Howl by Allen Ginsburg
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“Howl” is a poem written by Allen Ginsberg in 1955, published as part of his 1956 collection of poetry titled Howl and Other Poems, and dedicated to Carl Solomon.

Ginsberg began work on “Howl” as early as 1954. In the Paul Blackburn Tape Archive at the University of California, San Diego, Ginsberg can be heard reading early drafts of his poem to his fellow writing associates. “Howl” is considered to be one of the great works of American literature. It came to be associated with the group of writers known as the Beat Generation.
There is no foundation to the myth that “Howl” was written as a performance piece and later published by poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti of City Lights Books. This myth was perpetrated by Ferlinghetti as part of the defense’s case during the poem’s obscenity trial. Upon the poem’s release, Ferlinghetti and the bookstore’s manager, Shigeyoshi Murao, were charged with disseminating obscene literature, and both were arrested. On October 3, 1957, Judge Clayton W. Horn ruled that the poem was not obscene.
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,

angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,

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,

who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Mohammedan angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated,

who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkansas 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, incomparable blind streets of shuddering cloud and lightning in the mind leaping toward poles of

Canada & Paterson, illuminating all the motionless world of Time between,

Peyote solidities of halls, backyard green tree cemetery dawns, wine drunkenness over the rooftops,

storefront boroughs of teahed joyride neon blinking traffic light, sun and moon and tree vibrations in the roaring winter dusks of Brooklyn, aschcan rantings and kind king light of mind,

who chained themselves to subways for the endless ride from Battery to holy Bronx on benzedrine

until the noise of wheels and children brought them down shuddering mouth-wracked and battered bleak of brain all drained of brilliance in the
drear light of Zoo,

who sank all night in submarine light of Bickford’s floated out and sat through the stale beer afternoon in desolate Fugazzi’s, listening to the

crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox,

who talked continuously seventy hours from park to pad to bar to Bellevue to museum to the Brooklyn Bridge,

a lost battalion of platonic conversationalists jumping down the stoops off fire escapes off windowsills off Empire State out of the moon,

yacketayakking screaming vomiting whispering facts and memories and anecdotes and eyeball kicks and shocks of hospitals and jails and wars,

whole intellects disgorged in total recall for seven days and nights with brilliant eyes, meat for the Synagogue cast on the pavement,

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

suffering Eastern sweats and Tangerian bone-grindings and migraines of China under junk-withdrawal in Newark’s bleak furnished room,

who wandered around and around at midnight in the railroad yard wondering where to go, and went, leaving no broken hearts,

who lit cigarettes in boxcars boxcars boxcars racketing through snow toward lonesome farms in grandfather night,

who studied Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross telepathy and bop kabbalah because the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet in Kansas,

who loned it through the streets of Idaho seeking visionary indian angels who were visionary indian angels,

who thought they were only mad when Baltimore gleamed in supernatural ecstasy,

who jumped in limousines with the Chinaman of Oklahoma on the impulse of winter midnight streetlight smalltown rain,

who lounged hungry and lonesome through Houston seeking jazz or sex or soup, and followed the brilliant Spaniard to converse about America and Eternity, a hopeless task, and so took ship to Africa,

who disappeared into the volcanoes of Mexico leaving behind nothing but the shadow of dungarees and the lava and ash of poetry scattered in
fireplace Chicago,

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,

who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism,

who distributed Supercommunist pamphlets in Union Square weeping and undressing while the sirens of Los Alamos wailed them down, and
wailed down Wall,

and the Staten Island ferry also waited,

who broke down crying in white gymnasiums naked and trembling before the machinery of other skeletons,

who bit detectives in the neck and shrieked with delight in policecars for committing no crime but their own wild cooking pederasty and intoxication,

who howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the roof waving genitals and manuscripts,

who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy,

who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love,

who balled in the morning in the evenings in rosegardens and the grass of public parks and cemeteries scattering their semen freely to
whomever come who may,

who hiccuped endlessly trying to giggle but wound up with a sob behind a partition in a Turkish Bath when the blond & naked angel came to

pierce them with a sword,
who lost their loveboys to the three old shrews of fate the one eyed shrew of the heterosexual dollar the one eyed shrew that winks out of the womb and the one eyed shrew that does nothing but sit on her ass and snip the intellectual golden threads of the craftsman's loom,

who copulated ecstatic and insatiate with a bottle of beer a sweetheart a package of cigarettes a candle and fell off the bed, and continued along the floor and down the hall and ended fainting on the wall with a vision of ultimate cunt and come eluding the last gyzym of consciousness,

who sweetened the snatch of a million girls trembling in the sunset, and were red eyed in the morning but prepared to sweeten the snatch of the sunrise, flashing buttocks under barns and naked in the lake,

who went out whoring through Colorado in myriad stolen night-cars, N.C., secret hero of these poems, cocksman and Adonis of Denver—joy to the memory of his innumerable lays of girls in empty lots & diner backyards, moviehouses' rickety rows, on mountaintops in caves or with gaunt waitresses in familiar roadside lonely petticoat upliftings & especially secret gas-station solipsisms of johns, & hometown alleys too,

who faded out in vast sordid movies, were shifted in dreams, woke on a sudden Manhattan, and picked themselves up out of basements hung-over with heartless Tokay and horrors of Third Avenue iron dreams & stumbled to unemployment offices,

who walked all night with their shoes full of blood on the snowbank docks waiting for a door in the East River to open to a room full of steam-heat and opium,

who created great suicidal dramas on the apartment cliff-banks of the Hudson under the wartime blue floodlight of the moon & their heads shall be crowned with laurel in oblivion,

who ate the lamb stew of the imagination or digested the crab at the muddy bottom of the rivers of Bowery,

who wept at the romance of the streets with their pushcarts full of onions and bad music,

who sat in boxes breathing in the darkness under the bridge, and rose up to build harpsichords in their lofts,

who coughed on the sixth floor of Harlem crowned with flame under the tubercular sky surrounded by orange crates of theology,

who scribbled all night rocking and rolling over lofty incantations which in the yellow morning were stanzas of gibberish,

who cooked rotten animals lung heart feet tail borsht & tortillas dreaming of the pure vegetable kingdom,

who plunged themselves under meat trucks looking for an egg,

who threw their watches off the roof to cast their ballot for Eternity outside of Time, & alarm clocks fell on their heads every day for the next decade,

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,

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 nitroglycerine shrieks of the fairies of advertising & the mustard gas of sinister intelligent editors, or were run down by the drunken taxicabs of Absolute Reality,

who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge this actually happened and walked away unknown and forgotten into the ghostly daze of Chinatown soup alleyways & firetrucks, not even one free beer,

who sang out of their windows in despair, fell out of the subway window, jumped in the filthy Passaic, leaped on negroes, cried all over the street, danced on broken wineglasses barefoot smashed phonograph records of nostalgic European 1930s German jazz finished the whiskey and threw up groaning into the bloody toilet, moans in their ears and the blast of colossal steamwhistles,

who barreled down the highways of the past journeying to each other's hotrod-Golgotha jail-solitude watch or Birmingham jazz incarnation,

who drove crosscountry seventytwo hours to find out if I had a vision or you had a vision or he had a vision to find out Eternity,

who journeyed to Denver, who died in Denver, who came back to Denver & waited in vain, who watched over Denver & brooded & loned in Denver and finally went away to find out the Time, & now Denver is lonesome for her heroes,

who fell on their knees in hopeless cathedrals praying for each other's salvation and light and breasts, until the soul illuminated its hair for a second,

who crashed through their minds in jail waiting for impossible criminals with golden heads and the charm of reality in their hearts who sang sweet blues to Alcatraz,

who retired to Mexico to cultivate a habit, or Rocky Mount to tender Buddha or Tangiers to boys or Southern Pacific to the black locomotive or Harvard to Narcissus to Woodlawn to the daisychain or grave,

who demanded sanity trials accusing the radio of hypnotism & were left with their insanity & their hands & a hung jury,

who threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism and subsequently presented themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse with shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy,

and who were given instead the concrete void of insulin Metrazol electricity hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy pingpong & amnesia,
who in humorless protest overturned only one symbolic pingpong table, resting briefly in catatonia, returning years later truly bald except for a wig of blood, and tears and fingers, to the visible madman doom of the wards of the madtowns of the East,

Pilgrim State’s Rockland’s and Greystone’s foetid halls, bickering with the echoes of the soul, rocking and rolling in the midnight solitude-bench dolmen-realms of love, dream of life a nightmare, bodies turned to stone as heavy as the moon,

with mother finally fucked, and the last fantastic book flung out of the tenement window, and the last door closed at 4 A.M. and the last telephone slammed at the wall in reply and the last furnished room emptied down to the last piece of mental furniture, a yellow paper rose twisted on a wire hanger in the closet, and even that imaginary, nothing but a hopeful little bit of hallucination—

ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe, and now you’re really in the total animal soup of time—

and who therefore ran through the icy streets obsessed with a sudden flash of the alchemy of the use of the ellipsis catalogue a variable measure and the vibrating plane,

who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the soul between 2 visual images and joined the elemental verbs and set the noun and dash of consciousness together jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus

to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human prose and stand before you speechless and intelligent and shaking with shame, rejected yet confessing out the soul to conform to the rhythm of thought in his naked and endless head,

the madman bum and angel beat in Time, unknown, yet putting down here what might be left to say in time come after death,

and rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the goldhorn shadow of the band and blew the suffering of America’s naked mind for love into an eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone cry that shivered the cities down to the last radio

with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years.

II

What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?

Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!

Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless! Mental Moloch! Moloch the heavy judge of men!

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!

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb!

Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smoke-stacks and antennae crown the cities!

Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is the specter of genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of sexless hydrogen! Moloch whose name is the Mind!

Moloch in whom I sit lonely! Moloch in whom I dream Angels! Crazy in Moloch! Cocksucker in Moloch! Lacklove and manless in Moloch!

Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom I am a consciousness without a body! Moloch who frightened me out of my natural ecstasies! Moloch whom I abandon! Wake up in Moloch! Light streaming out of the sky!

Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible madhouses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs!

They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven! Pavements, trees, radios, tons! lifting the city to Heaven which exists and is everywhere about us!

Visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles! ecstasies! gone down the American river!

Dreams! adorations! illuminations! religions! the whole boatload of sensitive bullshit!

Breakthroughs! over the river! flips and crucifixions! gone down the flood! Highs! Epiphanies! Despairs!

Ten years’ animal screams and suicides! Minds! New loves! Mad generation! down on the rocks of Time!

Real holy laughter in the river! They saw it all! the wild eyes! the holy yells! They bade farewell! They jumped off the roof! to solitude! waving! carrying flowers! Down to the river! into the street!

III
Carl Solomon! I’m with you in Rockland

where you’re madder than I am
I’m with you in Rockland

where you must feel very strange
I’m with you in Rockland

where you imitate the shade of my mother
I’m with you in Rockland

where you’ve murdered your twelve secretaries
I’m with you in Rockland

where you laugh at this invisible humor
I’m with you in Rockland

where we are great writers on the same dreadful typewriter
I’m with you in Rockland

where your condition has become serious and is reported on the radio
I’m with you in Rockland

where the faculties of the skull no longer admit the worms of the senses
I’m with you in Rockland

where you drink the tea of the breasts of the spinsters of Utica
I’m with you in Rockland

where you pun on the bodies of your nurses the harpies of the Bronx
I’m with you in Rockland

where you scream in a straightjacket that you’re losing the game of the actual pingpong of the abyss
I’m with you in Rockland

where you bang on the catatonic piano the soul is innocent and immortal it should never die ungodly in an armed madhouse
I’m with you in Rockland

where fifty more shocks will never return your soul to its body again from its pilgrimage to a cross in the void
I’m with you in Rockland

where you accuse your doctors of insanity and plot the Hebrew socialist revolution against the fascist national Golgotha
I’m with you in Rockland

where you will split the heavens of Long Island and resurrect your living human Jesus from the superhuman tomb
I’m with you in Rockland

where there are twentyfive thousand mad comrades all together singing the final stanzas of the Internationale
I’m with you in Rockland

where we hug and kiss the United States under our bedsheets the United States that coughs all night and won’t let us sleep
I'm with you in Rockland

where we wake up electrified out of the coma by our own souls' airplanes roaring over the roof they've come to drop angelic bombs the hospital illuminates itself imaginary walls collapse
O skinny legions run outside
O starry-spangled shock of mercy the eternal war is here
O victory forget your underwear we're free

I'm with you in Rockland
in my dreams you walk dripping from a sea-journey on the highway across America in tears to the door of my cottage in the Western night

San Francisco, 1955—1956

Footnote to Howl

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! the madman is holy as you my soul are holy!
The typewriter is holy the poem is holy the voice is holy the hearers are holy the ecstasy is holy!
Holy Peter holy Alien holy Solomon holy Kerouac holy Huncke holy Burroughs holy Cassady holy the unknown buggered and suffering beggars holy the hideous human angels!
Holy my mother in the insane asylum! Holy the cocks of the grandfathers of Kansas!
Holy the groaning saxophone! Holy the bop apocalypse! Holy the jazzbands marijuana hipsters peace peyote pipes & drums!
Holy the solitudes of skyscrapers and pavements! Holy the cafeterias filled with the millions! Holy the mysterious rivers of tears under the streets!
Holy the lone juggernaut! Holy the vast lamb of the middleclass! Holy the crazy shepherds of rebellion! Who digs Los Angeles IS Los Angeles!
Holy time in eternity holy eternity in time holy the clocks in space holy the fourth dimension holy the fifth International holy the Angel in Moloch!
Holy the sea holy the desert holy the railroad holy the locomotive holy the visions holy the hallucinations holy the miracles holy the eyeball holy the abyss!
Holy forgiveness! mercy! charity! faith! Holy! Ours! bodies! suffering! magnanimity!
Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!

Berkeley 1955
Allen Ginsberg wrote drafts of the poem “Howl” in mid-1954 to 1955, purportedly at a coffeehouse known today as the Caffe Mediterraneum in Berkeley, California. Many factors went into the creation of the poem. A short time before the composition of “Howl,” Ginsberg’s therapist, Dr. Philip Hicks, encouraged him to quit his job and pursue poetry full-time. He experimented with a syntactic subversion of meaning called parataxis in the poem “Dream Record: June 8, 1955” about the death of Joan Vollmer, a technique that would become central in “Howl.”

Ginsberg showed this poem to Kenneth Rexroth, who criticized it as too stilted and academic; Rexroth encouraged Ginsberg to free his voice and write from his heart. Ginsberg took this advice and attempted to write a poem with no restrictions. He was under the immense influence of William Carlos Williams and Jack Kerouac and attempted to speak with his own voice spontaneously. Ginsberg began the poem in the stepped triadic form he took from Williams but, in the middle of typing the poem, his style altered such that his own unique form (a long line based on breath organized by a fixed base) began to emerge.
Ginsberg would experiment with this breath-length form in many later poems. The first draft contained what would later become Part I and Part III. It is noted for relating stories and experiences of Ginsberg’s friends and contemporaries, its tumbling, hallucinatory style, and the frank address of sexuality, specifically homosexuality, which subsequently provoked an obscenity trial. Although Ginsberg referred to many of his friends and acquaintances (including Neal Cassady, Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Peter Orlovsky, Lucien Carr, and Herbert Huncke), the primary emotional drive was his sympathy for Carl Solomon, to whom it was dedicated; he met Solomon in a mental institution and became friends with him.

Ginsberg admitted later this sympathy for Solomon was connected to bottled-up guilt and sympathy for his mother’s schizophrenia (she had been lobotomized), an issue he was not yet ready to address directly. In 2008, Peter Orlovsky told the co-directors of the 2010 film Howl that a short moonlit walk—during which Orlovsky sang a rendition of the Hank Williams song “Howlin’ At the Moon”—may have been the encouragement for the title of Ginsberg’s poem. “I never asked him, and he never offered,” Orlovsky told them, “but there were things he would pick up on and use in his verse form some way or another. Poets do it all the time.” The Dedication by Ginsberg states he took the title from Kerouac.

The poem was first performed at the Six Gallery in San Francisco on October 7, 1955. The reading was conceived by Wally Hedrick—a painter and co-founder of the Six—who approached Ginsberg in mid-1955 and asked him to organize a poetry reading at the Six Gallery. “At first, Ginsberg refused. But once he’d written a rough draft of ‘Howl’, he changed his ‘fucking mind,’ as he put it.” Further evidence that this was not performance art but poetry—a written piece that Ginsberg would not and has not ever described as anything but a poem not a performance piece

Ginsberg was ultimately responsible for inviting the readers (Gary Snyder, Philip Lamantia, and Philip Whalen, Michael McClure and Kenneth Rexroth) and writing the invitation. “Howl” was the second to the last reading (before “A Berry Feast” by Snyder) and was considered by most in attendance the highlight of the reading. Many considered it the beginning of a new movement, and the reputation of Ginsberg and those associated with the Six Gallery reading spread throughout San Francisco.[11] In response to Ginsberg’s reading, McClure wrote: “Ginsberg read on to the end of the poem, which left us standing in wonder, or cheering and wondering, but knowing at the deepest level that a barrier had been broken, that a human voice and body had been hurled against the harsh wall of America...”

Soon afterwards, it was published by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who ran City Lights Bookstore and the City Lights Press. Ginsberg completed Part II and the “Footnote” after Ferlinghetti had promised to publish the poem. “Howl” was too short to make an entire book, so Ferlinghetti requested some other poems. Thus the final collection contained several other poems written at that time; with these poems, Ginsberg continued the experimentation with long lines and a fixed base he’d discovered with the composition of “Howl” and these poems have likewise become some of Ginsberg’s most famous: “America”, “Sunflower Sutra,” “A Supermarket in California”, etc.

The earliest extant recording of “Howl” was thought to date from March 18, 1956. (The Blackburn Collection recordings show otherwise). Ginsberg and Snyder, after hitch-hiking from San Francisco, read from their poems in the Anna Mann dormitory at Reed College, Snyder’s alma mater. This recording, discovered in mid-2007 on a reel-to-reel tape in the Reed College archives, contains only Part I of “Howl.” After beginning to read Part II, Ginsberg said to the audience, “I don’t really feel like reading anymore. I just sorta haven’t got any kind of steam.”

The poem consists of three parts, with an additional footnote.

**Part I**

Called by Ginsberg “a lament for the Lamb in America with instances of remarkable lamb-like youths”, Part I is perhaps the best known, and communicates scenes, characters, and situations drawn from Ginsberg’s personal experience as well as from the community of poets, artists, political radicals, jazz musicians, drug addicts, and psychiatric patients whom he encountered in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Ginsberg refers to these people, who were underrepresented outcasts in what the poet believed to be an oppressively conformist and materialistic era as “the best minds of my generation.” He describes their experiences in graphic detail, openly discussing drug use and homosexual activity at multiple points.

Most lines in this section contain the fixed base “who.” In “Notes Written on Finally Recording Howl,” Ginsberg writes, “I depended on the word ‘who’ to keep the beat, a base to keep measure, return to and take off from again onto another streak of invention.”

**Part II**

Ginsberg says that Part II, in relation to Part I, “names the monster of mental consciousness that preys on the Lamb.” Part II is about the state of industrial civilization, characterized in the poem as “Moloch”. Ginsberg was inspired to write Part II during a period of peyote-induced visionary consciousness in which he saw a hotel façade as a monstrous and horrible visage which he identified with that of Moloch, the Biblical idol in Leviticus to whom the Canaanites sacrificed children.

Ginsberg intends that the characters he portrays in Part I be understood to have been sacrificed to this idol. Moloch is also the name of an industrial, demonic figure in Fritz Lang’s Metropolis, a film that Ginsberg credits with influencing “Howl, Part II” in his annotations for the poem (see especially Howl: Original Draft Facsimile, Transcript & Variant Versions). Most lines in this section contain the fixed base “Moloch”. Ginsberg says of Part II, “Here the long line is used as a stanza form broken into exclamatory units punctuated by a base repetition, Moloch.”
Part III
Part III, in relation to Parts I, II, and IV is a litany of affirmation of the Lamb in its glory,” according to Ginsberg. It is directly addressed to Carl Solomon, whom Ginsberg met during a brief stay at a psychiatric hospital in 1949; called “Rockland” in the poem, it was actually Columbia Presbyterian Psychological Institute. This section is notable for its refrain, “I’m with you in Rockland,” and represents something of a turning point away from the grim tone of the “Moloch”-section. Of the structure, Ginsberg says Part III is, “pyramidal, with a graduated longer response to the fixed base.”

Footnote
The closing section of the poem is the “Footnote”, characterized by its repetitive “Holy!” mantra, an ecstatic assertion that everything is holy. Ginsberg says, “I remembered the archetypal rhythm of Holy Holy Holy weeping in a bus on Kearny Street, and wrote most of it down in notebook there. I set it as ‘Footnote to Howl’ because it was an extra variation of the form of Part II.”

Rhythm
The frequently quoted and often parodied opening lines set the theme and rhythm for the poem:

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,
Angel-headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection
to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,
Ginsberg’s own commentary discusses the work as an experiment with the “long line”. For example, Part I is structured as a single run-on sentence with a repetitive refrain dividing it up into breaths. Ginsberg said, “Ideally each line of ‘Howl’ is a single breath unit. My breath is long—that’s the measure, one physical-mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of a breath.”

On another occasion, he explained: “the line length … you’ll notice that they’re all built on bop—you might think of them as a bop refrain—chorus after chorus after chorus—the ideal being, say, Lester Young in Kansas City in 1938, blowing 72 choruses of ‘The Man I Love’ until everyone in the hall was out of his head…”

‘The Poem That Changed America: “Howl” Fifty Years Later’

A “HOWL” photograph, taken at the Virginia Military Institute in 1991 by Gordon Ball: a row of uniformed cadets, their heads shaved, each with an identical blank notebook, each holding a copy of the City Lights Books Pocket Poets Series edition of Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl and Other Poems,” published in San Francisco in 1956, subject to an obscenity trial soon after, cleared by Judge Clayton Horn in a ringing affirmation of individual liberty and creative expression — and a flag of revolt, a blow against conformity, a hallowed relic, ever since.

The picture is all irony. What are these presumed soldiers of Moloch — the demon of money and power summoned in the second part of “Howl” to devour the soul rebels of the epic first section, unless, somehow, they can escape to fight another day — supposed to make of Ginsberg’s celebration of a tiny band of comrades determined to free America from itself? Of his paens to men who “screamed with joy” as they were penetrated by other men, to heroin and marijuana, to suicide and madness? Who knows what the cadets made of “Howl” — in the picture, they look bored. Another assignment to get through.

Ball, a longtime friend and editor of Ginsberg’s, is himself one of 24 contributors to Jason Shinder’s collection of new essays on “Howl” (not counting Ginsberg, with his own comment on the poem, written in 1986, 11 years before his death, and John Cage, with his galvanic “Writing Through Howl,” also from 1986). Like so many of the writers here, Ball forgivably fetishizes the little City Lights book. Like an 18th-century broadside, it was cheap, it was portable, you could read it standing up on a bus and give it away when you got off. It was a key to the enormous readership “Howl” has gathered over the decades, and you can still pick up a used copy for a dollar or so. But like so many, he gropes for something to say. The literary nakedness of the beats, Ball says of beat heroes like Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Neal Cassady and the few and then the many who took up the cause, “has something to do with the fact that today national debate includes, as legitimate topics for discussion, things such as homosexuality and heroin addiction.” This is close to babble — equating homosexuality and heroin addiction, and ignoring the fact that to the degree that homosexuality is today part of our national debate, it is precisely because one side of the debate believes homosexuality is not a legitimate topic of discussion — but not so close as Ball on the “spiritual base” at “the heart of the Beat Generation,” which “may offer a redemption of the woeful American legacy projected by Walt Whitman 125 years ago.”

Shinder, Ginsberg’s friend and assistant, a poet (“Among Women”) and a packager (the editor of “Divided Light: Father and Son Poems” and other anthologies), has produced a tribute album — but a tribute album in which half of the contributors are covering the same song. Rather than “critical texts,” Shinder wanted “personal narratives” from well-known writers on “how the poem changed their lives”: thus the word “I” appears in the first or second line of more than half the pieces here. The famous first lines of “Howl” are quoted from at least 11 times.

This gets tiresome. Sven Birkerts, bidding fair to replace Rick Moody as Dale Peck’s “worst writer of his generation,” offers an unbearable template: “Can I possibly convey how those words” — the first lines of “Howl” — “moved in me, how that cadence undid in a minute’s time whatever prior cadences had been voice-tracking my life?” No, he can’t. He wanders on, into “the moment of Shakespearean ripeness.” “Ripeness” would do the job, but you get the feeling it’s important to Birkerts to remind us he knows Shakespeare — or maybe to equate his reading “Howl” with Edgar’s revelation in “King Lear.”
Ginsberg wrote “Howl” in San Francisco and Berkeley; he read the long first section in public for the first time in San Francisco in 1955, and the whole of the poem for the first time in Berkeley the next year. (A CD of that performance is included in this book.) All sorts of divisions, exclusions, restrictive manners and deferences that were second nature in the East were missing in the Bay Area. If the primary terrain of the poem is New York City, the freedom one could find in California in the 50’s is crucial to the air that blows through the dank rooms of “Howl,” blowing all the way back to New York — but you wouldn’t know it from the Eastern writers Shinder has brought together, as if such Bay Area poets and critics as Ishmael Reed, Robert Hass, Rebecca Solnit, Joshua Clover or Richard Candida Smith would have less to say about where “Howl” came from and where it went than Jane Kramer and Eileen Myles, who have plenty to say. The America that gets changed in “The Poem That Changed America” is a Steinberg map, with San Francisco as far away as Tangier. “No one,” Marjorie Perloff says off-handedly, but too revealingly, “New Yorker or foreigner.”

You can forget that when Luc Sante begins to tell his tale — from 437 East 12th Street, which is, as it happens, the same New York City building where Ginsberg lived as if rising from the swamp of Eliot Katz on “Political Poetics” (right off, with Katz’s invocation of a poet attempting “to envision and create a more humane world,” you somehow know this is going to be the longest piece in the book), Sante changes the discussion as if throwing open a door: “Was ‘Howl’ the last poem to hit the world with the impact of news and grip it with the tenacity of a pop song?” The language is burning, the ideas are jumping and, finally, you are brought into the adventure of the poem, Ginsberg and his fellows turning New York City into their own frontier, then heading west, through Kansas, into Colorado, to the coast, then back again, discovering, you can feel, more of America in the decade before Ginsberg wrote the poem in 1955 than de Soto, Daniel Boone or even Lewis and Clark did in the centuries before them.

“Howl,” for all its affirmations, is a profoundly oppositional poem, and it counts on being opposed. . . . 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.”

If “Howl” is a catalog of flameouts and collapses, it is ecstatic in its lamentation.

As it happens, it’s with the critical pieces that Ginsberg’s poem comes back to life — critical pieces that take the shape of real talk. With David Gates there’s an instant change in tone. “I drove to the store the other day” — and you realize he’s not going to tell you he discovered “Howl” there. He parks, hears the boom of an obscene rap song from the S.U.V. in the next spot and starts thinking: “Banned literary mandarins such as Joyce and Nabokov may simply have wanted to go about their hermetic work unmolested, but Ginsberg was a public poet and a provocateur. ‘Howl,’ for all its affirmations, is a profoundly oppositional poem, and it counts on being opposed. . . . 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.”

And that is the basic measure of its strength: it is a list of . . . leprous epiphanies as redoubtable as Homer’s catalog of ships, but rather than stopping at that, it seizes the opportunity to realize all the botched dreams it enumerates. It envisions every broken vision, supplies the skeleton key that reveals the genius of every torrent of babble, reconstitutes every page of scribble that looks like gibberish the next morning.”

Fixed in time in Gordon Ball’s photograph, the cadets are still reading “Howl”; they’re still fixed in irony. But the story the picture doesn’t tell — that, in its way, it protects the viewer from imagining — doesn’t end in irony. As Bob Rosenthal, for 20 years Ginsberg’s secretary, writes in perhaps the plainest lines in “The Poem That Changed America,” only a fool pretends to know what might happen when a poem finds a reader. “‘Howl’ still helps young people realize their actual ambitions,” Rosenthal writes: “not to become a poor poet living in a dump but maybe to become a physical therapist when you are expected to become a lawyer, or maybe to become a lawyer when everybody expects you to fail at everything.”

Classic Beat
Review by GREIL MARCUS
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Ginsberg’s “Howl” and the Birth of a New Generation of Literature

The 1950s literary scene was ignited by emerging writers who rejected the postwar American culture. Among these writers was Allen Ginsberg, whose poem “Howl” has become one of the most important poems written in the past century. While some hailed it as a work of genius, many deemed it obscene, illustrating the culture it aimed to battle against. The poem rejected the repressive, capitalist, postwar American culture of the 1950s while also representing and illuminating the subculture that would eventually form the ideology of the Beat writers. These writers helped to make possible the counterculture revolution of the 1960s. In order to understand the poem, one must first understand the culture that produced it.

The 1950s marks a time of expansion and prosperity in American history, but an emerging subculture was beginning to boil over. The postwar decade of the ’50s marked a time of economic expansion for the United States. Men were returning from war, and goods that were previously unavailable were now not only accessible but in high demand. With the economic boom, and technological advances, consumerism was on the rise. Television was becoming a staple of American culture. According to Schmoop, 90% of American households contained at least one television by the end of the ’50s. This technology was often used as a tool to reiterate the status quo as mass media became dominant in the culture. Gender roles, family structure and expectations were very rigid at this point, which is often illustrated by the idea of the 1950s suburban housewife. In Robert Richman’s “Allen Ginsberg Then and Now,” he explains that “When City Lights published ‘Howl’ in 1956 [Ginsberg] wished it known that the book contained not just poems but contraband goods-dangerous to buy and dangerous to consume.” He understood the exploitive nature of 1950s America, and predicted opposition to his work. The decade is often seen as an era of conformity, but also, to a much lesser extent, of rebellion—thanks to writers like Ginsberg.

The writers of the 1950s had lived through the horrors of WWII, and were in the midst of the Cold War. Scholar Jeffrey Meyers has described “Howl,” as a “prophetic antiwar poem.” In his essay “Ginsberg’s Inferno: Dante and ‘Howl’” he relates the poem to Dante’s Inferno, as the two poems share much of the same ideology. While Ginsberg never officially named Dante as an influence, he wrote to Kerouac in 1948 explaining that he had been reading him and found his work very inspiring. Meyers explains that, “In the decade before Ginsberg wrote [“Howl”], he’d lived through the atomic bomb, the Cold War, the Berlin Blockade and the Korean War,” and also that “A few years later, in the 1960s, he felt instinctively and saw clearly that the war in Vietnam was disastrous and genocidal.” This would be the source of more politically charged poetry from Ginsberg. The poem has references to the hydrogen bomb, both in section I and II. In section II, while equating objects to Moloch, “monstrous bombs,” are named (line 88). Ginsberg also exclaims, “Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!” (line 80). Ginsberg is sharing the difficulties that soldiers must face, but also those of their families, who are weeping over their dead sons. Ginsberg also mentions the “crack of doom on the hydrogen jukebox,” (line 15), which is undoubtedly a reference to the hydrogen bomb. The poem refers to pacifists “passing out incomprehensible leaflets,” (line 30). This is a reference to the early anti-war movement, which originated with activists giving leaflets to passerby. Meyers illustrates other parallels to Dante in his essay, the most interesting, perhaps, Ginsberg’s depiction of the eight deadly sins of Dante’s circles of Hell.
The first of the eight deadly signs discussed in Dante's work is lust. Lust is defined as the craving for pleasures of the body. In Dante's Inferno, those who have committed this sin are forever blown in hurricane-like winds that are meant to represent their lack of self-control. Lustful behaviors and descriptions can be found in many instances of "Howl." The poem exalts sexual liberation, and bluntly praises casual sex. Ginsberg refers to Neil Cassady "whoring through Colorado," and "scattering [his] semen freely." Sodomy is also considered a sin of lust. Therefore, the homo-erotic references to "cock and endless balls," and being "fucked in the ass" are examples of lust. The next sin Meyers discusses is gluttony.

Gluttony is defined as over-indulgence to the point of extravagance or waste. Those in this circle of Hell must lie in slush produced by endless icy rain. The slush forces the sinners into a solitary confinement; they cannot see or hear their neighbors. This lonely, icy existence represents the cold, self-indulged attitude they possess. Gluttony is explained not only in terms of overindulgence of food or drink, but of other addictions as well. The repeated sexual references can be interpreted as addiction, and the drug use explored in the poem is certainly an example of gluttony. The line Meyers points out is "cooked rotten animals lung heart feet"; the characters are overindulging, eating every possible part of the animal. The fifth circle of Hell holds those who have practiced wrath.

In Dante's work, wrath is discussed in terms of rage against one's self, but also against others. Dante's River of Styx is home to those who hold anger in their hearts. The wrathful fight each other on the surface while the sullen lie at the bottom of the river. At the bottom of this river, there is only darkness, no happiness or hope. Ginsberg's poem represents anger in its description of rage against one's self, and also against the oppressive system. Ginsberg declares that his friends "created great suicidal dramas [by]...jumping off Empire State...[and also] jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge. Violence-the seventh circle-against one's self is also discussed, as they "danced on broken wineglasses barefoot," and "cut their wrists...successively." Dante's sixth circle of Hell was home to those who had committed heresy, which "Howl" does in almost every sense of the word.

Meyers explains that "Howl" defies all conventional, political, social, moral and especially sexual beliefs." While Dante condemns the behaviors that lead his characters into the circles of Hell, Ginsberg hails them. Heresy can be defined as belief that is in contradiction with orthodox religious doctrine. This poem explores beliefs that are obviously contrary to popular Christian views. Sex and sexual freedom is extensively discussed in the novel, while Christian doctrine forbids sex before marriage, and especially homosexual sex, as it is considered sodomy. Brunetto Latini, a friend of Dante's, is forced to run ceaselessly as punishment for lustful behaviors. Meyers notes that Ginsberg faintly mirrors this, as many of his friends are constantly and almost obsessively moving back and forth across the nation.

The ninth circle of Dante's Hell is for those who have committed deceitful and treacherous acts. The circle is divided into four parts, varying in degree of severity. Those punished in this circle are frozen in a lake of ice. Their depth is determined by the severity of their sin, which is marked by who they have deceived. Ginsberg uses Moloch to represent all things treacherous. Moloch is described as a number of things, from small, seemingly unimportant things, to "demonic industries! spectral nations! invincible madhouses!" While Dante absolutely disapproves of these sins, Ginsberg both rejects the culture at large, and celebrates the subculture that has been oppressed by the system. In addition to war, Ginsberg criticizes the American Capitalist system in a time when the United States was in the midst of a second Red Scare.
The second Red Scare occurred after WWII and was fueled by a number of events. The era is often referred to as “McCarthyism,” as Senator Joseph McCarthy was insistent that Communist espionage was rampant in the U.S. This fear stemmed from events such as the Chinese Civil War, the Berlin Blockade and the confessions from high-ranking government officials that they had leaked information to the Soviet Union. The 1953 execution of the Rosenbergs for conspiracy to commit espionage also fueled the growing fear of a Soviet-Communist takeover. These events caused many U.S. citizens to question the state of national security and increased paranoia centered on the Communist Party of the United States of America. The triumph of communist China in the Civil War led to an increased fear of a globalization of communism. An increase in governmental control was the result, as McCarthy often claimed to have access to lists of Communist spies and many who disagreed with his views were accused of being communists, or sympathizers. The scare illustrated America’s repressive government and the value it placed on capitalism. The idea of communism was terrifying to the United States government, as the capitalist economy boomed in the 1950s.

Howl by Allen Ginsburg

“Howl” rejects consumerism and capitalism at a time when America was profiting greatly from it. Perhaps the most obvious sign of this is the depiction of men burning their money. This is a symbol of absolute rejection of the power of the dollar. Ginsberg’s mother Naomi was a known and active communist and, as a child, Ginsberg attended many radical left meetings and conventions, which undeniably influenced these views. Ginsberg outrightly rejected capitalism and, though a sympathizer of socialism, also criticized communist dictatorships of his time. The poem contains Marxist references as well. This was undoubtedly a factor in the attempt to censor the work. In Footnote to Howl, Ginsberg writes, “holy the fifth International.” This refers to socialist efforts to create a new Workers’ International. Ginsberg also shares that the best minds of his generation were “protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism,” (line 31). The best minds also, “distributed Supercommunist pamphlets in Union Square,” until the police “wailed them down,” (line 32). Ginsberg’s socialist leanings were a source of strain in his relationship with Jack Kerouac, who named the character based on Ginsberg “Carlo Marx” in his novel On the Road. During the Cold War, the threat of socialism was real and imminent. To an audience fearing the globalization of communism, it’s easy to see how the work was regarded as radical and obscene. While the work was originally labeled obscene, it won an obscenity lawsuit, and helped to create a culture that made the uprisings of the 1960s possible.
John Tytell in his essay “Howl’s Echoes,” illustrates that “Allen Ginsberg wasn’t just ahead of his time; he helped create ours.” The transition into the 1960s marked the most drastic change between decades since the economic crash of 1929 halted the flourishing 1920s and replaced them with the Great Depression. As Ginsberg won the obscenity trial, it was clear that America was on the way toward a more accepting cultural identity. The boundaries set and adhered to in the conservative 1950s were being pushed, protested and destroyed in the decade that followed. The publication and subsequent success of “Howl” showed the subterraneans that their voice could be heard and illustrated a liberation in the things that could be written, and shared. For the first time, underrepresented groups, such as women, minorities and homosexuals, were speaking out and raising awareness of the unjust conditions they were forced to live in. The 1960s birthed legal abortion, the glass ceiling, the Civil Rights Act and the gay rights movement, which Ginsberg was a prominent figure in.

Ginsberg was one of the first poets to write so openly about homosexuality. The poem details homo-erotic acts and rejects conventional gender norms of the time. In a time when homosexuality was thought to be a disease of the mind, Ginsberg exalted casual sex and “endless cock and balls,” (line 11). Ginsberg’s work gave a voice of empowerment and ownership to the gay community. In addition to his frank writing on homosexual life, Ginsberg was very open about his own sexuality and relationship with long-time lover Peter Orlovsky. He was also once expelled from Cuba for expressing that he found Che Guevara cute. While the Stonewall Riots of 1969 are known as the igniting events of the gay rights movement, Ginsberg is known as a pre-Stonewall gay rights spokesperson, giving a face and hope to the gay community. In addition to gay rights activism, Ginsberg was a leader in the anti-war movement.

Ginsberg continued to write politically charged and anti-war poetry well after the publication of “Howl.” One of his best known anti-war poems, “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” juxtaposes descriptions of the Kansas landscape with media reports on the Vietnam War. In 1968, Ginsberg signed the War Tax Protest pledge, refusing to pay taxes that supported and financed the war. His poetry and lifestyle clearly rejected the militant, nationalistic views in regard to war. The 1960s gave way to charged and dangerous political protests, particularly on college campuses. The 1964 draft resulted in thousands of students burning their draft cards in protest of the war. As American military presence in Vietnam grew stronger, the protests became more frequent, and more radical. Ginsberg is credited with coining the term “flower power,” a slogan used to represent a passive resistance and nonviolent ideology in relation to anti-war protests. These protests, along with the other radical forward-moving organizations, such as the Black Panther Party, helped to further the Free Speech Movement. Because of the political divisions caused by these movements, and the outspoken members of them, the 1960s was an extremely conducive moment for the Beat writers and many other underrepresented voices.

The Beat writers put an image and an ideology to the subculture Ginsberg worked to represent. The group produced writings for the oppressed, those silenced by American culture. The poem includes references to Neal Cassady, Ginsberg’s love interest and muse, and Jack Kerouac. “Howl” helped to show those who lurked beneath the surface of representative American culture, from those “expelled from the academies for crazy” to those who went “whoring through Colorado in myriad stolen night-cars.” The first reference is almost certainly one to his expulsion from Columbia University, which led to his confinement in a mental institution, where he met Carl Solomon, whom the poem is dedicated to. Of the Beats, Tytell says, “Reacting to the stifling repression of the postwar years, they shared an anarchist suspicion of governmental controls, were socially transgressive and experimental as writers, and interested in forging a new consciousness. Ginsberg was a key figure in promoting that consciousness.” The 1957 obscenity trial illustrates the repressive nature of the culture Ginsberg set out to attack, but his triumph proved a change was underway. This work helped to pave the way for future writers, and allowed the previously unheard voices of the 1950s to dominate the media and literary scene of the 1960s.

The literature of the 1960s reflects the turmoil and chaos taking over the nation at the time. Many writers were more openly discussing social issues such as racism and sexism. With both the Civil Rights and Women’s Rights movements growing, women such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Sylvia Plath began writing about the black experience and the hardships of living in a male-dominated society. Many crucial pieces of feminist texts were written during this period, including work from Gloria Steinem, Kate Millett and Betty Friedan. Ginsberg also influenced more writers to openly discuss and criticize mental institutions. Plath’s The Bell Jar is a semi-autobiographical account of a woman’s mental breakdown and her stay at a psychiatric hospital. Ken Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest is another 1960s novel criticizing the state of the nation’s mental health care facilities in a time in which frontal lobotomies and the like were still performed. It was not until 1963, when President Kennedy signed the Community Mental Health Centers Act that new programs were implemented, strengthening the state of mental institutions in the United States. The decade also allowed for experimentation in writings. Only in this transitional, explorative decade is an author like Kurt Vonnegut not only made possible, but met with such success. Some of the most well-known and most read works of literature were born in the 1960s, including To Kill a Mockingbird and Slaughterhouse-Five.

Allen Ginsberg’s most famous work, “Howl,” has been compared to many great poems preceding it. Tytell said this was the “most overt social commentary since Whitman,” who Ginsberg claimed to have been greatly influenced by. Lynn Michelle Fogel, in her “We Got the Beat: Transcendentalism, Allen Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’ and the Inception of a New, Postmodern Generation” explains that when sitting down to write the poem, “Ginsberg proceeded to accomplish what no other writer since T.S. Eliot had done with ‘The Waste Land’—write a poem that had the capacity to change the American perspective.” The poem has been a source of comfort for those underrepresented in American culture, even through today’s time. The poem shouts an antiwar, anti-consumerist ideology that directly rejects the dominant culture of the time in order to elucidate a vastly unheard subculture. The poem has become an extremely influential and important piece of American literature, and “with more than a million copies printed in the United States, Howl is reportedly the most purchased book of poems in our time,” (Tytell). The poem is still hailed as genius, still taught in classrooms. It seems, even 17 years after his death, Ginsberg lives on.
"Is there a great mad wave of fame crashing over our ears?" Allen Ginsberg asked Jack Kerouac after the publication of On the Road in a letter from Amsterdam in the fall of 1957. The query was prescient, the image apt. Ginsberg would learn how to surf that wave, while Kerouac would capsize and drown, one of the early casualties of contemporary American literature.

Ginsberg’s ride on that wave has perhaps ebbed and flowed since his death 13 years ago, but it is cresting once more, with the recent publication of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg: The Letters (Viking) and The Typewriter Is Holy: The Complete, Uncensored History of the Beat Generation (Free Press), by Ginsberg’s archivist and biographer, Bill Morgan; an exhibition at the National Gallery of Art, “Beat Memories: The Photographs of Allen Ginsberg” (with an accompanying catalog, published by Prestel); and the movie Howl, starring indie heartthrob James Franco, about Ginsberg’s most famous poem and the 1957 obscenity trial challenging its publication in the United States. That trial, along with the simultaneous publication of Kerouac’s On the Road, catapulted the Beats into literary and cultural history.

The intense, candid letters that Ginsberg and Kerouac wrote to each other capture the emergence of that literary and cultural moment when America, and American literature, would change irrevocably. The letters are often elated with aspiration, extravagant—even hyperbolic—with language sometimes soaring for its own sake; at other times, they plunge into despair: “God knows what oblivion we’ll wind up in like unpopular Melvilles,” Ginsberg ponders.
The correspondence begins in 1944, when the two young men met in New York City, where Ginsberg was an undergraduate at Columbia University and Kerouac a dropout living nearby, and continues until 1963, six years before Kerouac's death, in 1969. Although they were greeted by American media as barbarous buoos at the cultural gates—"I go rewrite Whitman for the entire universe," Ginsberg boasted—the letters demonstrate a committed literary perspective. Allusions to Melville, Balzac, and Dostoievsky, Pound and Eliot, Joyce and Henry Miller establish the tradition they were committed to continue.

Some of the letters describe the daring literary ambitions they had for their friends, especially Ginsberg's for William S. Burroughs, whom he regarded as a genius. Others, written from Mexico in the early 1950s, reveal how their views were deepened by living in a country "beyond Darwin's chain," as Kerouac put it. Fortified with tequila and peyote, Kerouac praised pastoral Mexico, and both men saw it as a foil to an American obsession with acquisition and consumption. Occasionally the letters crawl with dense Buddhist philosophy; inevitably they race again with reports of the latest recklessness of friends like Neal Cassady and Gregory Corso. Later letters, more ominously, are full of the hysteria that overwhelmed Kerouac after the notoriety of On the Road. As he reported to Ginsberg, with some of the cascading presumption that galvanized his prose—repeating what he had announced in a television interview—"I am waiting for God to show his face."

God presumably did not show his face to Kerouac, but Ginsberg persisted in his search, outliving his friend by nearly 30 years, relishing the cultural spotlight that Kerouac abhorred. With "Howl" he exploded the claustrophobia of convention in American poetry, so that even Robert Lowell turned from the elite formalism of his Pulitzer Prize-winning Lord Weary's Castle to the more confessional direction of Life Studies a decade later.

But Ginsberg and his work had an even greater impact in the broader culture with regard to propriety. He abandoned the polite timidities of writing for an audience of the genteel few for the most overt social commentary since Whitman. In "Howl" and other works, he wrote about then-taboo subjects, like sex, drugs, and insanity. He didn't just write poetry, he performed it, with a dramatic presence and sheer vocal power and exuberance audiences hadn't seen or heard since Dylan Thomas. It is no exaggeration to say that the dynamic rhythmic momentum of "Howl" led to rap and hip-hop.

Much of his influence clearly has been extra-literary, like his prolonged involvement with meditation and Tibetan Buddhism, decades before such concerns became mainstream. After he came to terms with it, he was open, even flagrant, about his homosexuality when it was not safe or fashionable to do so. A famous 1963 photograph by Richard Avedon of Ginsberg and his lover, Peter Orlovsky, in a nude embrace was posted on streetlights all over San Francisco and became a trigger for the gay-rights movement years before Stonewall. It is no wonder that there continues to be such sustained interest in his messages.

"I would call that man poet," Henry Miller once declared, "who is capable of profoundly altering the world." Ginsberg put his "queer shoulder to the wheel," as he promised in his poem "America," to do his best to make the world a better place. Believing that things could change, that no authority was absolute, he was a key organizer of the counterculture (which for him was not confined to the 60s). Our principal spokesperson for candor in an age of secrecy, deceit, and denial, he freely offered his remarks, whether on censorship or psychedelics, to everyone from Congressional committees to People magazine. "Well, while I'm here I'll do the work," he wrote in "Memory Gardens," an elegy for Kerouac.

and what's the Work?
To ease the pain of living.
Everything else, drunken
dumbshow.

Ginsberg's engagement with the world was central, continuing, and consuming, and it made him a zeitgeist phenomenon. Apparently his work has not ended with his death: His poetry, passions, and preoccupations remain as relevant today as ever.

Ginsberg documented his life not just with words but with pictures. "I do my sketching and observing with the camera," he said in 1993. We learn in Beat Memories, the exhibition catalog by Sarah Greenough, senior curator of photographs at the National Gallery of Art, that his first pictures were taken with a box camera at the age of 15, of his mother, Naomi, at Greystone Park Psychiatric Hospital, in New Jersey.

Those of his friends—his "funny, family photos," as he called them—are steeped in warm intimacy. The early 1950s shots, like the one taken of Burroughs standing next to a sphinx at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or the classic, brooding one of Kerouac, with a railroad-brakeman's manual sticking out of his pocket, on a fire escape outside Ginsberg's window on East 7th Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, were drugstore prints taken with a Kodak camera, purchased for $13 from a pawnshop. Probably the best portraits of the Beats (who have been, after all, the most frequently photographed of American writers), they exist as what Ginsberg called "toticem moments," "when you notice something clearly and see it vividly." The objects in each photograph, whether sphinx or brakeman's manual, serve to define some essential quality in the subject.

Ginsberg's photographs illustrate the Beat priority of spontaneity, the expression of feeling with autobiographical immediacy. As Greenough so cogently observes, the photographs are "as natural as talking or writing," like the lyrical moment when Ginsberg captured his companion, Peter Orlovsky, in a naked handstand in a field at their farm, in Cherry Valley, N.Y. Ginsberg's snapshot poetic, based on what he called an "unpremeditated awareness," was influenced by the memorial relationship he had with his friend Robert Frank, the photographer. The resulting photographs portray a casual unselfconsciousness, a trust in chance, a sympathetic acceptance of the human condition without judgment, pose, or artifice. The touchingly nude self-portraits he took near the end of his life exemplify that ethos.

"The poignancy of a photograph comes from looking back to a fleeting moment in a floating world," Ginsberg wrote in a previous collection, published by Twelvetrees Press in 1990. So the poignancy expresses a haunting yearning for what would otherwise be unrecoverable. His comment underlines his belief that ordinary experience has a sacred quality to be cherished because life is transient.
Ginsberg’s photographs achieved more depth after 1983, when he began using Robert Frank’s printer, Sid Kaplan, and writing on the bottom of the prints. The words, as Sarah Greenough notes, “seemed to tumble over one another with rich exuberance.” Often a phrase leaps out of his scrawled commentary with the shock of epiphany: for example, the note for a 1953 photograph of a homeless man on East 7th Street whom he characterizes as a “shopping cart prophet.”

Some of Ginsberg’s photographs—like the one of Carl Solomon, to whom Ginsberg dedicated “Howl,” in only a white shirt and tie, grinning gleefully and absurdly bare below the waist, sitting cross-legged on a bed—are used to add a layer of authenticity to Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman’s film Howl, which features James Franco (Julia Roberts’s actor-boyfriend in Eat Pray Love) and Jon Hamm (Mad Men).

I must admit, Hollywood biopics are not my favorite genre—they tend to oversimplify and sensationalize—but this film is ambitious and valiantly heartfelt in its attempt to recreate the creative context for the most important long poem written by an American since “The Waste Land.” Its structure mixes four tracks. The first shows Franco as Ginsberg talking about how he writes and key events in his past, like his time in the psychiatric hospital where he met Solomon, and his aborted love affair with the firebrand Neal Cassady.

The second track depicts the notorious court trial of Lawrence Ferlinghetti, sued for publishing and selling an “obscene” poem—his small press, City Lights, published the book Howl and Other Poems in 1956. The steely, cool Jon Hamm plays Ferlinghetti’s defense attorney with resolute sincerity. Mary-Louise Parker is quite believable as a puritanical schoolteacher who dismisses the poem with disgust, and Bob Balaban is the prim though judicially proper Judge Clayton Horn, whose ruling exonerated the poem and helped to inform a national audience of its radical nature.

A third track restages the famous first public reading of “Howl” at Six Gallery, in San Francisco in 1955, a subterranean event in a former dirt-floor garage turned hip art gallery that literary historians acknowledge changed American poetry. Some historians might quibble that Ginsberg did not actually recite the “everything is holy” incantation at the Six Gallery reading, as the film pretends—this was the fourth part of the poem, called “Footnote”—because it was written subsequently. The distortion may have been so tempting because the “holy holy holy” rant is one of the most powerful conclusions of any poem, so who can blame the filmmakers for ending with it, too?

The fourth track is the most experimental, an animation by Eric Drooker illustrating the poem. I suspect that Ginsberg would have welcomed this aspect of the film because of his own collaboration with Drooker, who illustrated Ginsberg’s Illuminated Poems. Despite the slick glamour of its technical sophistication, I think the animation deflates the poem, tempers its rage. Imagine, if you can, a cartoon version of Dante’s Inferno or Eliot’s “The Waste Land.” How can Homer Simpson ever substitute for King Lear? Drooker’s animation is entertaining, alleviates the weighty despair of its subject, and might be effective as a pedagogical device, but it doesn’t shed much light on the poem.

The film maintains Ginsberg’s centrality in the gestation and development of the Beat Generation, a position systematically staked out by Bill Morgan in his history of how the Beats emerged, The Typewriter Is Holy. The title is inspired, drawn from one of the 65 times Ginsberg pronounces the word “holy” in the “Footnote” to “Howl.” As Ginsberg’s archivist, initially working with his photographs, Morgan was an intimate of the poet’s inner circle and was able to observe how Ginsberg advocated for the recognition of his friends. Ginsberg’s detractors have accused him of self-promotion, but like Whitman and Pound before him, he understood that unless the poet speaks on his own behalf, the world will safely ignore him.

Sober, meticulous, with the methodical persistence of the bibliographer, Morgan argues that the Beats were less a movement than a gathering of friends gravitating around Ginsberg’s orbit. But that is an overstatement, since Ginsberg would be the first to admit how much he learned from Burroughs and Kerouac, whose “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” was posted on Ginsberg’s headboard when he wrote “Howl.”

What helped the Beats cohere over time were common values. Reacting to the stultifying repression of the postwar years, they shared an anarchistic suspicion of governmental controls, were socially transgressive and experimental as writers, and interested in forging a new consciousness.

Ginsberg was a key figure in promoting that consciousness. Unlike most American poets since Eliot, he enjoyed an international reputation, and Howl was translated into 25 languages. Its unprecedented excess, the emotional juggernaut of its rhythm and language, profoundly influenced writers and musicians like Bob Dylan, John Lennon, Leonard Cohen, Patti Smith, and the group Sonic Youth and affected several generations of the young. With more than a million copies printed in the United States, Howl is reportedly the most purchased book of poems in our time.

When Ginsberg died, in 1997, there were memorials all over the world—in Berlin, Barcelona, and Calcutta as well as New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. After his death, in what amounted to a last-page editorial in The New York Times Book Review, its editor, Charles McGrath, asserted that Ginsberg’s later poems had failed to match the genius of his early works like “Howl” and “Kaddish,” the epic elegy—with its depths of anguished empathy—he wrote to commemorate his mad mother, Naomi.

This has been the perennial establishment view of Ginsberg, a tired cliché of criticism that has been routinely applied to great poets from Wordsworth to Whitman. The attitude is condescendingly wrong, as silly as the claim that Whitman’s only great poem was “Song of Myself.” In poems like “Wales Visitation,” “Ballad of the Skeletons,” “Please Master,” and “Death and Fame,” Ginsberg showed that he was always at the borders of poetry and beyond, inventing the new. His poetry will stand as one of the monumental achievements of modern American letters.

It is good to be reminded of that. That’s what the new outburst of interest in Ginsberg, in film, photographs, and print, accomplishes. Ginsberg resonates with our times because he helped create them. Rock ‘n’ roll will never die, and neither, apparently, will Allen Ginsberg.

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By John Tytell SEPTEMBER 12, 2010
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Allen Ginsberg. Howl. For Carl Solomon. I. I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical *****,
dragging themselves through the ***** streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly
connection to the starry dynamo in the machin- ery of night, who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the
supernatural darkness of cold-water flats. of Los Alamos wailed them down, and wailed down Wall, and the Staten Island ferry also