are available in the original draft facsimile edition of "Howl," but it would have been nice had they been included in *Howl on Trial* as well.

The excerpts from the trial testimony are fascinating and well edited, so that one has a sense of the progress of the trial. Judge Horn's statements are always balanced and interesting, and he emerges as a literate, intelligent man. "It is obvious," he states, "that you are never going to get unanimous consent on anything that is involved in this case. That's the reason it is such a difficult question. That's the reason why the freedom of the press should be so stringently protected, so that no one segment of the country can censor to the injury of the rest, what they can read, see and hear and so forth. That is why this case is such an important one, why I am giving it such a lot of time and consideration." Notable writers—some of them now more or less forgotten—come forth to praise Ginsberg's poem. Mark Schorer—who had written a book on Blake—speaks of "The

language of the street, which is absolutely essential to the esthetic purpose of the work”; Kenneth Rexroth describes “Howl” as “prophetic literature”: “the theme is the denunciation of evil and a pointing out of the consequences and a call to repent and a pointing out of the way out... ‘Woe! Woe! Woe! The City of Jerusalem! The Syrian is about to come down or has already, and you are to do such and such a thing and you must repent and do thus and so.’” He describes “Howl” as a poem of “extraordinarily high” merit and calls it “probably the most remarkable single poem, published by a young man since the second war.” At one point, reading a passage from the poem, the attorney for the prosecution finds himself unable to pronounce the word “solipsism.” He is instructed by the attorney for the defense while Judge Horn points out that the word is misspelled in City Lights’ text. Defense attorney Jake Ehrlich is able to make mincemeat out of the witnesses for the prosecution. One, Gail Potter, announces that she has rewritten both *Faust* and *Everyman* (“Now, that isn’t as funny as you might think”) and assures the Court that “you feel like you are going through the gutter when you have to read that stuff [‘Howl’]. I didn’t linger on it too long, I assure you.” Ehrlich declines to cross-examine her. In the case of another such witness, David Kirk, the lawyer seems better acquainted with literary history than the “expert”:

*Mr. Ehrlich:* Now, you have heard of Erasmus, haven’t you?

*Mr. Kirk:* I have.

Q. And Erasmus was quite a writer, wasn’t he?

A. I have little acquaintance with Erasmus. My study begins with 1660.

Q. 1660. You wouldn’t dare go back a day before 1660, would you?

*Mr. McIntosh* [attorney for the prosecution]: Object to that, your Honor.

Given such witnesses, there is little doubt that Ginsberg’s poem will emerge triumphant, though one of the glories of *Howl on Trial* is the presentation of Jake Ehrlich’s eloquent closing statement; surprisingly, the lawyer quotes from Christopher Marlowe’s “Ignoto”:

I am not fashioned for these amorous times,  
To court thy beauty with lascivious rhymes:  
I cannot dally, caper, dance and sing,  
Oiling my saint with supple sonneting:  
I cannot cross my arms, or sigh, “Ah me,”  
“Ah me forlorn!” Egregious foppery!  
I cannot buss thy fill, play with thy hair,  
Swearing by Jove, “Thou art most debonnaire!”  
Not I, by cock! But I shall tell thee roundly,  
Hark in thine ear, zounds I can fuck thee soundly.

Though *Howl on Trial* centers on a particular poem, it is less a book about poetry than it is about a poem’s encounter with history—history in the particular form of a society the poem not only places in question but actually insults: “Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the crossbone soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows! Moloch whose buildings are judgment! Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments!” If such a book can emerge triumphant within the American

judicial system, is Moloch as all embracing as he seems? The trial, as the editors of *Howl on Trial* know very well, gives reason for hope. 2/

*Howl on Trial* opens with the assertion that “Fifty years after the trial it seems impossible to believe that anyone could have ever doubted the literary merit of *Howl and Other Poems*.” That may be the way things appear to the talented people at 261 Columbus Avenue, but, despite “Howl”’s many, many adherents—its “howlers”—doubts about the “literary merit” of Ginsberg’s work continue to be voiced, most recently by New Formalist writers such as David Mason. I don’t agree with the naysayers but have to admit that there is something deliberately *annoying* about Ginsberg’s poem, something which all its success has never succeeded in covering over. The poem continues to sting. *Howl on Trial* ignores that fact in order to pursue other matters—matters of considerable importance, to be sure, even matters of considerable personal importance to Allen Ginsberg, for whom free speech and censorship were burning issues. Bill Morgan is surely right when, in the concluding chapter, he insists that “The Censorship Battle Continues.” But in making its case *Howl on Trial* is not quite fair to the amazing, violent, tender, excessive, *controversial* poem *City Lights* published on November 1, 1956. 3/

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“Howl” may be, as Jason Shinder has it, “the poem that changed America,” but the event at Herbst Hall is an indication of how America can change “Howl.” The poem is not only a thumbing of the nose at “propriety, moral ‘value,’ superficial ‘maturity,’” but the product of a tremendous longing for the visionary, for what Ginsberg calls in “Model Texts: Inspirations Precursor to HOWL” the “breakthru to unobstructed Spirit,” a condition which will redeem the “bad boy” aspect of his poem and give the writer access to another, more satisfying mode of “respectability.” Ginsberg cites—and quotes from—Christopher Smart’s “Jubilate Agno,” Shelley’s “Adonais” and “Ode to the West Wind,” Apollinaire’s “Zone,” Kurt Schwitters’ “Priimiititiii,” Mayakovsky’s “At the Top of My Voice,” Lorca’s *Poet in New York*, Hart Crane’s “Atlantis,” William Carlos Williams’ “To Elsie,” and of course Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. From this point of view, the outcast becomes the poet-saint, the sage. In effect, the poet is saying, “I am not only not to be discarded, treated as dirt—*beaten down, destroyed*—I am at this moment *better than anyone*, and I can prove it by my words and by the precursor poets who come alive in the texture of my verse. I have transformed myself into the High Priest of your culture. Listen to the holiness of my utterance.” (In his 1956 letter to Richard Eberhart, Ginsberg wrote, “I used to think I was mad to want to be a saint, but now what have I got to fear? People’s opinions? Loss of a teaching job? I am living outside this context.”)

“Howl” is indeed the “*radically* offensive” document David Gates claims it to be, but it is also the announcement of the creation of a poet—and the poet is, precisely, the redemption of the pariah. Ginsberg remarked in 1976 that “‘Howl’ is really about my mother,” the formidable Naomi who died in the insane asylum and whose spirit animates his great poem, “Kaddish” (“More Explanations Twenty Years After”). Naomi’s was definitely a mind “destroyed by madness,” and she lurks behind the more public figure of Carl Solomon. In an interview with Lawrence Grobel, published in *Endangered Species: Writers Talk About Their Craft, Their Visions, Their Lives*, Ginsberg remarks, “‘Howl’ was actually written with [my mother] in mind”:

“Carl Solomon! I’m With You in Rockland” really is my mother and “I’m with you in Pilgrim State Hospital,” in the sense of a release of feeling, an acknowledgement and release of maternal tenderness, which though thwarted still exists intact with me, or in anyone, probably. Tenderness toward mother, the only mother I have after all, whatever condition she was in. So “Howl” was actually an emotional reunion with my mother.

At the same time he remarks about his horror at actually seeing his mother:

I sent her “Howl” at Pilgrim State Hospital, where she was in her last months before her stroke. She hadn’t recognized me about a half year before when I visited. She thought I was a spy, actually. It was very disturbing—I wept. It seemed like the farthest limit of dehumanization and illness and madness, that she couldn’t remember me.

The poet’s letter to Eberhart insists that “I am saying that what seems ‘mad’ in America is our expression of natural ecstasy” but also admits to feelings “of sympathy and identification with the rejected, mystical, individual even ‘mad.’” His ambivalent feelings about madness—cf. the hipster’s exclamation, “crazy”—are at the very center of “Howl.” The poem is an act of identification with the mother, but it is also an expression of the poet’s horror at what his mother has become: trapped in the power of Moloch. “Howl” is simultaneously mad (really mad, like Naomi) and—a poem, an “expression of natural ecstasy.” The power of the piece is that it inhabits both worlds and will not exchange one for the other:

Breakthroughs! over the river! flips and crucifixions!  
gone down the flood! Highs! Epiphanies! Despairs!  
Ten years’ animal screams and suicides! Minds!  
New loves! Mad generations! down on the rocks  
of Time!

1. In “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” James Baldwin rightly characterized such passages as “absolute nonsense . . . and offensive nonsense at that.” Like Elvis Presley, Kerouac seemed to express something like a “black” sensibility, but, like Elvis, he wasn’t black. At the same time, like Elvis, Kerouac was *criticized* (at times viciously) for being “improper,” “wild,” “anti-intellectual”—i.e., (in the racist sense) “black.” “There were people,” Norman Mailer told Bruce Cook in *The Beat Generation*, “who made a career out of attacking the Beats.” The ability of the Beats to survive such criticism depended on their considerable talent surely but also on the fact that they were, after all, white males living in a world which tended to empower and mythologize white males. The whole point of Mailer’s essay is to *provide a way of empowering Mailer, and, by extension, other white people, particularly white males*. It has nothing to do with African Americans. “I had tried,” Baldwin added, “to convey something of what it felt like to be a Negro and no one had been able to listen: they wanted their romance.”

2. Something more about Moloch. I think there is a significant problem—even a weakness—in the poem which has not been dealt with. “Moloch” is definitely the villain of the piece: Ginsberg doesn’t like Moloch. But if, as the “Footnote to Howl” implies, everything is holy, isn’t Moloch holy too? Ginsberg could not bring himself to that realization—probably because the “everything” he had in mind, while in many ways inclusive, would not include such a creature. Everything is holy, *but not him: he’s bad*. But what if Moloch is holy too? What would that mean about the world?
  
3. There is a typo in *Howl on Trial*’s presentation of the text of “Howl”: line 9 of the opening section, “who got busted in their public beards” should be “who got busted in their pubic beards.” It’s a natural enough mistake: “Howl” is definitely a case of the “pubic” made “public.”