
Chapter Ten

A Lion in Our

Living Room:

Reading Allen Ginsberg

in the Eighties

THE COLLECTED POEMS (1985)

I

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.¹

In the New York of the late fifties, Frank O'Hara, hearing Allen Ginsberg declaim the now classic opening of "Howl," turned, so the story goes, to his neighbor and whispered, "I wonder who Allen has in mind?"

The question is not mere camp. What O'Hara meant, no doubt, is that, despite the universalizing gesture, the roll call of "best minds . . . destroyed by madness," the real hero of "Howl," the "angel-headed hipster"

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.

(CP, 126)

was a single, lonely, and bookish young man named Allen Ginsberg, writing, like the François Villon of "The Testament," in the thirtieth year of his life, when he felt himself to be beyond shame. "Howl," that is to say, is less Ginsberg's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" or his elegy for Carl Solomon (institutionalized, like Ginsberg's own mother, Naomi, in a mental hospital) than it is the most harrowing as well as the funniest of autobiographies.

To put it more accurately: "Howl" is one link in the larger autobiographical chain that constitutes Allen Ginsberg's poetry. In the "Author's Preface, Reader's Manual" that opens his canonical 800-page *Collected Poems* (an elegant edition by Harper and Row, whose back cover bears the photograph of a charmingly rabbinical Allen Ginsberg, holding a packet of the seven small black-and-white City Lights volumes in which the bulk of his poetry has appeared from 1956 to the present), Ginsberg announces, "Herein author has assembled all his poetry books published to date rearranged in straight chronological order to compose an autobiography" (CP, xix). Indeed, the *Collected Poems* has an index of proper names so that the reader can trace the evolving relationship of Ginsberg and, say, Neal Cassady or can look up what the poet said about his grandmother, Rebecca Ginsberg (four references).

The "straight chronological" arrangement gives a startling new shape to a life we have so far perceived only in bits and pieces. Thus the "youthful poetries" (1945–52) originally published in *The Gates of Wrath* (1972) and *Empty Mirror* (1961) are now combined, the "imperfect literary rhymes" of the former interspersed with the "raw-sketch practice poems" of the latter so that "disparate simultaneous early styles juxtaposed [will] aid recognition of a grounded mode of writing encouraged by Dr. Williams, 'No ideas but in things.'" Again, Ginsberg has arranged the volume so that the "Travel poems Calcutta-Saigon-Angkor Wat-Japan, 1963, mixed through three separate books, now cohere in sequence," and he takes pains to alert us to the continuity of the "Cross-country Auto Poesy chronicle [that] starts 1965 at Northwest border." The ten sections of the book, we are told, "roughly indicat[e] time, geography, and motif or 'season' of experience"; the book as a whole is meant to portray "poetic energy as cyclic, the continuum a panorama of valleys and plateaus with peaks of inspiration every few years" (CP, xx).

These brief hints are not just rationalizations, designed to "make it cohere." To read Ginsberg's *Collected Poems* in 1985 is

something of a shock—a *frisson* of pure pleasure. Was our poetry really this energetic, this powerful and immediate just a few short decades ago? Did the poet really dream of a "Green Automobile," in which he could take his lover "riding / over the Rockies . . . riding / all night long until dawn" (CP, 86)? At a time when so much of our poetry wears white gloves, when the main precept often seems to be "Proceed with caution!" Ginsberg's poetic trajectory is a marvel to behold. Vortex, as Ginsberg's mentor Ezra Pound put it, is ENERGY!

This energy has not always been appreciated. The more theoretical studies of postmodern poetry and poetics—Charles Altieri's *Enlarging the Temple*, Hugh Kenner's *A Homemade World*, Robert von Hallberg's *American Poetry and Culture, 1945–1980*, and, for that matter, my own *Poetics of Indeterminacy*—have tended to ignore, if not deprecate, Ginsberg's achievement, partly, perhaps, in reaction to the journalistic overkill devoted to the Beat Generation.² "In 'A Supermarket in California,'" says Denis Donoghue, "Ginsberg had done everything that is required of a poet except the one essential thing—to write his poem."³ And in an essay called "The Sorrows of American-Jewish Poetry," Harold Bloom declares:

The chanter of *Howl*, *Kaddish*, and many lesser litanies is as much beyond the reach of criticism as Norman Mailer; both have been raised to that bad eminence where every fresh failure is certain of acclaim as an event, something that has happened and so is news, like floods, fires, and other stimulating disasters. The genuine painfulness of reading through *Kaddish* is not an *imaginative* suffering for the reader, but is precisely akin to the agony we sustain when we are compelled to watch the hysteria of strangers.⁴

The charge of formlessness, of poetry as mere rant, will no doubt continue to haunt Ginsberg, but the publication of his *Collected Poems* should do much to dispel it. Indeed, to read one's way through the "valleys and plateaus" of these 800 pages is to be reminded how fatuous are the legends that have grown up around Allen Ginsberg, legends for which the poet's own *ex cathedra* pronouncements have been at least partially responsible.

The first such myth is that Ginsberg's poetry is a straight transcription of visionary speech. As he himself insists in the preface, " 'First thought, best thought.' Spontaneous insight—the sequence of thought-forms passing naturally through ordinary mind—was always motif and method of these compositions" (CP, xx). Ginsberg has been making this claim for years: in the *Paris Review* interview with Tom Clark (1965), he explains:

We all talk among ourselves and we have common understandings, and we say anything we want to say. . . . So

then—what happens if you make a distinction between what you tell your friends and what you tell your Muse? The problem is to break down that distinction: when you approach the Muse to talk as frankly as you would talk with yourself or with your friends. . . . That meant . . . a complete revision of what literature was supposed to be. . . . It's the ability to commit to writing, to *write*, the same way that you are!⁵

Such comments have often been taken at face value. In a study of the Beats called *Naked Angels* (1976), John Tytell commends Ginsberg's *Paris Review* commentary for its "great clarity" and remarks:

Prematurely conscious of the potentials for lying on a national scale, the Beats raised the standard of honesty no matter what the artistic consequences. . . . [They] passionately embraced the extreme of uncontained release and denounced superimposed and confining forms. . . . The desire to remove the literary superego was a sign of how the Beats would struggle with the conditioning influences of language; in many ways it represented a fulfillment of the romantic credo as formulated in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* in which Coleridge and Wordsworth promised to use the language of ordinary men.⁶

"Uncontained release"? The removal of "the literary superego"? Here is a little diary-poem of 1955 called "A Strange New Cottage in Berkeley," originally designed as a prelude to the famous "A Supermarket in California" and now restored to its proper place:

All afternoon cutting bramble blackberries off a tottering brown fence
 under a low branch with its rotten old apricots miscellaneous under the leaves,
 fixing the drip in the intricate gut machinery of a new toilet;
 found a good coffeepot in the vines by the porch, rolled a big tire out of the scarlet bushes, hid my marijuana;
 wet the flowers, playing the sunlit water each to each, returning for godly extra drops for the stringbeans and daisies;
 three times walked around the grass and sighed absently:
 my reward, when the garden fed me its plums from the form of a small tree in the corner,
 an angel thoughtful of my stomach, and my dry and lovelorn tongue.

(CP, 135)

Perhaps the first thing to notice here is that "the sequence of thought-forms passing naturally through ordinary mind" would not include the title, "A Strange New Cottage in Berkeley," a title that serves as the focal point for the catalog that follows. For it is, of

course, the poet who is "strange" and "new" to his surroundings and hence lonely in his solitude, even as he senses himself to be on the brink of something "new" that he longs for. Ginsberg in conversation with William Burroughs or Jack Kerouac or Gregory Corso might talk about the same activities—cutting brambles from the fence, fixing the toilet, watering the flowers—but hardly in the sequence found in the poem, a sequence that moves carefully from the ordinary to the strange and that culminates in the high style of "an angel thoughtful of my stomach, and my dry and lovelorn tongue."

The sequence of images moves from without to within, from the bramble blackberries on the fence to the "dry and lovelorn tongue" that craves the fruit of the garden. The first three lines present images that seem to be in accord with the great American work ethic, the natural desire to "fix up the place," to create order. But Ginsberg as boy scout imperceptibly gives way to Ginsberg the resourceful tramp, finding "a good coffeepot in the vines by the porch, roll[ing] a big tire out of the scarlet bushes," and then Ginsberg the bad Beat boy, hiding his marijuana in anticipation of the times to come. The pragmatic and the visionary here go hand in hand: to "wet the flowers, playing the sunlit water each to each," becomes a rite of initiation, a rite confirmed in the line "three times walked round the garden and sighed absently."

This self-portrayal makes us smile. The poet as lord of the manor surveying his domain is, of course, a scared young man, "absently" dreaming of lost and future love. But "absence" also paves the way for the influx of spirit, for the vision of the plum tree in the corner of the garden as "an angel thoughtful of my stomach, and my dry and lovelorn tongue."

Such wry conjunctions of the ordinary and the "strange," of grubby fact and vision, are typical of Ginsberg. There is a touch of the Jewish clown in the makeup of this poet-prophet. In the appendix to the *Collected Poems* we find a photograph of Naomi, Allen, and Louis Ginsberg taken at the New York World's Fair on 15 June 1940 (fig. 1). The bespectacled adolescent looks like nothing so much as a nice Jewish boy on an outing with his respectable parents, although even here Naomi's expression beneath her rakish black hat is decidedly odd, and Louis, holding a neat umbrella, has the smile of the insecure. The homely urban kid with glasses is, in any case, still very much a part of the bardic young poet who arrives in Berkeley looking for freedom and love. The ethos of rehabilitating the "good coffeepot" found in the vines and the automobile tire beneath the burning bush is still the ethos of the Paterson, New Jersey, streets, indeed, of the Lower East Side, where Louis and Naomi grew up. The poet's angel, it seems, is ready to be "thoughtful



Figure 1. Naomi, Allen, and Louis Ginsberg, New York World's Fair, 15 June 1940, on p. 764 of the *Collected Poems*. By permission of the author.

of [his] stomach," because he has not wasted his material substance. Waste not, as it were, want not.

"Waste not, want not" is, for that matter, the adage that comes to mind as one reads Ginsberg's early poems and journals. A second common Ginsberg myth dispelled by a reading of the *Collected Poems* is that the conventional verse forms of the poet's youth were, at best, a false start, a kind of straitjacket he had to shed in order to find his "real self" in the long, loose sweeping line of "Howl"—a line purportedly derived from Blake, Whitman, and the Bible. In his famous letter of 1949 to his mentor, William Carlos Williams (the letter reproduced by Williams in *Paterson V*), Ginsberg writes: "I do not know if you will like my poetry or not—that is how far your own inventive persistence excludes less independent or youthful attempts to perfect, renew, transfigure, and make contemporarily real an old style of lyric machinery, which I use to record the struggle with imagination of the clouds."⁷ Williams, who had little tolerance for fixed verse forms, replied with the terse comment, "In this mode perfection is basic." Ginsberg took the hint: the poems of *Empty Mirror* (1952) abandon verse forms completely: the new line is created by breaking the prose of his journals into lines of verse.⁸ This time Williams responded enthusiastically. In his introduction to *Empty Mirror*, he writes: "The lines are superbly all alike. Most people, most critics would call them prose—they have an infinite variety, perfectly regular; they are all alike and yet none is like the other. It is like the monotony of our lives that is made up of the front pages of newspapers and the first (aging) 3 lines of the *Inferno*" (*CP*, 809).

And from here, so the story usually goes, it was just a short step to the "breath unit" of "Howl," the long jazz-inspired line first heard in Ginsberg's reading at the Six Gallery in San Francisco in 1956, a line the poet himself has described as moving according to "natural inspiration of the moment . . . disparate thinks put down together, shorthand notations of visual imagery, juxtapositions of hydrogen juke-box. . . . Mind is shapely, Art is shapely."⁹

Hip as this sounds, the fact is that Ginsberg has always been the most careful of prosodists and that the metrical forms of the *Gates of Wrath* have never been entirely abandoned.¹⁰ Indeed, by the late seventies Ginsberg was once again writing ballad quatrains like the following:

Lack Love

Love wears down to bare truth
My heart hurt me much in youth
Now I hear my real heart beat
Strong and hollow thump of meat

I felt my heart wrong as an ache
Sore in dreams and raw awake
I'd kiss each new love on the chest
Trembling hug him breast to breast

Kiss his belly, kiss his eye
Kiss his ruddy boyish thigh
Kiss his feet kiss his pink cheek
Kiss behind him naked meek. . . .

(CP, 693)

This harks back thirty years to such poems as "A Western Ballad":

When I died, love, when I died
My heart was broken in your care;
I never suffered love so fair
as now I suffer and abide
when I died, love, when I died. . . .

(CP, 15)

Or to the even earlier "An Eastern Ballad," dated 1945–49:

I speak of love that comes to mind:
The moon is faithful, although blind;
She moves in thought she cannot speak.
Perfect care has made her bleak. . . .

(CP, 18)

It could (and has) been argued that Ginsberg's recent return to the "simple" ballad form of his repressed youth marks a loss of poetic power, a retreat into the pleasant and easy. But since the circular arrangement of the *Collected Poems* is Ginsberg's own, we can take it to signify that, for this poet, as for Pound before him, "poetry withers and 'dries out' when it leaves music . . . too far behind it."¹¹ Consider lines 3–4 of "An Eastern Ballad," one of the first poems Ginsberg wrote and preserved:

She móves in thóught || she cánnót spéak.
Pérfect cáre has máde her bléak.

The twenty-year-old poet who placed the caesura in the third line and who foreshortened the fourth, beginning, in Blakean fashion, with a trochee, was already a very accomplished poet. The consonance of "per"/"care"/"her," the alliteration of "has"/"her," the assonance of e's and a's—all culminating in the rhyme "speak"/"bleak"—this is a poetic debut that bears watching, no matter how hackneyed the image of the blind moon and the theme of lost love. Side by side with such songs, we find "prosaic" poems like "Pater-son" (1949), which begins:

What do I want in these rooms papered with visions of
money?

How much can I make by cutting my hair? If I put new heels
on my shoes,
bathe my body reeking of masturbation and sweat, layer upon
layer of excrement. . . .

(CP, 40)

This jaunty self-mocking opening immediately brings to mind Frank O'Hara, who was still an undergraduate at Harvard and quite unknown to Ginsberg in 1949. After listing all the Establishment institutions to be rejected ("employment bureaus," "statistical cubicles," "cloakrooms of the smiling gods of psychiatry," and so on), Ginsberg launches into a long catalog of what he would rather be doing:

rather jar my body down the road, crying by a diner in the
Western sun;
rather crawl on my naked belly over the tincans of Cincinnati;
rather drag a rotten railroad tie to a Golgotha in the Rockies;
rather, crowned with thorns in Galveston, nailed hand and foot
in Los Angeles, raised up to die in Denver,
pierced in the side in Chicago, perished and tombed in New
Orleans and resurrected in 1958 somewhere on Garret
Mountain,
come down roaring in a blaze of hot cars and garbage,
streetcorner Evangel in front of City Hall, surrounded by
statues of agonized lions,
with a mouthful of shit, and the hair rising on my scalp,
screaming and dancing in praise of Eternity annihilating the
sidewalk, annihilating reality,
screaming and dancing against the orchestra in the destructible
ballroom of the world,
blood streaming from my belly and shoulders
flooding the city with its hideous ecstasy, rolling over the
pavements and highways
by the bayoux and forests and derricks leaving my flesh and
my bones hanging on the trees.

(CP, 40–41)

Here, seven years before the performance of "Howl" in San Francisco, is the Ginsberg mode in embryo: the long anapestic line built on the anaphora of "rather" (as the "Howl" line builds on the anaphora of "who"), the cataloging of American place names, the reference to ugly reality ("the tincans of Cincinnati," "a rotten railroad tie," "hot cars and garbage"), the conjunction of the physical ("mouthful of shit") and the spiritual ("hair rising on my scalp, / screaming and dancing in praise of Eternity). Indeed, some of the phrasing of "Pater-son" (e.g., "to die in Denver") reappears almost verbatim in "Howl."

But toward the close, "Paterson" goes somewhat limp. Such phrases as "the destructible ballroom of the world" and "hideous ecstasy" are hackneyed, and the Whitmanian conclusion, "by the bayoux and forests and derricks leaving my flesh and my bones hanging on the trees," has not quite been earned by the preceding catalog: the speaker is too angry at the world to become a seer, too preoccupied with himself to enter the life of the bayoux and forests and derricks.

Indeed, the feat of "Howl" is that it pays homage to Whitman and Williams even as it transforms their characteristic rhythms and images. Consider the following sequence:

who júmped ôff the Bróoklyn Brídge || thís áctually háppened ||
and wáلكed áway únknówn and forgóten into the
ghóstly dáze of Chínatówn sóup álleywáys & firetrúcks, ||
nót éven óne frêe béer,
who sáng óut of their wíndows in despáir, || féll óut of the
súbway wíndow, || júmped in the fíthy Passáic, || leáped
on négroes, || críed áll óver the stréet, || dánced on
bróken wíneglásses bárefôot || smáshed phónogrâph
récord of nostálgic Eúropéan 1930s Gérman jázz ||
fínished the whískey and thréw úp gróaning into the
blóody toílet, || móans in their éárs and the blást of
colóssal stéamwhístles,
who bárréled dówn the híghwáys of the pást jóurneyíng to éách
óther's hótrôd- || Gólgôtha || jáil- || sólitude || wáтч || or
Bírminghâm jázz incárnátíon.

(CP, 129)

Compare this to Whitman's "Song of Myself":

Wáلكíng the páth wórn in the gráss and béat thróugh the léaves
of the brúsh,
Where the quáil ís whístlíng betwíxt the wóods and the whéat-
lôtt,
Where the bát flíes in the Séventh-mónth éve, || where the
gréat góldbúg dróps thróugh the dárk,
Where the bróok puts óut of the róots of the óld trée and flóws
to the méadow. . . .¹²

Whitman's rhythm is characterized by its flow, its forward thrust. Phrase succeeds parallel phrase with only the slightest of pauses between them, and the predominant anapests and amphibraches are linked by alliteration and assonance. In contrast, Ginsberg's line moves forward only to go into reverse. His mode is a curious amalgam of graphic realistic reference and surrealist image, a mix, so to speak, of Williams ("No ideas but in things," as Ginsberg repeatedly tells us) and the high style of the Great (English) Tradition, learned from Mark Van Doren and other professors at Columbia University and filtered through Hart Crane. "The ghostly daze of Chinatown," "the highways of the past," "moans in their ears"—

such phrases could and did appear in *The Gates of Wrath*, as could such poetic diction as "unknown and forgotten," "in despair," "journeying," and "solitude." But in "Howl," this elegant language quickly modulates into parenthetical statements like "this actually happened" or "not even one free beer." Here is the speech base we hear so much about, but notice that Ginsberg's clotted catalogs—"Chinatown soup alleyways & firetrucks" or "each other's hotrod-Golgotha jail-solitude watch" are closer to Apollinaire or Blaise Cendrars's proto-Dada style than to Whitman. The rhythmic contour of such phrases is one of intentional clash:

éách óther's hótrôd- || Gólgôtha || jáil- || sólitude || wáтч

where the opposition of voiced and voiceless stop (*d* + *g*) or liquid and spirant (*l* + *s*) forces the reader to pause and draw breath.

Throughout "Howl" we hear this oppositional rhythm, a bumping and grinding that vocalizes the poet's feverish intensity. But in the "Footnote to 'Howl,'" written some time after the completion of the poem, the clash of energies gives way to something much more predictable:

Holy the solitudes of skyscrapers and pavements! Holy the
cafeterias filled with the millions! Holy the
mysterious rivers of tears under the streets!

(CP, 134)

Evidently Ginsberg added the "Footnote" to counter the criticism (made, among others, by his father) that the poem propounded no positive values.¹³ But the "Holy! Holy! Holy!" conclusion (set over against the "Moloch" litany of the preceding section) has an air of willed assertion: everything is too easily and too inexplicably "holy" and beautiful. The long lines now consist of no more than a series of neatly parallel phrases ("Holy New York Holy San Francisco Holy Peoria"), phrases that have none of the bite of such earlier sequences as "Peyote solidities of halls, backyard green tree cemetery dawns, wine drunkenness over the rooftops, storefront borougns of teahead joyride neon blinking traffic light, sun and moon and tree vibrations"). I mention this because poems like the "Footnote to 'Howl'" have been imitated by countless Ginsberg disciples, whereas the linear structure of "Howl" itself is all but inimitable in its density.

The question of density brings me to a third myth, which has to do with the interpretation of the poet's voice. Simply put, this is the myth that, from "Howl" onward, Ginsberg writes a poetry of vatic inspiration coupled with a searing denunciation of modern capitalist society as the embodiment of the spiritual death brought on by a culture bent on "visions of money." Only the transformation of consciousness, whether induced by drugs or poetry or Buddhist

meditation, can bring the poet to a cosmic vision of the essence of things. Ginsberg, according to this myth, is a poet-prophet in the tradition of Plotinus, Blake, and Mahayana Tibetan Buddhism. The negative side of this myth (and we hear this often too) is that Ginsberg's claim to vision is dubious, that his drug-induced poems or Buddhist mantras make pretentious claims for what is in fact no more than free association, and that his political ideology is at best naive and at worst irresponsible, as when he insists that there is some kind of connection not only between Carry Nation's Wichita temperance movement and the "defoliat[ion] of the Mekong Delta" but that Carry Nation began the "vortex of hatred" that "murdered my mother / who died of the communist anticommunist psychosis / in the madhouse" ("Wichita Vortex Sutra," *CP*, 410).¹⁴

Interestingly, the controversy over the value of Ginsberg's prophetic mode generally tends to bypass the role of the comic, the absurd in his poetry. What the *Collected Poems* show us is that Ginsberg is, finally, a very *funny* poet. To read "Howl" as a serious indictment of American culture, a culture that denies the possibility of spiritual illumination, is to ignore the poet's self-deprecatory humor, his ability to laugh at himself and at his friends. When, in a 1976 reading of the poem at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, Ginsberg came to the line

who reappeared on the West Coast investigating the FBI in
beards and shorts with big pacifist eyes sexy in their
dark skin passing out incomprehensible leaflets

(*CP*, 127)

the audience laughed delightedly, no doubt at the non sequitur of referring to "the big pacifist eyes" as "sexy," as well as to the open question of what those "incomprehensible leaflets" did, in fact, contain.¹⁵ Or again, the line "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" is playful in its insinuation that the youthful slitting of the wrists was all bravado, a Chaplinesque gesture designed to protect the "best minds of my generation" from the middle-class boredom that turned out to be precisely their fate.

"Howl" is replete with images of young men who thought "the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet in Kansas," who were dragged off roofs "waving genitals and manuscripts," who furnished their rooms with "orange crates of theology," who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge only to walk away "unknown and forgotten" and be rewarded with "not even one free beer," who made "harlequin speech[es] of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy," and "who were given instead the concrete void of insulin Metrazol electricity hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy pingpong

& amnesia." It is in many ways an elegy for the poet's youth, to the time when opposition was all, when taking risks was daily fun, designed to *épater* one's parents and teachers. Part I of "Howl" presents Ginsberg in the role of urban Jewish Huck Finn, the street-wise kid who refuses to obey those boring, hypocritical grown-ups. The same voice speaks to us in "A Supermarket in California," where we find "Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!" (*CP*, 136). Or again, in "America," where the poet exclaims, "America after all it is you and I who are perfect not the next world," but then admits, "There must be some other way to settle this argument" (*CP*, 146).

The other side of such clowning is, as in a Chaplin film, a terrible sadness, the emptiness of having no one for whom to perform. Consider the opening of "Transcription of Organ Music," written in Berkeley in 1955:

The flower in the glass peanut bottle formerly in the kitchen crooked to take
a place in the light,
the closet door opened because I used it before, it kindly stayed open waiting
for me, its owner.

I began to feel my misery in pallet on floor, listening to music, my misery,
that's why I want to sing.

The room closed down on me, I expected the presence of the Creator, I saw
my gray painted walls and ceiling, they contained my room, they
contained me
as the sky contained my garden,
I opened my door

The Rambler vine climbed up the cottage post, the leaves in the night
still where the day had placed them, the animal heads of the flowers where
they had arisen
to think at the sun

(*CP*, 140)

Here the poet is himself the "flower in the glass peanut bottle" straining crookedly "to take a place in the light." Nothing happens. Like the young men of "Howl" who "cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear," the "I" finds himself in a room that "closed down on me," and opening the door leads to no influx of spirit. Everything remains exactly as it was: Rambler vine, leaves, flowers, and, inside the house, "My books . . . waiting in space where I placed them . . . my words piled up, my texts, my manuscripts, my loves."

In the lines that follow, the lonely poet attempts to cheer himself up by contemplating "the red blossoms in the night light" of a bush "peering in the window." In a moment of Lawrentian communion he tries to assume the position of the leaves "upturned top float to the sky to receive." But Ginsberg's is a sensibility that communes with people, not with flowers (unless, of course, a Jack

Kerouac is sitting close by, as in "Sunflower Sutra"), and so nothing changes. "The light socket is crudely attached to the ceiling, after the house was built, to receive a plug which sticks in it allright, and serves my phonograph now." Indeed, "There are unused electricity plugs all over my house if I ever need them." And worst, for a poet who needs friends and lovers, "The telephone—sad to relate—sits on the floor—I haven't the money to get it connected."

In *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, Paul Portuges argues that "Transcription of Organ Music" records a "transcendental, prophetic experience," that the poet "masterfully uses his physical surroundings to force himself into a visionary state" (p. 76). True, the poem ends with the lines:

I want people to bow as they see me and say he is
gifted with poetry, he has seen the presence of the Creator.
And the Creator gave me a shot of his presence to grat-
ify my wish, so as not to cheat me of my yearning for him.

(CP, 141)

But in the context of the unused electric plugs, unconnected telephone, and the masturbatory fantasy about the kitchen door as "hole [that] will admit me," the telling thing is that the poet wants "people to bow as they see me," he wants *others* to know that "he is gifted with poetry," that "he has seen the presence of the Creator." Like the Lawrence of *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, Ginsberg has a strong sense of theater. Even at his most introspective, he does not forget to play to the stands.

The Chaplinesque mode with its rapid shifts from sadness to laughter and back again is brought to perfection in such poems of the late fifties as "In the Baggage Room at Greyhound," which culminates in the lines:

A swarm of baggage sitting by the counter as the
transcontinental bus pulls in.
The clock registering 12:15 A.M., May 9, 1956, the second
hand moving forward, red.
Getting ready to load my last bus. — Farewell, Walnut Creek
Richmond Vallejo Portland Pacific Highway
Fleet-footed Quicksilver, god of transience.
One last package sits lone at midnight sticking up out of
the Coast rack high as the dusty fluorescent light.
The wage they pay is too low to live on. Tragedy reduced to
numbers.
This for the poor shepherds. I am a communist.
Farewell ye Greyhound where I suffered so much,
hurt my knee and scraped my hand and built my pectoral
muscles big as vagina.

(CP, 154)

Here is the Ginsberg signature: the careful location of the self in place and time, the roll call of place names as if the very naming process could conjure up godhead, the sudden political gesture ("The wage they pay is too low to live on. . . . I am a communist")—all finally giving way to the burlesque of the tough-guy boast about "pectoral muscles big as vagina."

II

Ginsberg's autobiography takes him from these exquisite anatomies of loneliness to the more public (and sometimes strident) pronouncements of *Planet News* (1968) and *The Fall of America* (1973). Between these two modes there is "Kaddish" (1961), at once Ginsberg's most highly praised and his least typical poem. So close is the poet of "Kaddish" to the story he tells about his mother Naomi's mental breakdowns and remissions, her "mad" episodes, her relationship with her weak husband and her adolescent son, that we respond to his terrible disclosures with a certain astonished embarrassment, embarrassment that any man would be willing to describe his own mother as follows:

One night, sudden attack—her noise in the bathroom—
like croaking up her soul—convulsions and red vomit coming
out of her mouth—diarrhea water exploding from her
behind—on all fours in front of the toilet—urine running
between her legs—left retching on the tile floor smeared with
her black feces—unfainted—

At forty, varicosed, nude, fat, doomed, hiding outside
the apartment door near the elevator calling Police, yelling for
her girlfriend Rose to help. . . .

(CP, 218)

How the twelve-year-old Allen Ginsberg coped with this situation, how years later Naomi no longer recognized him when he visited her on the mental ward, and how, "2 days after her death," he found a letter from her saying, "The key is in the window, the key is in the sunlight at the window—I have the key—Get married Allen don't take drugs—the key is in the bars, in the sunlight in the window"—these tales are moving, even harrowing, but no one would wish this portion of Ginsberg's autobiography any longer. On the contrary, it seems that the Ginsberg of "Kaddish" is writing somewhat against the grain. He had, no doubt, to get the Freudian drama off his chest, but in his best and most characteristic poems, the "family" is that of male comrades, the band of brothers whose lives intersect with his. With the exception of Naomi and Aunt Rose,

women play no role in Ginsberg's poetry. Indeed, Woman is the absence that haunts the poet's worst moments. In "This Form of Life Need Sex" (1961), we read:

I will have to accept women
if I want to continue the race,
kiss breasts, accept
strange hairy lips behind
buttocks,
Look in questioning womanly eyes
answer soft cheeks. . . .

And because he cannot in fact accept women in any sense:

Between me and oblivion an unknown
woman stands;
Not the Muse but living meat-phantom,
a mystery scary as my fanged god. . . .
(CP, 284)

This is Ginsberg at his least attractive: his equation of Woman and Death, his references to "the one hole that repelled me 1937 on," call into question, it seems to me, his protest poems about the oppressive "Fathers in office in these industries" ("War Profit Litany," CP, 486), his references to the "Corporate voices [that] jabber on electric networks building / body-pain, chemical ataxia, physical slavery" ("Pentagon Exorcism," CP, 483). For Ginsberg does not reject the patriarchal world; he merely wants to replace one set of fathers with a more congenial one, for example, the "peasant manhoods [of Vietnam, who] burn in black & white forest" on the TV screen. One of the low points in the volume is a poem of 1970 called "Ecologue," which begins:

In a thousand years, if there's History
America'll be remembered as a nasty little Country
full of Pricks, thorny hothouse rose
Cultivated by the Yellow Gardeners.
"Chairman Mao" for all his politics, head of a Billion
folk, important old & huge
Nixon a dude, specialized on his industrial
Island, a clean paranoiac Mechanic. . . .
(CP, 542)

Our "nasty little Country" is metaphorized as the female rose; it is the rose that is, in an all-too-obvious pun, "full of Pricks." In this context, the homage to Chairman Mao as "head of a Billion / folk, important old & huge" has a macho ring: it brings to mind Ezra Pound's adulation of "old Muss" (Mussolini). Today, in the reign of

Mao's enemy Comrade Deng, Ginsberg's simpleminded opposition of the good Mao to the bad Nixon is hardly compelling.

What is compelling in the later (and, on the whole, lesser) poems is Ginsberg's extraordinary sense of the moment, of being, so to speak, at the center of the vortex. Read as an autobiography, the *Collected Poems* is a kind of ironic Horatio Alger story. The hero of this narrative learns how to take every liability of his childhood and turn it into an asset. The homely little kid with glasses becomes a bearded, exotically attractive guru figure; and then, just when everyone expects him to appear in Indian dress and beads, he dons suit and tie, cuts his hair, and looks for all the world like everyone's cuddly Jewish uncle. The dreary lower-middle-class setting of Paterson, New Jersey, gives way to the cross-country and cross-continent journeys that take the poet to Big Sur and Benares, to Calcutta and Kathmandu. Yet these travels have never produced, as they have for so many writers and artists, a scorn for one's native place: Ginsberg is just as celebratory of Wichita, Kansas, as of Machu Picchu, just as attentive to the sights and sounds on the New York subway as on the Patna-Benares express. Again, his homosexuality, surely a source of guilt and shame for a Jewish boy growing up in America in the forties, becomes, by the time of "Howl" and *Planet News*, the source of a newfound strength: it allows Ginsberg to play a double role. On the one hand, his sexual otherness calls into question the complacent "masculinity" of the straight men who are in power. On the other, it is a source of vulnerability, bringing the "famous poet" down to the reader's level. For, despite all his celebrity, here is a man whose lovers continue to leave him, who can never get enough sex, who, in his mid-fifties, can still complain:

Rarer and rarer
Boys give me favor
Older and older
Love grows bolder.
(CP, 722)

Or:

It's not the most romantic
dream to be so frantic
for young men's bodies,
a fine sugar daddy
blest respected known
but left to bed alone.
(CP, 723)

If love is often a failure, there is consolation in friendship. Like the Yeats of "The Municipal Gallery Revisited," Ginsberg might well declare, "Say that the glory was I had such friends." The poor and

lonely Columbia undergraduate, masturbating in his Harlem room, grows up to count among his friends Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, Gary Snyder and Robert Creeley, Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery. Having made a convert of Williams at the outset of his career, twenty years later Ginsberg takes on Pound. Calling on the Great Poet in Venice at a time when Pound no longer speaks, Ginsberg cajoles the old man into commenting on the *Cantos* ("It's all tags and patches") and introduces his attentive listener to songs by Dylan and the Beatles.

A great deal of fuss has been made about the role of drugs in Ginsberg's work: he himself has conscientiously noted which poem was written on which drug—part 2 of "Howl" on peyote, "Kaddish" on Methedrine, "Wales Visitation" on LSD, and so on. But here again, Ginsberg's history, as presented in the *Collected Poems*, is a kind of Fortunate Fall. As a child, we learn in "Kaddish," his response to the food prepared by his mother was one of disgust:

Serving me meanwhile, a plate of cold fish—chopped raw cabbage dript with tapwater—smelly tomatoes—week-old health food—grated beets & carrots with leaky juice, warm—more and more disconsolate food—I can't eat it for nausea sometimes—the Charity of her hands stinking with Manhattan, madness, desire to please me, cold undercooked fish—pale red near the bones. Her smells—and often naked in the room, so that I stare ahead, or turn a book ignoring her.

(CP, 219)

To escape from this world is, at first, to go West, to the "Supermarket in California" with its "peaches and . . . penumbras," its avocados and giant melons, so unlike the "grated beets & carrots with leaky juice" of his childhood. In poems like "Sunflower Sutra" and "Sather Gate Illumination," the poet's new "mad locomotive riverbank sunset Frisco hilly tincan evening sitdown vision" (CP, 139) is, at least in part, induced by the ingestion of exotic food and drugs. "Float[ing] on the sweetened scene of trees & humans" at Berkeley, he exclaims:

My stomach is light, I relax, new sentences spring forth out of the scene to describe spontaneous forms of Time—trees, sleeping dogs, airplanes wandering thru the air, negroes with the lunch books of anxiety, apples and sandwiches, lunchtime, icecream, Timeless.—

(CP, 143)

Apples, sandwiches, ice cream under the trees—it is a far cry from the "cold undercooked fish" his mother fed him. "Kaddish" is followed, not coincidentally, I think, by the three drug poems, "Mes-caline," "Lysergic Acid," and "I Beg You Come Back & Be Cheerful,"

as if to say that, with the death of his mother, he is now free to do as he pleases.

But not quite. Unlike Kerouac or Neal Cassady, unlike the countless Beat poets who OD'd or drank themselves to death, Ginsberg emerges in the *Collected Poems* as the ultimate survivor. There is something of the professor (and also of the once good boy who ate his chicken soup) in his disciplined experimentation with drugs, the careful accounts made in his journals of his precise physical reactions. By the early seventies the fascination with drugs had largely given way to the absorption in the discipline of Buddhist meditation.

And here again, Ginsberg has responded to the challenge with a certain pragmatism. If Buddhism has been useful to him, he has not exactly retired to a monastery. In conversation with Paul Portuges, he is candid about his inability to follow fully the Tibetan doctrine of nonattachment to the ego. As he puts it, "[Buddhist practice] is just a question of learning a sharper, more experienced way of recognizing and appreciating what's already in your head. It doesn't require a big breakthrough or anything like that."¹⁶

So in the seventies we find the poet returning more frequently to the scene of the crime, to the old neighborhood on New York's Lower East Side where Naomi once walked. In a charming poem called "Mugging" (1974), which begins:

Tonite I walked out of my red apartment door on East tenth
street's dusk —

we see Ginsberg strolling down his familiar street, calmly observing the local sights and sounds, when something happens:

Walked past a taxicab controlling the bottle strewn curb —
past young fellows with their umbrella handles & canes
leaning against a ravaged Buick
—and as I looked at the crowd of kids on the stoop — a boy
stepped up, put his arm around my neck
tenderly I thought for a moment, squeezed harder, his
umbrella handle against my skull,
and his friends took my arm, a young brown companion tripped
his foot 'gainst my ankle —
as I went down shouting Om Ah Hum to gangs of lovers on the
stoop watching
slowly appreciating, why this is a raid, these strangers
mean strange business
with what — my pockets, bald head, broken-healed-bone leg, my
softshoes, my heart —
Have they knives? Om Ah Hum — Have they sharp metal wood to
shove in eye ear ass? Om Ah Hum. . . .

(CP, 625)

The spectacle of Ginsberg, once himself the hoodlum suspended from Columbia for writing "Butler has no balls" on his dorm window, now middle-aged and bald, wearing "a neat orlon shirt" and carrying a "woolen bag of poetry address calendar & Leary-lawyer notes," the spectacle of this man suddenly being knocked down by a gang of slum kids and trying to calm himself by chanting a mantra, is both funny and touching. For the irony is that the once wild poet has become a member of the Establishment and he knows it. His "snakeskin wallet" ("actually plastic," he explains apologetically) contains "70 dollars" as well as "dreary plastic contents—Amex card & Manf. Hanover Trust Credit too—business card from Mr. Spears British Home Minister Drug Squad—my draft card—membership ACLU & Naropa Institute Instructor's identification."

The metamorphosis the poet has undergone is rather like the metamorphosis of the little black-and-white City Lights pocket books into the big fat *Collected Poems* selling for \$27.50. But so good-humored is Ginsberg about his new role as "sixty-year old smiling public man" that we can only smile too. As he rises from "the cardboard mattress" where the boys have thrown him, having carried off his wallet and Seiko Hong Kong wristwatch, he remarks ruefully: "Om ah Hum didn't stop em enough, / the tone of voice too loud." And there is the further irony that they took his "valuables," but "my shoulder bag with 10,000 dollars full of poetry left on the broken floor."

So much for being a poet. He gets up, picks up his glasses from the step where he had the good sense to deposit them even as he was dragged into the store, and surveys the now wholly defamiliarized scene:

Whole street a bombed-out face, building rows' eyes & teeth
missing
burned apartments half the long block, gutted cellars,
hallways' charred beams. . . .

The chanting of "Om Ah Hum" now gives way to a more Western jeremiad: "O hopeless city of idiots empty eyed staring afraid." In the poet's imagination, the "honking neighborhood" is transformed into a surreal and frozen landscape: the poem's final image is of an "old lady with frayed paper bags / sitting in the tin-boarded door-frame of a dead house."

"Mugging" may be read as an elegy for the lost New York of the fifties, a New York in which people still spoke to their neighbors and chatted on their tenement steps. But it avoids sentimentality by turning the poet's situation into comedy. The image of Ginsberg, down on the ground and deprived of his glasses, trying to chant Buddhist mantras so as to pacify his teen-age assailants, carries on the tradition of "Howl."

III

In recent years, as I noted earlier, Ginsberg has returned to the short ballad stanzas of his youth. Having written so expansively for decades, he now shows a penchant for the minimal, as in a poem called "For Creeley's Ear," which begins with the stanza:

The whole
weight of
everything
too much.

(CP, 663)

Such minimal lyrics may be profitably read against a recent text by John Cage called "Writing through Howl" and subtitled "for A. G. on his Sixtieth Birthday." Commissioned for a birthday festschrift,¹⁷ "Writing through Howl," which is dated, Ginsberg style, "through Asia and home to New York, January–April 1984," functions as a fascinating commentary on its parent text, even as it creates a new poetic construct of a very different sort.

"Writing through Howl" is what Cage calls a *mesostic*, which is to say that the acrostic "ALLEN GINSBERG" runs down the middle of the page rather than at the left margin. "Howl" is subjected to I Ching chance operations, and the mesostic follows the rule that "a given letter capitalized does not occur between it and the preceding or following capitalized letter."¹⁸ Thus the word "saw" ("I saw") gives us the first letter of "Allen," and the second letter, *l*, is taken from "themselves," the "l" of "hysterical" not counting because the word also contains an *a*. When the "writing through" is completed, the process begins again, this time using what Cage calls the "rubble," that is, the words that were not used the first time around. So the first word containing an *a* is "madness," and the first *l* that qualifies comes in "cold-water flats." By the ninth and last time of "writing through," we have the tiny mesostic "Allen"—

Angry
soLidities
battaLion
thE
aNd—

which nicely characterizes Ginsberg's stance: the "lion" ready to spring from the larger "battaLion," and "the end" that becomes, for Ginsberg, "the aNd," in keeping with his faith in the rhetoric of accumulation. But—and here is where Cage is so interesting—Ginsberg himself would never use such a phrase any more than he would use so abstract a designation as "Angry soLidities." "Starry dynamo," "unshaven rooms," "incomparable blind streets"—with Ginsberg, we still know where we are.

“Writing through Howl” begins like this:

sAw
themseLves
Looking for
hipstErs
starry dyNamo
hiGh sat
theIr
heaveN
Saw
puBlishing
odEs on
Rooms
listeninG to the terror
beArds returning through
Laredo
beLt
for nEw york
iN
druGs
wIth
alcohol aNd
ballS
Blind
in thE mind
towaRd
illuminatinG
dAwns
bLinking
Light
thE
wiNter
liGht
endless rIde

Here Ginsberg’s dense, clotted, overwrought line gives way to stark reduction, a reduction that leaves a great deal to the reader’s imagination. We don’t know, for example, who it is that is “Looking for / hipstErs,” for we are given only flashes of a “starry dyNamo,” of a Miltonic “hiGh sat / theIr / heaveN,” of “beArds returning through / Laredo.” Ginsberg’s snowballing and sonorous chant here becomes the trill of “Blind / in thE mind / towaRd / illuminatinG / dAwns / bLinking / Light,” a trill followed by the echo “thE / wiNter / liGht,” and then a kind of breath pause and the addition “endless rIde.”

Further on, we get such stanzas as

visionAry
onLy
supernaturaL
Ecstasy
iN
streetliGht

Or:

Gaunt
waitresses
loNely petticoat
eSpecially
Blood
on thE snowbank docks
foR
floodliGht

By the time we get to the third writing through, we get little fragments like:

stArving
fLoating
contempLating jazz

Or:

theIr
bloNde
loSt
loveBoys
thE
thRee

Cage’s stanzas leave a good deal open (e.g., who are “the three”?) but they are by no means to be taken as non-sensical. When, for example, the “loNely petticoat” or the “Gaunt / waitresses” is metonymically related to “Blood / on thE snowbank docks,” a new narrative possibility is suggested. Think of the promising plots that might contain these elements! Or again, when we read “incomprehensibLe / capitaLism / distributEd / iN / deliGht,” we are struck by the realization that the stanza provides a playful commentary on Ginsberg’s own wholesale diatribes against the System.

Emblematically, “Howl” and “Writing through Howl” provide us with two interesting poetic alternatives. Ginsberg’s is a mode of continuity: however surrealist, jarring, hilarious, horrendous his conjunction of images may be, he regards the poem as a living *whole* with, somewhat surprisingly, a beginning, middle, and end. “Howl” moves from the “I saw . . .” sequence to the diatribe against Moloch (part 2) to the resolution of “Carl Solomon! I’m with you in Rockland” (part 3), with the footnote “Holy! Holy! Holy!” as an even

more elaborate (and I think unnecessary) coda. Similarly, "Sunflower Sutra" moves from the despair of "I walked" to the final "evening sitdown vision," and "America" ends on the triumphant assertion "America, I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel."

Ginsberg, we may conclude, is never the poet of collage, of fragment, of layering and splicing. As such, his poetry now looks, for all its references to "cock" and "balls," reassuringly traditional. This may well be what Cage is implying in his gently ironic mesostics, featuring as they do the primacy of the word over its referent. But Cage's poetic text is also an act of homage, in that it isolates key words and phrases like "in the goldhorn shadow" so as to make us more aware of their peculiar density. "Writing through Howl" is thus a fitting tribute to the author of the *Collected Poems*, which is itself an homage to America at mid-century.

"HOWL" AND ITS ENEMIES: THE GENTEEL REACTION (1987)

In the December 1984 issue of the *Boston Review*, Allen Ginsberg's *Collected Poems* received the following mini-review from Richard Howard: "The MacPherson *de nos jours*, this gathered assortment, fragments shored, limbs remembered, adds up to an astonishing confession: it may not be poetry at all, it is always testimony, a kind of processional martyrology—in that martyrs are witnesses to the truth."¹⁹ Period. Which is to say, with a dismissive wave of the hand, that Ginsberg's oeuvre, like James MacPherson's invention of the Celtic bard Ossian, whose pseudoprimitive epics delighted his eighteenth-century audience, is no more than inspired fakery. "It may not be poetry at all."

To those of us who have followed Ginsberg's career from its inception, Howard's bemused dismissal has an air of déjà vu. It recalls the now notorious and much reprinted 1957 review of *Howl and Other Poems* by Ginsberg's fellow Columbia student and poet-friend John Hollander. To wit:

It is only fair to Allen Ginsberg . . . to remark on the utter lack of decorum of any kind in this 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. . . . *Howl* seems to have emerged under the influence of a kind of literary *Festspiel* held at frequent intervals on the West Coast, in the course of which various poets, "with radiant cool eyes," undoubtedly, read their works before audiences of writhing and adoring youths.²⁰

Again, the argument is that *Howl* is fake, hype, media event—anything, in short, but Poetry with a capital P.

In the thirty-year span between Hollander's reference to that "dreadful little volume" called *Howl* and Howard's dismissal of the whole *Collected Poems* as "the MacPherson *de nos jours*," "Howl" has become one of the best known poems in the world. In the sixties and seventies, for that matter, Ginsberg's poetry gained wide acceptance in the Academy, critics, scholars, and fellow poets taking pains to demonstrate that the so-called confessional rant was by no means formless, that indeed Beat poetry, Ginsberg-style, was remarkable for its polyglot learning, for the complexity of its derivations and intertexts.

In recent years, however, a curious reaction has set in. We can attribute a certain measure of the current hostility to Ginsberg on the part of newspaper and journal reviewers to what is called the New Conservatism or the Age of Reagan, but this is only part of the story, since most of the reviewers who have dismissed the *Collected Poems* came of age in the wake of the Vietnam War and espouse the left-wing politics now *de rigueur* in English departments across the country.²¹ No, what I should like to call here the Neo-New, where New refers to the New Criticism, has a more complex derivation.

Reviewing the *Collected Poems* for the *New Criterion*, Bruce Bawer, himself a poet and the author of a book on the Robert Lowell circle called *The Middle Generation* (Archon, 1986), writes:

To read such poems as these back-to-back . . . is to be stunned by the oversimplification, the repetition, the self-indulgence, the egocentrism, the utter inability to develop a theme. Doesn't [Ginsberg] ever, one wonders, get sick of reiterating these banalities? Doesn't he ever yearn to get beyond the surface cliché, to develop a more sophisticated view of the world, and to express it in more memorable and meticulously chosen words?²²

The "utter inability to develop a theme" or to "express it in . . . meticulously chosen words," the inability, as Bawer later puts it, to produce "a finely turned phrase"—inherent in such strictures is a curiously prestructuralist faith in language as vehicle, as a conduit that leads directly from the speaking subject to a meaning above and outside the signifier. One should have, so it seems, a "view of the world" that is sufficiently "sophisticated"; one then explores, as Bawer says, "the complexities that make the actual world interesting and frustrating and *real*," assuming, of course, that one knows what reality is.

A similar charge is made by Roger Rosenblatt in the *New Republic*: "If one makes comparisons with Eliot, Pound, Lowell,

Stevens, or even with Ransom or Robert Penn Warren, the collected Ginsberg does not stand a chance. . . . the bulk of [Ginsberg's] work shows no philosophical growth . . . and rarely any depth. [As for "Howl"], it is a poem worth rereading, especially if one deluded oneself into liking it when it made its loud debut."²³ No philosophical growth, rarely any depth—here again is the dismay at the poet's "utter inability to develop a theme." Rosenblatt's complaint is echoed by Lachlan Mackinnon's suggestion, in his *Times Literary Supplement* review, that Ginsberg can write only out of his personal life because he lacks "a true culture."²⁴ But perhaps the "Neo-New" case against Ginsberg is presented most forcefully by the poet Mark Jarman in an omnibus review for the *Hudson Review*. This piece covers thirteen American poets born between 1900 and 1960, ranging from Elder Olson and Shirley Kaufman to Jarman's contemporaries, Gary Soto, Eric Pankey, and Sharona Ben-Tov. In this eclectic context, Ginsberg's *Collected Poems* gets short shrift (less than a page), Jarman observing that "Ginsberg was not a promising young poet nor has he become a mature older poet. But for about ten years, from 1955 to 1965, his writing anticipated American life, especially the youth subculture built around music and drugs and the now waning fascination with Eastern religions."²⁵

The poetry, that is to say, is judged thematically, and since the "themes" are, so Jarman argues, now passé, so is much of Ginsberg's poetry:

We know that sexuality is as various as American life is supposed to be. We know our government's abuse of its immense military power is madness. Drugs have been sources of insight rather than simply recreational. A spiritual alternative to western religion exists in the orient. The list sounds dismissive only because to mention these themes of Ginsberg is to realize, unfortunately, how ironic they have become, how much a source of parody. (p. 331)

A source of parody is precisely what these so-called themes have become: witness Christopher Buckley and Paul Slansky's "Yowl: For Jay McInerney," which is printed in the 8 December 1986 issue of the *New Republic* as a commemorative offering "On the 30th anniversary of 'Howl.'" I shall come back to this parody in a moment, but first it might be helpful to look at a few poems by those who do, according to Jarman and his colleagues, have the "ability" to "develop a theme" or invent what Bruce Bawer calls "a finely turned phrase," those poets who are evidently not guilty of self-indulgence or oversimplification, concentrating as they do on the "complexities" that, in Bawer's words, "make the actual world interesting and frustrating and *real*."

One such poet is Eric Pankey, last year's winner of the Walt Whitman Award for a book called *For the New Year* (Atheneum). A Pankey poem called "Tending the Garden" is praised by Jarman for its complex dramatic strategies: "Pankey imagines Horatio at Elsinore, speaks in the voice of Cain, addresses Vallejo, and assumes the characters of a railroad bull and a survivor of a Nazi death camp." "The latter," remarks Jarman, "may seem an overworked subject, but I would argue that Pankey's clarity makes the poem exceptional," and he cites the following passage:

The other prisoners were envious
of our duty. It was, at times, hard work,
but the work, it seems, promoted our health.
I was determined to stay well, to last
through the coming winter and not end up
face up in a grave my own hands had dug.

And Jarman comments: "In writing of such apparent simplicity, words like *duty*, *promoted*, *determined*, and *health* resonate with their special meaning, and the cunning word play of 'end up / face up' is nearly subliminal. Frankly, I admire this, for the narrative poem as such might seem to have no time for these effects" (p. 339).

Such a reading recalls nothing so much as those Brooks-and-Warren exercises where the student would learn to identify the speaker (never, according to Rule 1, the poet himself but always a persona!) and comment on the poem's way of saying one thing but meaning another—which is to say, its irony (Rule 2). To call the torturous task of the death-camp survivor "the work," to use the casual "end up" as a lead-in to "face up"—this, one surmises, is to provide us with "meticulously chosen words." Except that the real New Criticism, as opposed to its "neo" version, would have recognized this passage from the ironically entitled "Tending the Garden" (get it?) as pure contrivance. Allen Tate, for one, would have asked some hard questions about the function of the iambic pentameter in this poem.

Another poem Jarman singles out for praise is Dick Allen's "Overnight in the Guest House of the Mystic," which contains these lines:

I dream
of histories ahead, the quasars flowering
upon the edge of space; odd specks of light
like fireflies in the pines, the first
new cities of another galaxy.
Which marks me of my time—which turns
almost helplessly between
huge shadows and the drifting stars,
a boat upon a boat at sea

floating in a bottle, each uplifted sail
raised to catch a wind that cannot be.

“Allen’s expression of hope in what lies beyond,” comments the reviewer, “is finally an integrated one . . . for he knows the limitation of his subject matter. . . . His dream does indeed mark him of his time, as it does many another, yet the wisdom of the statement—the admission—is rare” (p. 333).

Note the classic New Critical terminology—“integrated,” “limitation,” “wisdom of the statement,” an “admission” that is “rare.” Thematics are all, blinding the reader to the real “limitation” of this little poem, which is its inability to convince us that any conceivable voice is actually saying the things in question. One doesn’t in fact “dream / of histories ahead” but only of a specific historical event; again, it is hard to conceive of a dream in which “odd specks of light” are viewed as being, in the most reasonable of tried-and-true similes, “like fireflies in the pines.” But even these images are not as bathetic as the moralizing statement of the second stanza: “Which marks me of my time. . . .” A latter-day William Vaughan Moody, this melancholy speaker is “helplessly” positioned “between / huge shadows and the drifting stars.” Stars have been poetically “drifting” from Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* on down; it is reassuring, I suppose, to know that even quasars can’t change these Romantic verities. And then Allen sees himself as “a boat upon a boat at sea”—there’s an original metaphor—a boat, moreover, “floating in a bottle.” And now, with the click of a spring, comes the final recognition that “each uplifted sail / raised to catch a wind that cannot be.” “Sea”/“be”—the perfect closural rhyme underscores the poet’s mournful conclusion.

“The wisdom of the statement,” says Jarman, “the admission—is rare.” But what is it that is being admitted? Does Allen know anything we don’t know about galaxies and quasars? Is his point of view in any way special? Do those who are “of their time” usually tell us they are so? And if the poet is so uncertain about the future, how does he know, with such metrical and rhyming certainty, that the “uplifted sail [is] raised to catch a wind that cannot be”?

These questions do not occur to Jarman because his central postulate is the bifurcation of form and content. The poet, it is implied, first chooses his subject matter—something that is important, serious, and of its time—and then “expresses” it using as many “finely turned phrases” (Bruce Bawer’s term) as possible. “Knowing the limitation of [one’s] subject matter” thus becomes the cardinal virtue. And, given this aesthetic stance, a poem like “Howl” is perceived as nothing but a loose, baggy monster. “*Howl*, once effective as counter-culture manifesto,” writes R. Z. Sheppard in *Time* magazine, “is now an unconvincing historical oddity.”²⁶ But “Howl” was

never a counterculture or any other kind of manifesto, and mistaking Ginsberg’s brilliant Dada/Surrealist autobiographical poem, with its particular blend of the comic and the serious, the everyday and the visionary, the pedestrian and the fantastic for something as pat as a “counter-culture manifesto” leads to the writing of such “clever” parodies as the Buckley-Slansky “Yowl,” to which I now turn.

Like *The Waste Land*, “Howl” has a stylistic signature so singular that nothing is easier than to parody it. Buckley’s satire, which purports to take on both Ginsberg’s vatic excesses and eighties yuppie-dom, opens as follows:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by stress
frazzled overtired burnt-out
jogging through suburban streets at dawn
as suggested by the late James Fixx,
career-minded yupsters burning for an Amstel Light
watching Stupid Pet Tricks,
who upwardly mobile and designer’d and bright-eyed and high
sat up working in the track-lit glow of the Tribeca loft
skimming through the Day Timer while padding the expense
account. . . .
who ate chocolate croissants in outdoor cafes and drank
blush wine on Columbus Avenue washed down with a little
Percodan with Dove bars with Diet Coke with Lean Cuisine.²⁷

The authors of “Yowl” are obviously having a good time finding substitutions for Ginsberg’s images: the “angry fix” of the “angel-headed hipsters” becoming, in a nice little joke, the late James Fixx of jogging fame, or the “stale beer” of “Howl” becoming the Diet Coke of “Yowl.” But the one-dimensional exposé of the “upwardly mobile and designer’d and bright-eyed” yuppie, who “sat up working in the track-lit glow of the Tribeca loft,” only serves to put into bold relief the very real complexities of “Howl.”

Take that famous opening line, “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked.” In the first draft, the three adjectives were “starving mystical naked,” and surely Ginsberg is not exaggerating when he says, in the notes for the Harper Facsimile Edition (1986), that this is a “crucial revision,” “hysterical” providing “a key to the tone of the poem.” He observes, “Tho the initial idealistic impulse of the line went one way, afterthought noticed bathos, and common sense dictated ‘hysteria.’ . . . The poem’s tone is in this mixture of empathy and shrewdness.”²⁸ Which is to say that the connotations of “hysterical” more or less throw the poem’s gear into reverse, calling into question the purported darkness of the poet’s vision.

Indeed, “Howl” is itself much funnier—and much more subtly satiric—than is its 1986 parody. Take the strophe

who vanished into nowhere Zen New Jersey leaving a trail of
ambiguous picture postcards of Atlantic City Hall

Those who complain of the poem's repetitiveness, its seemingly endless cataloging of "who" clauses ("This continues," declares John Hollander, "sponging on one's toleration, for pages and pages"),²⁹ fail to recognize what is actually a marked condensation. The first draft of the strophe above reads:

who vanished into the New Jerseys of amnesia
posting cryptic picture postcards
of Belmar City Hall and last years sharks
(HODF, 13)

And Ginsberg's note tells us that this is a "composite image of a few post-college 'career failures' characteristic of 1950s, including author's own two-year sojourn in Paterson 1950–51 on leaving Columbia Psychiatric Institute. Author's family spent many 1930s summers at the shore in Belmar—'Atlantic City,' final draft. 'Sharks' ref. recurrent seaside newspaper reports and souvenir postcards" (HODF, 126).

The note testifies to the autobiographical source of this and almost every image in "Howl"; it also counters Ginsberg's own professed aesthetic of "First thought, best thought," of "spontaneous insight" as "motif and method" of composition (CP, xx). For when "the New Jerseys of amnesia" become the "nowhere Zen New Jersey," the bleak memory of Paterson summers gives way to a teasing oxymoron: a "nowhere" New Jersey that is also "Zen" can't be all bad, can it? Again, the specificity of "sharks" as a local term for the waste paper products of the area gives way to the comic image of the postcard trail, left behind by the poet and his friends. Are they dirty pictures? Threats to City Hall? The poem opens possibilities that will now be picked up in the account of the "bop kabbalah" that is its métier.

The notion of "bop kabbalah" also defines the syntactic drive of "Howl." Ginsberg's syntax typically puts parts of speech into "incorrect" slots so as to make us rethink their relationship. Thus we read:

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 jazz³⁰

where the placement of the heavily stressed nouns "poverty" and "tatters" in adjective slots creates the very jazz syncopation the poet is describing, even as the participle "floating" can refer to the "flats" as well as the relative pronoun "who," and even as the syntax suggests that it is the "cities" that are "contemplating jazz." The heavily alliterative, aggressively grinding and "difficult" rhythm ("of cold-

water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz") is wholly flattened out in "Yowl":

who hollow-eyed and febrile read the theater reviews in
unread issues of the *New Yorker* yes the *New Yorker*

a locution that suggests to me a wholly one-dimensional reading of the parent text. Thus, when a critic like Lachlan Mackinnon announces that Ginsberg "has been too lazy to shape his material as it, like any material, demands," one wonders whether "lazy" doesn't apply to the reader rather than to the poet.

By the time "Yowl" winds up its "I'm with you" litany with the final couplet, "I'm with you on the Upper East Side / looking for myself in *People* magazine," it has become clear that yuppiedom is being satirized by those who are themselves its charter members. The clever knowingness of the parody, like Lachlan Mackinnon's reference to the "cultural sterility" of Ginsberg's *Collected Poems*, or Roger Rosenblatt's patronizing dismissal of "Howl" ("One can grow giggly learning that 'the best minds' of the poet's generation 'copulated ecstatic and insatiate with a bottle of beer.' . . . It makes you wonder what the second best minds were doing") point to the curious paradox inherent in what I have called the Neo-New movement in letters—the paradox that, for all the talk of culture and complexity, for all the outcry against the formlessness, the simplification, the self-indulgence, and the "laziness" of Ginsberg's poetry, the younger critics who are now casting the stones are quite simply not very good readers.

Why should this be the case? My own hunch—and I can do no more here than make tentative suggestions—is that the emphasis on theory in the "English" and "Comparative Literature" curriculum of the past decade or so has produced a curious split. On the one hand, we now train students to follow, say, Paul de Man's most arcane arguments, to watch and understand as deconstructionist criticism uncovers the hidden place where a given text unravels and reveals its real workings. Or again, we train students in Marxist theory, teaching them how to determine the covert power relations in Shakespeare's comedies or to define the role of exchange value in Emily Dickinson. It is a case of *reading for* rather than *reading*, and hence the exemplary texts are likely to be the safe ones—the texts everyone *knows* to be "great literature" so that we can get down to the business of submitting them to this or that theoretical paradigm.

On the other side of the academic fence, we find the Poetry Writing Workshop, that last bastion of those who want to have nothing to do with what they take to be the arid and abstract discourse of the theoreticians. In the writing workshop, "understanding poetry," as Brooks and Warren called it in their famous book by

that title, is still considered a worthwhile exercise: questions of voice, meter, metaphor, and structure, questions now denigrated by the theory camp as “mere” formalism, continue to be asked. But the difficulty—and there was no real precedent for this in the era of *Understanding Poetry*—is that today’s workshop poet is likely not to read anything *but* poetry, which is to say, given our elaborate system of grants, fellowships, summer workshops, and mini-seminars, primarily the poetry of his fellow poets. As such, the practice and reception of poetry becomes increasingly a kind of cottage industry, a middlebrow pastime no more likely to produce widespread enthusiasm than it is likely to disturb anyone.

Given this climate, the bardic-comic voice of an Allen Ginsberg can hardly help being perceived as some sort of irrelevancy. For if poetry is a middlebrow pastime, its watchwords become safety, respectability, correctness, and “interesting” subject matter well put: “What oft was thought but ne’er so well express’d.” Moreover—and here the politics of poetry reviewing comes in—young poet-critic X must be careful to say nice things about poets Y and Z for by next week they will be reviewing his or her own new book. Ginsberg, on the other hand, is sure to review neither X, Y, nor Z, and so there isn’t much incentive to be polite.

As such, Ginsberg’s now immortal “Rockland,” where “we are great writers on the same dreadful typewriter,” has become, in the late eighties, the Upper East Side of “Yowl,” where “I’m with you . . . pricing modems.” But not quite. For in a curious sense, it is “Howl” that has the last word, containing as it does its own parody of its future parodists, which is to say of all the Sad Young Men “who were burned alive in their innocent flannel suits on Madison Avenue / amid blasts of leaden verse & the tanked-up clatter of the iron regiments of fashion . . . & the mustard gas of sinister intelligent editors.” All that gas, after all, “crowned” as it is “with flame under the tubercular sky,” is bound to burn away, leaving behind, in the words of “Howl,” “a variable measure and a vibrating plane.”

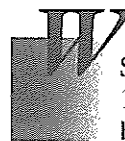
Chapter Eleven

Apocalypse Then:

W. S. Merwin and the

Sorrows of Literary History

I



S. Merwin’s sixth book of poems, *The Lice*, appeared in 1967 at the height of the war in Vietnam. Reviewing the book for the *Yale Review*, Laurence Lieberman declared:

If there is any book today that has perfectly captured the peculiar spiritual agony of our time, the agony of a generation which knows itself to be the last, and has transformed that agony into great art, it is W. S. Merwin’s *The Lice*. To read these poems is an act of self-purification. Every poem in the book pronounces a judgment against modern man—the gravest sentence the poetic imagination can conceive for man’s withered and wasted conscience: our sweep of history adds up to one thing only, a moral vacuity that is absolute and irrevocable. This book is a testament of betrayals; we have betrayed all beings that had power to save us: the forests, the animals, the gods, the dead, the spirit in us, the words. Now, in our last moments alive, they return to haunt us.¹

Extreme claims, these, especially now that a younger generation is proclaiming that *it* is the last, even as its poets are writing in a “cool” mode, very different from Merwin’s.² The apocalyptic consciousness

somewhat unreliable owing to crucial lacunae in the texts, provide essential clues for reading the poems.

17. The discovery clearly comes some time between the writing of “Elm” (19 April 1962) and “The Rabbit Catcher” (21 May 1962); see *CP*, pp. 192–94; and Linda W. Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), pp. 205–8.
In *Plath’s Incarnations*, Buntzen cites some unpublished letters, written a few months later; these are in the Plath Manuscript Collection, Lilly Library, Indiana University, and are labeled Box 6, MSS II. On 9 October 1962, for example, Plath complains to her mother of “the foulness I have lived, his wanting to kill all I have lived for six years by saying he was just waiting for a chance to get out, that he was bored & stifled by me, a hag in a world of beautiful women just waiting for him.” And on October 21, “It is as if, out of revenge, for my brain and creative power, he wanted to stick me where I would have no chance to use it. I think now my creating babies and a novel frightened him—for he wants barren women like his sister and this woman” (pp. 26–27).
18. Cited by Buntzen, *Plath’s Incarnations*, p. 11.
19. See Butscher, *Method and Madness*, pp. 320–22; Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath*, pp. 218–20; Plath, *Letters Home*, pp. 459–61.
20. Perloff, “On the Road to Ariel,” pp. 127–29.
21. Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath*, p. 205.
22. Richard Allen Blessing, “The Shape of the Psyche: Vision and Technique in the Late Poems of Sylvia Plath,” in *GL*, p. 68.
23. I discuss this poem in some detail in “On Sylvia Plath’s ‘Tulips,’ ” *Paunch* 42–43 (December 1975): 105–9; see also Perloff, “Sylvia Plath’s ‘Sivvy’ Poems,” pp. 170–73.
24. See Perloff, “Angst and Animism,” pp. 70–72.
25. For the background of these poems, see Butscher, *Method and Madness*, pp. 322–24; Plath, *Letters Home*, p. 469.
26. Margaret Dickie Uroff, *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), pp. 164–65.
27. See Ted Hughes, notes to *CP*, p. 293.
28. See A. R. Jones, “On Daddy,” in Newman, p. 234.
29. See *n.* 3.
30. See Irving Howe, “Sylvia Plath: A Partial Disagreement,” *Harper’s Magazine*, January 1972, p. 90; Kenner, “Sincerity Kills,” in *GL*, p. 43.
31. Charles Newman, “Candor Is the Only Wile: The Art of Sylvia Plath,” in Newman, p. 24.

Chapter Ten: A Lion in Our Living Room: Reading Allen Ginsberg in the Eighties

1. Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems, 1947–1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 126. Subsequently cited as *CP*.
2. See Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1979); Altieri, *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World: The American Modernist Writers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975); Robert von Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture, 1945–1980* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1985); Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981).
The exception is James E. B. Breslin’s *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945–1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Breslin’s chapter on Ginsberg remains the best all-round treatment of the poet. Another important—though highly critical—essay, which appeared after my own had been completed, is that of Paul Breslin in *The Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry since the Fifties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
3. Denis Donoghue, *Connoisseurs of Chaos: Ideas of Order in Modern American Poetry* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 49.
4. Harold Bloom, *Figures of Capable Imagination* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), p. 260.
5. Interview with Allen Ginsberg in *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, Third Series*, ed. George Plimpton (New York: Viking Press, 1968), pp. 287–88.
6. See John Tytell, “The Broken Circuit,” in Jack Kerouac, *On the Road: Text and Criticism*, ed. Scott Donaldson (New York: Viking Penguin, 1979), pp. 327–28.
7. See William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 174. The letter is reprinted as the preface to *The Gates of Wrath: Rhymed Poems 1948–1951* (Bolinas, Calif.: Grey Fox Press, 1972).
8. On this point, see James Breslin, *Modern to Contemporary*, pp. 88–92.
9. Allen Ginsberg, “Notes for *Howl and Other Poems*,” in *The Poetics of the New American Poetry*, ed. Donald Allen and Warren Tallman (New York: Grove Press, 1973), p. 319.
10. For a discussion of the function of stress, syllable count, breath units, and stanza forms, both in his own poetry and in that of poets ranging from Charles-Michel Campion and Milton to Williams, Marianne Moore, and Robert Creeley, see Ginsberg’s “Improvised Poetics” (1971) and “An Exposition of William Carlos Williams’

- Poetic Practice" (1976), both in *Composed on the Tongue*, ed. Donald Allen (Bolinas, Calif.: Grey Fox Press, 1980), pp. 18–62, 118–53.
11. Ezra Pound, "Vers Libre and Arnold Dolmetsch" (1918), in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1954), p. 437. Ginsberg quotes this passage in "Improvised Poetics," p. 59.
 12. Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Scully Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett, Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), p. 62.
 13. In a 1956 letter cited by James Breslin, *Modern to Contemporary*, pp. 104–5, Louis Ginsberg writes his son: "[“Howl”] has violence; it has life, it has vitality. In my opinion, it is a one-sided neurotic view of life; it has not enough glad, Whitmanian affirmations."
 14. The former point of view is best represented by Paul Portuges, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Ross-Erikson, 1978); the latter by Paul Breslin, *The Psycho-Political Muse*, pp. 22–41.
 15. See Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman, *Beauty and the Beast, Naropa Institute Recordings* (Boulder, Colo., 1976).
 16. Quoted in Portuges, *Visionary Poetics*, p. 162.
 17. See John Cage, "Writing through Howl" (1984), MS.
 18. See Cage, "Foreword," *M, Writings '67–72* (Middletown, Conn., 1973).
 19. Richard Howard, *Boston Review* 9 (September 1984): 33.
 20. John Hollander, "Review of *Howl and Other Poems*," *Partisan Review*, Spring 1957; reprinted in Lewis Hyde, ed., *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), pp. 26–27.
 21. There are some notable exceptions to what follows. See James Atlas, "A Modern Whitman," *Atlantic* 254 (December 1984): 132–36; Terence Diggory, "Ginsberg's Voice," *American Book Review* 7 (September–October 1985): 13–14; Lewis Hyde, "States of Altering Consciousness," *New York Times Book Review*, 30 December 1984, pp. 5–6; Charles Molesworth, "Language, and Sweet Music Too," *Nation*, 23 February 1985, pp. 213–15; Helen Vendler, "A Lifelong Poem Including History," *New Yorker* 61 (13 January 1986): 77–84.
 22. Bruce Bawer, "The Phenomenon of Allen Ginsberg," *New Criterion* 3 (February 1985): 1–14, on p. 10. Cf. Robert Richman, "Allen Ginsberg Then and Now," *Commentary* 80 (July 1985): 50–55. Ginsberg's poetry, Richman remarks, is best characterized as "sleaze."

23. Roger Rosenblatt, "A Major Minor Poet," *New Republic* 192 (4 March 1985): 33–35.
24. Lachlan Mackinnon, "A Loss of Beat," *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 May 1985, p. 574.
25. Mark Jarman, "Generations and Contemporaries," *Hudson Review* 38 (1985–86): 327–40, on p. 330. Subsequent citations to this work are in the text.
26. R. Z. Sheppard, "Mainstreaming Allen Ginsberg," *Time*, 4 February 1985, p. 72.
27. Christopher Buckley and Paul Slansky, "Yowl: For Jay McInerney," *New Republic* 195 (8 December 1986): 48–49.
28. Allen Ginsberg, *Howl: Original Draft Facsimile, Transcript & Variant Versions, Fully Annotated by Author, with Contemporaneous Correspondence, Account of First Public Reading, Legal Skirmishes, Precursor Texts & Bibliography*, ed. Barry Miles (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 124. Subsequently cited in the text as *HODF*.
It was the publication of Miles's edition that prompted the MLA session "Howl Twenty Years Later" at which these remarks were first delivered.
29. Hollander, "Review of *Howl*," p. 26.
30. In the first draft (*HODF*, pp. 12–13), this line read:

who poverty and tatters and fantastic minds
sat up all night in lofts
contemplating jazz

which lacks the interesting juxtaposition of natural and supernatural ("floating across the tops of cities") in the final version.

Chapter Eleven: Apocalypse Then: W. S. Merwin and the Sorrows of Literary History

1. Laurence Lieberman, "Recent Poetry in Review: Risks and Faiths," *Yale Review*, Summer 1968, pp. 597–601; reprinted in Lieberman, *Unassigned Frequencies* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 257.
2. For a good overview of the difference between mainstream sixties and seventies poetry, see Charles Altieri, *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984); cf. Stanley Plumly's two-part article, "Chapter and Verse," part 1: "Rhetoric and Emotion," part 2: "Image and Emblem," *American Poetry Review* 7 (January–February 1978): 21–42, (May–June 1978): 21–32.
3. See Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell