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Which way does your beard point tonight? Ginsberg's quest to resurrect Whitman's America

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WHICH WAY DOES YOUR BEARD POINT TONIGHT? GINSBERG'S QUEST
TO RESURRECT WHITMAN'S AMERICA

by

James Altman

Bachelor of Science
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

**Master of Arts Degree in English
Department of English
College of Liberal Arts**

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ABSTRACT

Which Way Does Your Beard Point Tonight? Ginsberg's Quest To Resurrect Whitman's America

by

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Throughout his poetry, Allen Ginsberg is in continual dialogue with Walt Whitman. This thesis focuses on prominent differences in the evolving American character which made these two kindred spirits nevertheless different from each other. In Whitman's time the United States was concerned with the expansion of, and pushing back of, borders of all kinds. To Whitman, America was a collection of states less concerned with dominating the world than with welcoming it in, in every possible respect. By contrast, Ginsberg's America had gained a position of unimaginable world power. Yet to maintain that power, Cold War America had to close itself off from many people, ideas, and possibilities that might threaten its newfound prominence. Through his dialogue with Whitman, Allen Ginsberg chides America for such narrow-minded thinking and reintroduces Cold War America to what it used to be.

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INTRODUCTION

“AH, DEAR FATHER”: ALLEN GINSBERG’S DEBT TO WALT WHITMAN

As is perhaps to be expected with the passage of a century, the United States inhabited by Allen Ginsberg had changed markedly from what it had been in the time of his poetic idol Walt Whitman. In *Whitman's Wild Children: Portraits of Twelve Poets*, Neeli Cherkovski astutely points out that "Whitman's 'child who went forth' had come of age in an America quite different from the one envisioned in *Leaves of Grass*" (168). Cherkovsky goes on to characterize Ginsberg's relationship to the post-war United States as one of complete dissatisfaction with the exploding materialist mentality he saw around him, a mentality which while heaping prosperity on some, left many others feeling disenfranchised, disoriented, and dispossessed.

It seems more than fair to say that to Whitman, America was a collection of states less concerned with dominating the world than with welcoming it in, in every possible respect. By contrast, Ginsberg's America had gained a position of almost unimaginable world power. Yet to maintain that self-same power, Cold War America had to close itself off from many people, ideas, and possibilities that might threaten its newfound prominence. Allen Ginsberg chides America for such narrow minded-thinking.

Moreover, he also in effect reintroduces Cold War America to what it used to be.¹

Throughout much of his poetry, Ginsberg is in continual dialogue with Whitman. He views American society and his own role as a poet through the lens of that ongoing all-important dialogue.

Ginsberg views as paramount his connection to, and incorporation of, Whitman's ideals and methods in order to show Cold War America "the lost America of love," that is, the America of Whitman's time. Witness his meditation on that very concept in these lines from his classic poem "A Supermarket in California" (1955):

Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?

(Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 136).

In this concise image we have the idea that the early America of energetic exuberance and endless possibility has been replaced by suburban respectability. Also, the silence of the cottage stands in stark contrast to the noise and chaos Ginsberg associates with American life during the Cold War. His desire to stand apart from mainstream American culture likely stems from his radical upbringing. According to Bill Morgan, his father's side of the family was strongly Socialist. (Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself* 4). His radical mother, on the other hand, came from a family more in favor of Communism. (Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself* 4). Out of this context, Allen Ginsberg emerged a socialist in later life. Moreover, although Allen always considered himself "culturally Jewish" (Morgan, *I*

¹ It may be fitting, however, to observe that the notion of such a Golden Age embodies a fallacious approach to examining the past.

Celebrate Myself 4), he studied and practiced Buddhism for most of his life. Having such a different philosophical framework than most Americans perhaps enabled Allen Ginsberg to see what they did not wish to see, namely, poverty amongst the economic boom of postwar America. Randall Bennett Woods in his book *Quest for Identity: America since 1945* observes that poverty was much more prevalent in the 1950s than the average person of the time likely realized. Moreover, it touched nearly every segment of society, though it “was deepest and widest among four groups: African-Americans increasingly isolated in inner-city ghettos, mill and factory workers in New England and the Carolinas, Appalachians who lived in the coal region, and residents of the rural South, both black and white.” (143) Woods goes on to characterize the situation among the poor, especially those in large cities such as Allen Ginsberg's New York, as a self-perpetuating cycle in which scarcity of resources and opportunities created poverty and vice versa. Allen Ginsberg undoubtedly saw many such people every day. Furthermore, he likely perceived their desire to extricate themselves from their impoverished circumstances.

A similar desire to escape the misery around him and seek out a better situation permeates the whole of “Supermarket.” In effect, “A Supermarket in California” takes the reader on a compressed version of the sort of journey Allen Ginsberg takes in poems such as “Howl” and “Wichita Vortex Sutra.” Walt Whitman takes similar all-encompassing journeys in poems such as “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” and “The Sleepers.” Each of these journeys shows a large slice of American society good and bad, virtuous and scandalous, in an effort to show America what it is and what it needs to be. It seems appropriate that Allen Ginsberg, in wishing to remind America of what it previously stood for, should imagine he encounters Walt Whitman in a supermarket. By thinking about just how out

of place he and Walt Whitman would be in the hustle and bustle of a modern supermarket, Ginsberg tries to show Cold War America that it has lost its focus on individual uniqueness and profound connection to the physical environment.

In "A Supermarket in California" (1955) we are presented with a boundlessness of American produce that Walt Whitman had predicted years earlier. For instance, he wrote, in the section of *Specimen Days* titled "America's Characteristic Landscape" of America as a land bursting with "beef and pork, butter and cheese, apples and grapes." (Whitman, *Specimen Days* 191) Fruits and vegetables, meats and delicacies, and nearly everything else imaginable seem to overflow almost every line. Unfortunately, not everything is so boundless. We can clearly see the bland suburbia of blue automobiles that is slowly squeezing the life out of the formerly indomitable spirit of America. Luckily though, Allen Ginsberg also shows us what he views as the cure for all the country's troubles: the average everyday people of the United States.

Whole families shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes! (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 136).

Allen Ginsberg views that type of togetherness as the key to overcoming Cold War paranoia. It is true that Allen Ginsberg rarely celebrated the traditional nuclear family in his poetry. However, he does perhaps, in this case, simply wish to give a snapshot of the ordinary people of the United States. These are people whom he hopes will eventually remember that it is deep personal connections to each other which will redeem America, not merely buying the freshest produce. Furthermore, his invocation of García Lorca when he asks, 'And you, García Lorca, what were you doing down by the watermelons?'

(Ginsberg *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 136) will foreshadow his later invocations of not only Whitman but Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, and George Washington, among others. In these gestures, he owes a debt to Whitman, who earlier called upon, among others, George Washington in "Poem of Remembrances for A Girl or A Boy of These States."

Some characters in the poem, be they actual or imagined, are scarcely mentioned at all, if not outright avoided. Neither Ginsberg nor Whitman goes anywhere near the cashier despite snacking on anything they can get a hold of. It seems Ginsberg views the cashier as a symbol of the desire for money, and though their views differed somewhat, neither Ginsberg nor Whitman saw financial gain as central to American life or American happiness. Moreover, throughout this otherwise peaceful journey Ginsberg continually imagines they are being followed by a detective of some kind. Such could be an acknowledgment of the ever present threat of artistic censorship which hung heavily over Cold War creativity, and of the increasing pressure more generally to conform to societal expectations.

Such pressure, whether real or imagined, appears to have permeated virtually every aspect of Cold War American life including "A Supermarket in California." Yet, how is it, that a poem which appears, on the surface, a heartfelt meditation on Whitman's influence upon Ginsberg, truly be a "Cold War" poem? The beginning of an answer may be found in the supermarket setting itself.

A spacious marketplace apparently overflowing with a myriad of produce from around the world seems a fitting representation of the booming economy of post-World War II America. Throughout the poem we see people perusing the various items, such as

tomatoes and avocados. Thus, they seem to benefit from America's ever expanding consumer culture. Moreover, they contribute to it with every purchase they make. Thus, when Allen Ginsberg shows us wives, husbands, and babies, interspersed among the various items, he not only shows us a wide swath of American life, as Whitman might do, but also shows consumerism in action, consumerism in which the poem's characters seem to partake fully, since the poem makes no mention of anyone else in the supermarket, apart from Ginsberg, intentionally trying to avoid the cashier. In this case, it appears only Allen Ginsberg sees approaching the cashier, and therefore by default engaging in capitalist consumerism, as a distasteful activity. Perhaps that is because he believes that those people shopping all around him are more focused on acquiring perishable material goods than they are on the welfare of their neighbors, their environment, and their nation. Therefore, when Allen Ginsberg imagines that he hears Walt Whitman inquiring of the grocery store employees "Who killed the pork chops?" (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 136), the true questions put to the grocery boys, and by extension to America itself, might be phrased as follows: do you know anything about the life lived by the people who raised the pigs that became these pork chops? Do you still remember America's former overwhelming connection to the land? Do you know what it's like to actually, physically, prepare the pork for packing, or do you, at least, feel a kinship with those who do? Moreover, when Ginsberg thinks he hears Whitman ask "What price bananas?" (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 136) he is not just imagining Whitman attempting to discern the rate of inflation over the course of a century. In this case, Ginsberg's imagined Whitman wants to ask, do you know what it took to bring these bananas to market? Do you care about the poverty and suffering those

who harvest them often have to endure? That in itself would be an appropriate question because the banana is a famous commodity in American commercial history.²

Fittingly, perhaps, we do not hear answers from the grocery boys to either of Whitman's questions. It seems unlikely the average person in Cold War America would know how to answer such thought-provoking questions. Allen Ginsberg's imagined incarnation of Walt Whitman also asks one more question of the grocery boys, and thus, to America as a whole "Are you my Angel?" (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 136). Here, Whitman is not just trying to engage in pleasant conversation, but more pointedly, is asking: do you understand my principles? Has any of my philosophy remained with you? Again, it seems appropriate that he receives no answer. Furthermore, the argument can be made that just because Whitman's questions are imagined does not make them unimportant. That is especially true since Whitman is not the only person Allen Ginsberg imagines is close by him in the supermarket.

As he moves from aisle to aisle, Ginsberg believes he is under surveillance by a detective of some kind. This is a comic instance, since he tells us the detective following him is not real. However, in other instances such a situation might readily occur. Cold War America's leaders, ever fearful of Communist infiltration, and subversive activities in general, kept many people under surveillance. Often, such surveillance occurred illegally, and without any legitimate cause. Randall Bennett Woods astutely observes, in

² Regarding the difficult history of the banana's relationship to Latin America, Pablo Neruda wrote in "The United Fruit Co." (1971)

Among the bloodthirsty flies
the Fruit Company lands its ships,
taking off the coffee and the fruit;
the treasure of our submerged
territories flows as though
on plates into the ships. (*Neruda & Vallejo: Selected Poems*, 192).

Quest for identity: America since 1945, that throughout the Cold War, “J. Edgar Hoover had ordered surveillance of student and peace groups, and had gathered information on thousands of citizens, many with no criminal records.” (301) Woods goes on to characterize the American political and military establishment of the day as incessantly paranoid about the possibility of Communist influence in America, to the point that millions of Americans were kept under surveillance or otherwise scrutinized by numerous civilian and military entities.

When Allen Ginsberg imagines himself being followed in the supermarket he is therefore making light of a very real phenomenon in Cold War America: the fact that one could be considered un-American for simply showing the sort of nonconformist, open-minded spirit which America's first citizens had openly embraced. Ginsberg may have particularly felt this irony due to the fact the FBI kept a file on him during his lifetime. Ginsberg knows that he is not in any danger of arrest while he is in the supermarket. Still, the comic twinge of paranoia he portrays when he writes that he was, “followed in my imagination by the store detective” (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 136) illustrates the uneasiness any of his freethinking contemporaries likely felt about what Cold War society asked them to do, namely to fit in, and not cause a stir. However, to do that was impossible for Allen Ginsberg, just as it had been for Walt Whitman. Neither Ginsberg nor Whitman could ever bring themselves to simply go along with a society with which they disagreed because, to them, America was not a nation created by those who fit in, but rather by those who freely chose to stand out.

CHAPTER 1

“A MEANINGLESS INSTITUTION”: ALLEN GINSBERG AND SOCIETAL CONVENTIONS

Both Allen Ginsberg and Walt Whitman embraced positions as social commentators on the American Union of their times. As Whitman served as a poetic model for Ginsberg, it should not come as a surprise that they commented on many of the same things. Themes of sexual morality, material prosperity, the urban landscape, and the liberating potential of America's frontiers ring throughout their work, as, moreover, does a concern for the centrality of the soul of the nation and for the need to resist oppressive conformity. As similar as Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg may appear thematically and stylistically however, there are certain important differences between them. Walt Whitman, for instance, formed part of his philosophy based upon the American version of transcendentalism as articulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Essentially, Emerson believed in order to truly transcend a person needed to separate the physical body from the spiritual self. This was needed in order to understand both. Hence, a possible reason for his frequent meditations concerning what is "inside" and "outside" of himself in essays such as "Nature." He says in a lecture titled "The Transcendentalist" delivered at the Masonic Temple in Boston "The Transcendentalist adopts the whole connection of spiritual doctrine. He believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy" (Nature:

Addresses and Lectures 317). Interestingly enough, those things Emerson believes in appear entirely immaterial outside of the physical everyday world. Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg, on the other hand, found transcendentalism's seeming lack of attention to the body and bodily concerns unsatisfactory. In *Allen Ginsberg's Buddhist Poetics*, Tony Trigilio makes the point that Allen Ginsberg sought out "Buddhist poetics in which both body and mind are engaged with equal emphasis" (51).

Another difference between Whitman and Ginsberg also stems from Ginsberg's heavily Buddhist beliefs as opposed to Whitman's at least somewhat more traditional semi Judeo-Christian ethic. I do not necessarily mean to say that Walt Whitman was, or was not, a Christian. I simply mean he appears in some cases to acknowledge widely held cultural values more than does Ginsberg for example, in the bather sequence of "Song of Myself" the person watching the bathers is ultimately portrayed as female while the bathers are male. Whitman perhaps would have preferred to openly flaunt a male character watching the bathers. Moreover, perhaps he realized that in the America of his time he could not realistically do this. The Christian morality of his neighbors, which certainly influenced him on some level, would not allow it. Ginsberg seems fettered by no such trepidation when he writes about homosexuality. Perhaps Ginsberg saw the old Christian morality at times somewhat less relevant to his poetics than Whitman would have. It may be that Ginsberg's philosophy believes America can be an even freer nation if the idea of one overriding monotheistic religious ethic is deemphasized. Likewise, in terms of deemphasizing conventions, both of Whitman and Ginsberg write mostly in free verse. However just how "free" their verses truly are, is an interesting question. Some readers may be surprised to realize that two of Whitman's most popular poems "O

Captain! My Captain" (1865) and "When Lilacs Last in the Door-Yard Bloom'd" (1865-66) are written in fairly traditional rhymed meter. Consider the first few lines of "O Captain! My Captain":

O Captain ! my Captain! our fearful trip is done;
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won;
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring:
(Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 337).

As beautiful as the lines are, they are not terribly revolutionary stylistically. This type of funeral ode might just as easily have come from John Keats or Percy Shelley as far as the structure is concerned. Perhaps this occasional formalism on the part of Whitman came from the very fact of his inventing a particular type of free verse. In other words, he really had no free verse models. As a consequence, he returned to tradition from time to time in order to regroup himself so he could again attempt to move forward. Ginsberg also, is occasionally more formal than most readers might realize. Consider the opening line of "A Supermarket in California": "What thoughts I have of you tonight Walt Whitman" (Ginsberg *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 135).

The line is not in strict iambic pentameter, however, it is iambic. It suggests a closer connection to traditional English poetry than might be expected from a wild, freethinking, beatnik. Indeed, the fact such an outspoken nonconformist as Allen Ginsberg decided to

write his poem in anything even remotely resembling a traditional meter serves to show the impact that such traditions have had in shaping the course of poetry. As it may be said that Ginsberg followed in Whitman's footsteps in moving, largely, away from traditional meters and to a degree of free verse, he undoubtedly also wanted to follow Whitman's lead in celebrating America.

Unfortunately, due to his troubled times, Allen Ginsberg usually had to take a darker view of American society than did his mentor. He could not praise either America's growing cities or her countryside, as Whitman had done, simply because he saw that Whitman's predictions for American society were not coming true. To Allen Ginsberg, something had gone awry in America between Walt Whitman's time and his own.

That is why, above all, Allen Ginsberg wishes to restore to America the sense of exuberance and enthusiasm that he perceives in the America of Walt Whitman's time. Concerning "Howl," Mark Doty points out that "the title poem explicitly identifies itself as a lamentation for those most promising and most excluded from the "American ideal" (*A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* 116). Overall, he tells us that those of Ginsberg's generation have been pushed to the breaking point by the rest of American society and forced to strip themselves of tender feelings.

Any such feelings have furthermore faded from many others of the characters in "Howl" (1955):

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..."

(Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 128).

Ginsberg clearly views the dollar, the quest for wealth, and worldly advancement, as the destroyer of all hope, creativity, and peace. The dollar is paramount to Allen Ginsberg's criticism of America society because to earn a dollar one must acquiesce to pressure to fall into line with the materialist culture he despises. Those who give in to money invariably lose their creativity and ultimately their selves, as is symbolized by the cutting off or stagnation of their intellect. By calling the dollar heterosexual, Ginsberg links economic prosperity, and probably the social acceptance such prosperity would garner, to conformity with the wider Cold War era American ideal of the traditional nuclear family. As both Ginsberg and Whitman do not shy away from their sexual orientation, we see a possible beginning of an explanation of their disdain of the idea of working for money. Such disdain indeed goes beyond Ginsberg's unwillingness to actively contribute to the military-industrial complex of his time, a system he believes is not only fundamentally sick, but is by its existence degrading the health of every American. Such a view in fact reverses the standard 1950s perception, where to be gay was regarded as a sickness in itself. In "Howl" he reminds us of people who "who coughed on the sixth floor of Harlem crowned with flame under the/tubercular sky surrounded by orange crates of theology" (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 129).³

³ It is important to mention here a few prominently outspoken conservative anti-communist clergy Ginsberg's time who influenced popular thinking. Among these are: Billy Graham, New York's Francis Cardinal Spellman, who served as apostolic vicar to the United States Armed Forces during World War II. Also notable were Bishop Fulton J. Sheen who hosted an important weekly television show, and Herbert W. Armstrong, as well as his son Garner Ted Armstrong.

“Tubercular sky” implies that the entire American landscape is fundamentally diseased. It must therefore be cured as a real case of tuberculosis might be, with a peaceful respite involving contemplation of nature for its own sake. In other words, the only way to cure such a situation is by a fundamental re-examining of the priorities of American consumer society and the military lengths it is willing to go to in order to acquire resources. The presence of orange crates of theology, moreover, implies the widespread influence of the conservative self-righteousness felt by most American leaders during the Cold War era. Also, since oranges are a perishable food item, the implication is that this sort of thinking will not sustain America indefinitely. Ginsberg rails repeatedly against the society such philosophy has spawned.

“A Meaningless Institution” (1948) shows not only his disaffection with the world around him, but acknowledges his debt to Whitman's "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" through a shared theme of dissatisfaction with some type of knowledge others apparently value.

I was given my bedding, and a bunk
in an enormous ward,
surrounded by hundreds of weeping,
decaying men and women.
Old, crippled, dumb people were
bent over sewing. I waited
for an official guide to come
and give me instructions.

After awhile, I wandered
off down empty corridors
in search of a toilet.

(Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 15).

The hospital ward seems to be a sick and misguided America. The poet is above it and so can see what others cannot. The decaying people who are sewing are just a few of millions of nameless people who have plugged in to the capitalist system of Cold War America. He waits for an official guide possibly to argue with him or possibly to see what conformity could offer him. By going off in search of a toilet, the poet decides to make his own way in the world. Making one's own way in the world could also involve noticing and caring about things others consider unimportant. Of course, even when one can disengage from society and see beyond it, the results may not be positive or pleasant. As Ginsberg tells us in "American Change" (1958)

The coin seemed so small after vast European coppers thick francs
leaden pesetas, lire endless and heavy,
poor pile of coins, original reminders of the sadness, forgotten money
of America---
nostalgia of the first touch of those coins, American change,
All the struggles for those coins, the sadness of their reappearance...
(*Collected Poems 1947-1980* 186-87).

“American Change” evokes the way Ginsberg changed while traveling in Europe. The smallness of the coin appears to symbolize the narrow-mindedness of American social and political thinking at the time. He had forgotten American money. He had forgotten America's obsession with money and the conformity that comes along with it. Obviously, he is sad to have to deal with the whole mess again. At this point, America has changed fundamentally from the nation of love Whitman envisioned. The struggles of the coins could refer not only to the physical labor taken to earn them but also to the oppression suffered by citizens of other countries with substantial commercial ties to the United States. Rarely in his writings does Whitman ever mention money, except when he talks about freely handing it out to wounded Union soldiers during his time working in a hospital in Washington, DC, which he recounts in the section of *Specimen Days* “Gifts—Money—Discrimination” (69). Even on those occasions, he does not say that giving the soldiers the money will fundamentally change his standard of living or view of himself, for he makes clear that to him money is not the essence of America.

To Whitman, America is only as great as the average farmer with a plow and an ax. By contrast, in Ginsberg's time the man with an ax has been all but forgotten, in favor of his earning the money to be able to pay someone else to plow his land. That seems the core of the sadness Allen Ginsberg feels about his America.

To Whitman, everyone and everything deserved freedom because everything had a soul. Bradley Stiles, in *Emerson's Contemporaries and Kerouac's Crowd: a Problem of Self-Location*, notes “Whitman's doctrine of ‘Personalism’ his need to put a face on everything he encounters, to know it personally. When he addresses the flood tide in ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,’ he sees it face-to-face.” (40) Stiles further illustrates this

aspect of Whitman by cataloging several other important instances, “such as the hawk in ‘Song of Myself’ that scolds him for lingering too long.”

Allen Ginsberg builds on the same idea. However, instead of revealing the bustling benevolent soul of Brooklyn ferry, he presents a self-contained, sadistic soul of the malevolent Moloch as an image of blind windows. It is distinctly important that the windows in this case are blind, or maybe more accurately that the blinds have been pulled down on the windows and therefore on America's consciousness. Cold War America could not see the potential harm it was doing to the rest of the world by the arms race with the Soviets. It couldn't see the suffering in other countries caught in the middle of the conflict, among them Korea and Vietnam. Moreover, let us not forget that the eyes are the windows of the soul. Therefore, it would seem that if the windows are blind, the soul is at best blind and helpless, and at worst, dead or missing entirely.

The soul is not the only part of the American character slowly being dissolved by Cold War politics and the desire for suburban respectability. No, indeed, it seems that any sort of creativity and unorthodox perspective is slowly biodegrading under the heat and pressure of the wider culture, as when Allen Ginsberg asks in part I of "Howl," "What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up/their brains and imagination?" (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 131) He again refers to the idea that when one is an all-American adult, the proper thing to do is to go off to work in an office building or factory leaving childish things like poetry and desire for deeper meaning and wider exploration of life's possibilities behind. As Randall Bennett Woods observes, "As America moved into the postindustrial era, consumption became a virtual obsession." (126) And what has America, the former land of boundless possibility, and

endless exploration received in return for its conversion to the doctrine of all-consuming materialism? None other than, "Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness!" (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-80* 131).

Unfortunately, such was hardly an isolated case. By Allen Ginsberg's time cities had taken on what Tony Ullyatt describes as the character of "a sterile wasteland inhabited by the living dead" (104). Ullyatt, moreover, characterizes Cold War urban life as a nightmarish living hell in which individuals were so completely categorized and pigeonholed that their entire being degenerated to such an extent that they saw self-destructive behaviors as their only means of defying the "omnipresent, omnipotent bureaucracy" (Ullyatt 105). Thus, what Walt Whitman had earlier envisioned as a great gathering place where people could work together, get what they absolutely could produce themselves, share ideas, and build a stronger more loving America had instead become the chief means of pulling love, and imagination out of the population. Allen Ginsberg angrily declares,

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!

(Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 131).

In this case poverty is the ghost of genius partly because a poetic genius like Ginsberg, influenced by a simpler time in America, had little interest in working for money and therefore in feeding America's consumer economy. Moreover, a genius of any

kind is usually able to see possibilities the average person cannot. Such a person might develop social and economic policy contrary to America's consumer culture. Such a person would of course be branded at best childish and at worst un-American as many like Ginsberg were sometimes described.

Mind you, as angry as Ginsberg is, when he writes, "Moloch who entered my soul early!" (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 131), he makes an important admission. He admits that even a great poet, even someone totally unconcerned with financial success and focused on the well-being of every person on earth, is continually bombarded almost from birth by the wider culture's expectations that everyone will eventually contribute to mass production and consumption.

Moreover, he continues, "Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs! blind capitals! demonic industries! spectral nations!" (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 131-32). His imagery here relates to the bland anonymity of suburban life and to the agents of war and the governments too caught up in their own interests, too sure of their own righteousness to realize that their actions might affect others, or the fundamental need for people to work together.

Unfortunately, the idea of everyone working together toward a similar goal can, like everything else, become corrupted. Cold War America found itself wholeheartedly united behind common goals. As Woods points out, concerning America of the time, "A new type of society emerged characterized by a drive for conformity in dress, architecture, and gender roles; an obsession with consumption and insensitivity to the underclass" (126). The problem for Allen Ginsberg lay in the nature of those goals. In the pages of

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

(Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 132).

This is another indictment of American consumer culture reaffirming that Cold War America had placed things like radios, televisions, and suburbs above the need for understanding and mutual cooperation. Ginsberg goes on to lament,

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

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! (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems* 132).

These lines imply that America's consumer culture has forsaken everything truly worthwhile. They have thrown away everything that connects them to everyone else and to what they used to be, the wide-open America of Walt Whitman when frontiers were still boundless and possibilities still limited only by individual creativity. Implying that these things were sent down the river means they are being destroyed, since at the end of a river often lies a sawmill where natural resources are broken down. Essentially, America has used the raw material of its own poetic soul to construct the soulless edifice of the entirely impersonal modern city and malevolent military-industrial complex.

Moreover, through the image of going down the river, Ginsberg shows that the once idealistic forward-looking America has sold itself into slavery, slavery to a kind of superficial prosperity which, while perhaps placing a long white Cadillac in every garage, steals away just as much of the personal initiative and self-reliance which made a country like America possible in the first place. In his "Independence Day Manifesto" (1959) Ginsberg boils the entire sadistic situation down to "a vast conspiracy to impose one level of mechanical consciousness on mankind and exterminate all manifestations of that unique part of human sentience, identical in all men, which the individual shares with his Creator." (Ginsberg, *Deliberate prose* 3)

It seems unlikely that Walt Whitman imagined the gigantic impersonal cities and the equally impersonal corporations of Cold War and new millennium America⁴ when he wrote "I Dream'd in a Dream" in 1867:

I dream'd in a dream, I saw a city invincible to the attacks of the
whole of the rest of the earth;
I dream'd that was the new City of Friends;
Nothing was greater there than the quality of robust love---it led
the rest; (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 133).

In fact, considering the dehumanizing effect that cities can have on the human psyche Whitman's assessment of the New York of his time appears almost as a fairy tale. As he

⁴ Concerning the loss of individuality and the rise of overarching mass culture during this time, it seems appropriate to mention some works which dealt with that idea. Particularly notable are David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and C. Wright Mills' *The Power Elite* (1959). Each one deals to some extent with the loss of individuality to the military-industrial complex, which by controlling the media, influenced popular opinion to accept conformity.

relates in "Human and Heroic New York," Whitman feels that "New York gives the directest proof yet of successful Democracy, and of the solution of that paradox, the eligibility of the free and fully developed individual with the paramount aggregate." (Whitman, *Specimen Days* 149) One can only assume that Walt Whitman saw the growing commercial cities as a modern innovation which would push back boundaries and increase personal freedom. Though he seems to have maintained that overall belief throughout his life, Whitman's thinking did, of course, evolve as the years went by. By the appearance of *Democratic Vistas*, in 1871, he began to witness widespread political corruption at the highest levels of local and national government. Whitman likely looked on with considerable trepidation as Tammany Hall's Boss Tweed was convicted of corruption and sentenced to time in Sing Sing penitentiary. In addition, President Grant's Administration was, at about the same time, beginning to experience significant scandals, perhaps most notably the Whiskey Ring. Likely it was such political misdeeds which prompted Whitman to write in *Democratic Vistas* (1871)

I would alarm and caution even the political and business reader, and to the utmost extent, against the prevailing delusion that the establishment of free political institutions, and plentiful intellectual smartness, with general good order, physical plenty, industry, &c., (desirable and precious advantages as they all are,) do, of themselves, determine and yield to our experiment of Democracy the fruitage of success (Whitman, *Specimen Days* 269).

In spite of this, Whitman's overall faith in the growing American Republic and democracy in general does not seem to have faltered to any significant degree.⁵

It is difficult to know for certain, but it seems logical to think that Whitman would have deeply disliked Cold War America's consumer culture, since in his youth most people lived in large family groups on the farm subsisting on whatever they could produce themselves as opposed to buying most goods in cities. That fundamental change in America, from rural to urban, from subsistence to consumerism, from camaraderie to chaos, appear at the center of these lines by Ginsberg:

Police dumbfounded leaning on
their radiocar hoods
While Poets chant to Allah in the roadhouse Showboat!
Blue eyed children dance and hold thy Hand O aged Walt
who came from Lawrence to Topeka to envision
Iron interlaced upon the city plain---
Telegraph wires strung from city to city O Melville!
Television brightening thy rills of Kansas lone
(Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 394).

⁵ Mind you, as the 1870s gave way to the 1880s, and 1890s there were more American writers who were critical of what the American city and society were becoming. Notable among these writers was Stephen Crane. In his novel, *Maggie a Girl of the Streets: a Story of New York*, Crane presents Maggie Johnson, a goodhearted teenage girl who eventually turned to prostitution. She does so while living in a tenement environment populated by her alcoholic parents, violent brother, and other assorted dregs of lower class New York. Harry P. Mawson, in his 1892 article "A Hot Wave among the Poor" describes people perhaps not terribly unlike Maggie and her family when he writes of the poor with "faces wan and white, with a look of despair upon them that seems almost ready to break out into a cry for help" (*Maggie: a Girl of the Streets* 104). Even more starkly, William T. Elsing observes in his article "Life in New York Tenement-Houses" (1887) that conditions in the tenements were often so terrible that "in such homes the oft-recurring motto, 'God Bless Our Home' is not an idle mockery." (*Maggie: a Girl of the Streets* 136).

Telegraph wires and televisions have in Allen Ginsberg's view stolen away any vestige of Kansas's pioneering frontier spirit, a spirit first born out of the region's relative physical isolation from the rest of the country. As modern technologies, such as the telegraph and television made Kansas more accessible to the bulk of Americans, so too they made Kansas easier prey to ideas of social conformity and increasing intellectual sameness that were gaining strength throughout the rest of America. In *Understanding the Beats* Edward Halsey Foster says of Kansas, "This, the geographic center of the United States, seemed to Ginsberg the center of whatever had gone wrong with the country" (116). Is it not interesting how the police are dumbfounded by the poets chanting? In the ultranationalist predominantly Christian America of the era someone chanting for peace would have appeared completely alien, as apparently do Walt Whitman and Herman Melville, who as symbols of America before industrialization have figuratively come along for the ride through Ginsberg's remembrance of their principles.

Someone living in the new millennium, having heard years of news reports that consistently identify Kansas as a "red state," might see Ginsberg's assessment as essentially accurate, if perhaps a little harsh. However that harshness is magnified, when we compare Ginsberg's view of the conservative bastion Kansas had become with what Walt Whitman said about the very same area a century before.

Nor the similar days in Topeka. Nor the brotherly kindness of my RR. friends there, and the city and State officials. Lawrence and Topeka are large, bustling, half-rural, handsome cities. I took two or three long drives about the latter, drawn by a spirited team over smooth roads. (Whitman, *Specimen Days* 180).

Of course, that very contrast seems to be what Ginsberg is driving at, that a virtual rural paradise with just enough industry to sustain itself properly has forsaken its frontier roots and replaced them with bland middle-class values. It might be fair to say that the Kansas Ginsberg describes is only different from New York City or Washington, DC because of geography. Its mentality would make it all but indistinguishable from the seats of eastern power. Seeing Kansas as Ginsberg did makes Walt Whitman's assessment of the area almost unbelievable, particularly his belief in

these interminable and stately prairies—in the freedom and vigor and sane enthusiasm of this perfect western air and autumn sunshine, that feature of the topography of your western central world—that vast Something, stretching out on its own unbounded scale, unconfined, which there is in these prairies, combining the real and ideal, and beautiful as dreams. People of this continental inland West know how much of first-class *art* they have in these prairies—how original and all your own—how much of the influences of a character for your future humanity, broad, patriotic, heroic and new? (Whitman, *Specimen Days* 180).

Whitman's words, especially "heroic and new," seem incredibly ironic when viewed through the light of "Wichita Vortex Sutra." They appear ironic because Whitman had hoped the people of Kansas would create a new culture that would be unrestrained by outdated beliefs, and external demands. It appears Whitman got it wrong. The vastness of the prairies has not bred a new sense of boundlessness in the thinking of its people but has instead allowed them to be surrounded and overtaken by the conservatism of others.

One aspect of life in which that conservatism manifested itself most profoundly was in the emergence of "9-to-5" factory and office jobs in Kansas and across the rest of America, during the administration of President Franklin Roosevelt. Even earlier, in the 1880s and 1890s, 12 to 14 hour factory shifts, made possible by electricity, had become standard in American industry. Whatever the length of the shift, the idea of punching a time clock in order to earn a living represented a fundamental social shift throughout much of America. In a predominantly agricultural setting, the idea that "time is money" has a very different meaning. Agricultural labor is not performed for only a set forty hours a week. Sowing crops, harvesting, and other farm chores are done seasonally according to the dictates of the soil and the weather. A person's individual environment, just as it influences what he can produce, will influence how and at what rate he can produce it. Such divergence, say, between a farming town and a fishing village, will most likely lead to different types of social organization within those communities. People living in such a situation, while they certainly feel a part of the group, are able by virtue of their lifestyle to feel a sense of uniqueness compared to the rest of the world. In a situation of rapid industrialization such as that of Cold War America, where time is becoming money and work and rewards are becoming entirely standardized, the individual uniqueness of each person within each particular group quickly begins to decay. In such cases, those who cannot or choose not to adapt to the new conformity pressed upon them are quickly branded outsiders by those with whom they may have once felt very much at home. Many newly minted outsiders will readily yearn to try to reestablish some semblance of the closeness to others which they lost due to external forces.

In his introduction to *The Poem That Changed America: "Howl" Fifty Years Later* Jason Schinder contends that "the central response of the outsider in 'Howl' is illuminated in part by the poets need to develop a community of his own" (xxiii). Schinder additionally views the inhabitants of the troubled universe that is "Howl" as sharing a sense of profound solidarity which they hope can overpower all differences between them, be they actual or imagined. That same idea of time appears pivotal in several sections of "Howl." In particular, many of the characters are trying to escape time. They are trying to hold back the march of time, which they see as a crushing weight attempting to force them to give in to accepted morality. They see eternity as expansive and all-encompassing, much as Walt Whitman perceived himself and his vision of a truly democratic future America. Ginsberg and his fellow beat poets truly were people,

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...

(Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 129).

An overriding concern with time permeates this passage. Throwing watches off of rooftops implies an unwillingness to be pinned in by the conventional thinking implied in a 40-hour work week. Instead such people want to think beyond merely themselves and their own circumstances and to contemplate what is best for the human race as a whole. Clocks fallen on their heads implies they were largely unsuccessful. Such a notion is reinforced by the fact that once they fail to commit suicide they are forced to "grow up" and accept conventional reality of suburban life. I say that they "had to grow up" because most people are only truly considered adults when they enter the workforce, and thereby, at least on the surface, abandon the idea that there is more in life than material gain. The fact that they open antique stores is telling because their ideas of unfettered personal freedom and understanding between races and nations were by then considered un-American. Thinking they were growing old might imply that they began to wonder if they were in fact gradually becoming just as conservative as those they were fighting against. The mention of being burned alive in their suits, as well as the mentions of munitions like mustard gas in relationship to things like advertising, again implies that the larger American consumer culture is making war upon all those who strive for something beyond mere respectability. Ginsberg later said in an interview that at the time he composed "Howl" the literary situation was such that "Walt Whitman was considered a jerk, and William Carlos Williams was considered a jerk, and any sign of natural man was considered a jerk. The ideal, as you could find it in advertising in the loose organizations, was the man of distinction: actually, a sort of British-looking guy with a brush moustache and a tweed coat, in a club library, drinking - naturally - the favorite drug, the drug of choice of the Establishment." (Interview with Ginsberg 8/11/96) This

passage concerns an all-consuming love of and fascination with British culture and its forms, particularly poetic forms. Ginsberg perhaps would say that a person like the one he describes, if he wrote poetry at all, would create artificial poetry based on old models and not born out of his own individual perceptions of reality. A person needn't necessarily be a college professor to write in this way though it does seem many American college professors of the time would have fit this portrait. Therefore, irony drips from his reference to an almost prototypical college professor. Not only did he himself eventually end up teaching at many different institutions, but also he did not have a particularly easy time at Columbia University. His less than idyllic college days probably played a role in these lines from "Howl," in which he refers to students likely not terribly different from himself as an undergraduate students,

who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkan-
sas 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,
(Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 126).

Their eyes are cool because they are not heated by the passions and hatreds of the Cold War all around them. This would clash harshly with the "scholars of war," who could be literal college professors or simply the policymakers in America and Russia at

the time. The mentioning of obscenity is appropriate considering the course of history regarding "Howl."⁶ Moreover it refers to the greater culture of censorship in Cold War America. "On the windows of the skull" implies that many of these subversive things were simply thought and/or spoken, in other words discussed openly in a way that America should have been proud of. Those who were unshaven would have to cower because of the unfavorable attitude toward them of most Americans. When they burn their money they imply it means nothing to them. Just as money means very little to a child, it would mean very little to someone whose main goal was self-expression and mutual understanding rather than personal advancement. Also, burning money could serve as more of a symbolic gesture against the entire American system of the time much like flag burning. Burning either implies that an individual believes America has failed him to such an extent that he must try to destroy its most cherished symbols in order to purge it from his mind.

These are also the same people "who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze/of Capitalism." (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 127). Since nicotine is a mild sedative, the implication is that by burning holes in themselves Ginsberg and others are trying to wake up their fellow Americans by letting the smoke clear. There is, of course, also a comic logic to burning oneself with cigarettes in order to protest a haze of tobacco. It is as if America has been so stripped of spiritual resources

⁶ In 1956, Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" stood at the center of a highly publicized obscenity trial in San Francisco. City authorities, and concerned citizens, charged that it was a vulgar book. They claimed it was inappropriate for children due to its mature language and sexual themes. Bill Morgan and Nancy Peters in *Howl on Trial: The Battle for Free Expression* note that "David Kirk, assistant professor of English at the University of San Francisco, a heavily Catholic school, condemned 'Howl' as a weak almost, pathetic imitation of an outmoded form used 80 or 90 years before by Walt Whitman." (206) In rendering his verdict, Judge Clayton Horn declared that "Howl" had literary merit by saying "A work is not to be judged on a few unpalatable words lifted from context, but as a whole and then from its effect not on childish minds but on the average adult in the community." (Morgan and Peters 123).

that the only weapons malcontents can reliably exploit at first are the tools of the larger culture they despise.

Ginsberg further illustrates his mistrust of the consumer culture of America and the advertising juggernaut that perpetuates it in "Wichita Vortex Sutra" (1966) when he writes

O man in America!
you certainly smell good
the radio says
(Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 409).

In these lines, America is essentially one of those Wild West façades often seen on television: it only looks good from the front. Who knows what sort of corruption really exists on the inside? Yet that appears to be the point: if something looks or smells good enough it must be prospering... mustn't it? It does not seem too much of a stretch to say that Ginsberg despised most forms of advertising. In his poem "America," he speaks about selling his poetic ideas on payment plans with a small down payment as if they were a refrigerator or somebody's broken-down old pickup truck. Perhaps he believes that in the consumer culture of Cold War America that is the only way anyone will notice his work.

In "Europe! Europe!" (1958) he shows the need to think outside the conventional intellectual universe, which had by then become dominated by consumerism and conservatism, by demonstrating what conventional thinking has given birth to

the cities
are specters of cranks
of war the cities are
work & brick & iron &
smoke (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 171).

By “cranks of war”, we can safely assume he may mean the literal crank of the war machine churning out material and eating up human lives and creativity. Moreover, to call someone a “crank” is to call him crazy or say that he is terribly misinformed about a situation. Allen Ginsberg appears to view cities and the people who live in them in both these ways at once. In his “Magic Psalm” (1960) Ginsberg deals again with the theme of individual genius outside of the realm of the narrow-minded politics of any particular moment. “Giant outside Time with all its falling leaves---Genius of the Universe---/ Magician in Nothingness where appear red clouds---” (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 255). As was the case in “Howl” among those who cast their vote for eternity, anyone who turns away from militarism, nationalism, and consumerism, is thinking and behaving outside of conventional factory-whistle-type time. Such people believe themselves to be in communion with the greater universe. Therefore, they are largely uninterested in the everyday ordinary concerns which occupy their neighbors. That may explain why Allen Ginsberg and his fellow beat poets had such an extraordinarily difficult time gaining any real acceptance within established Cold War American society. As poets, they existed outside of the realm of what conventional 1950s America could understand. They refused to give in to calls from every side that they settle down, start a

family, buy a car, and above all simply fit in. They refused to submit to outside expectations and urged others to resist conformity as well.

Largely to their dismay, however, most people eventually crumbled under social pressure and joined mainstream society. To be sure, a certain degree of social acceptance probably came as an inherent reward to this acquiescence. Yet still, it seems a steep price to pay since, as Theodore Roszak notes in his seminal work, *The Making of a Counterculture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition*: “Men in the developed world become more and more the bewildered dependants of inaccessible castles wherein inscrutable technicians conjure with their fate” (13). Roszak goes on to characterize Cold War American society as so worn down psychologically by long-term world tensions and difficult economic conditions that most gladly seek anything that gives them a tangible material security. What's more, he further wonders why anyone of such a mindset would scoff at governmental systems that “provide bread aplenty,” which after all, “takes no effort to chew, and yet is vitamin enriched” (13). A person focused on such a steak-and-potatoes perception of reality likely has little use for poetry, and even less for the poets themselves. Hence they eventually “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” (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 128).

In describing the moon in this way, Ginsberg shows that the paranoia of wartime has not faded. Indeed it has persisted and grown to such an extent that those who wish to live outside of the conventional world of money, respectability, and repression of individualism can only find acceptance in the next world because the existing society

does not recognize these artists' work. Moreover, the laurel wreath is the honor of honors given only to the greatest poets, the likes of Petrarch. By saying that such an honor will be achieved in oblivion, he seems to say the poets will not see the true fruits of their labor. Adulation, however, does seem Ginsberg's concern as much as showing America a different way of thinking about itself, one in which fear and paranoia do not reign supreme. He likely longs for the kind of uncomplicated serenity he had earlier depicted in "Transcription of Organ Music" (1955):

The kitchen has no door, the hole there will admit me should I wish
to enter the kitchen.

There are unused electricity plugs all over my house if I ever
need them.

The kitchen window is open, to admit air ...

The telephone---sad to relate---sits on the floor---I haven't the money
to get it connected--- (Ginsberg, , *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 141).

It is important that the kitchen has no door. Doors to Allen Ginsberg appear as impediments to understanding and discussion, things that have to be circumvented and opened to allow for movement of people and ideas. Also the window being open to the air implies the possibility of new fresh thinking coming into his mind with every passing of the breeze. Such an idea would have appealed to a man tired of the tensions of the Cold War, to a man tired of watching the US and the Soviet Union seemingly do nothing but distrust and threaten each other. It is not difficult to imagine Ginsberg's tongue

resting firmly in his cheek when he says that he is sad the phone is not connected. A poet of his caliber can use his verse to communicate in much more profound ways than a simple telephone conversation. Regardless of the means, he seemed driven to help others understand the need to actively examine the world situation.

Such an open vision by necessity saw that everyone's experience is just as valuable as everyone else's. Such was not the superficial pluralism of Cold War America. Roszak points out that "we call it pluralism but it is a matter of the public authorities solemnly affirming everybody's right to his own opinion as an excuse for ignoring anybody's troubling challenges" (16). Whitman encourages the individual to rebel against such an attitude when he writes in 1871, just after the Civil War,

Still , though the one I sing,
(One, yet of contradictions made,) I dedicate to Nationality,
I leave in him Revolt, (O latent right of insurrection! O quenchless,
indispensable fire!) (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 13).

Moreover, in 1867, he wishes to know,

Who learns my lesson complete?
Boss, journeyman, apprentice---churchman and atheist,
The stupid and the wise thinker---parents and offspring---merchant,
clerk, porter and customer (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 393)

To Whitman and Ginsberg, all the above mentioned figures are capable of understanding and deserving of the chance to understand and benefit from all that America can offer. No one ought to be excluded. Indeed, no one should even be admonished unless he or she tries to exclude others from some aspect of the American experience.

How surprised Whitman might have been to know that within a century his poetic disciple would have to cry out against "suicidal American society at large, and American military and material self-destructiveness" (Raskin 135). All this he protested in his own melodic, manic manifesto. Of course when he did the results proved explosive. As creative works of art often do, "Howl" took on a life of its own, far beyond that of the actual written text. That life, as history shows, was hardly serene. "Howl" elicited heated reactions, positive and negative, from all sectors of San Francisco society. Raskin points out that in the end "the local Philistines felt compelled to cleanse their community of the offending text" (Raskin 211). Allen Ginsberg unabashedly attempts to show the peaceful all accepting attitude he saw in Walt Whitman, and by extension in Whitman's America. As he writes in his poem "Uptown,"

"I've seen everything"---the bartender handing me change of \$10,

I stared at him amiably eyes thru an obvious Adamic beard---

"If I had my way I'd cut off your hair and send you to Vietnam"---

"Bless you then" I replied to a hatted thin citizen hurrying to the barroom
door

"And if I couldn't do that I'd cut your throat" he snarled farewell,
and "Bless you sir" I added as he went to his fate in the rain, dapper
Irishman. (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 424).

Here perhaps as much as anywhere Ginsberg tells the nationalistic, ultraconservative establishment to go to hell in such a gentle way that they probably look forward to the trip. Every insult is answered with a blessing. Such is probably the way Ginsberg and his compatriots wished that all conflicts could be settled. Also, the use of the term "citizen" to describe the man insulting Ginsberg is important since to Ginsberg and Whitman a citizen was someone actively involved in crafting his or her own destiny. Whether that meant building a farm or helping to found a city, or whatever else, an active citizen did not just accept what the government told him at face value. That might apply, for instance, to things like whether or not going to war in a foreign country was the right thing to do. Moreover, a citizen by this definition would understand that every other citizen has the right to determine his or her own individual destiny. Therefore, a man saying he would cut Ginsberg's hair and send him off to war is not really a citizen at all but is merely a person being led by the heated passions of the moment, passions which when left unchecked can quickly lead to scenes like those in "Howl" where we see, "Boys sobbing in armies!" (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 131).

It seems important that we are told that boys are sobbing in armies, boys, not men. The men, the Americans who have already begun their lives raising families and producing and consuming goods, don't cry about being in the Army. Why should they cry? For them it's just a natural extension of who they are. To be unhappy in the Army,

they would have to admit the possibility of other solutions to problems. Moreover, they would have to admit that they have more in common with their Cold War enemies than is convenient for their government. The boys are crying in the Army because they haven't yet given up on the idea that there is more in life than just acquiring wealth and killing anyone who stands in the way of acquiring it. Whitman himself often saw boys crying in both the northern and southern armies during the American Civil War. In *Specimen Days* he writes poignantly about various young soldiers from New York, Connecticut, Wisconsin, Virginia, and other places. He saw the suffering they had to endure. Furthermore, he knew that America could not stand such suffering or the disagreements that brought it about for long.

In fact, when speaking of democracy, Whitman says it "affiliates with the open air, is sunny and hardy and sane only with Nature—just as much as Art is...American Democracy, in its myriad personalities, in factories, work-shops, stores, offices—through the dense streets and houses of cities, and all their manifold sophisticated life—must either be fibred, vitalized, by regular contact with out-door light and air and growths, farm-scenes, animals, fields, trees, birds, sun-warmth and free skies, or it will certainly dwindle and pale" (Whitman, *Specimen Days* 201). Allen Ginsberg wholeheartedly endorsed this idea. To him, as to Whitman, America, and every individual American, must follow a unique path unencumbered by outside pressures.

CHAPTER 2

“THESE STATES”: GINSBERG AND THE AMERICAN NATION

It might be fair to say that Allen Ginsberg likely appeared as a relic of a bygone political era in comparison to most of Cold War America. Like his mentor Walt Whitman he deeply believed in and often commented on the idea of America as a nation. To him, however, as to Whitman, the United States were not a single piece of plastic cut from a mold in a factory, exactly the same in every regard imaginable. When Ginsberg and Whitman spoke of "these United States," as embodied in the Declaration of Independence, they referred to a mutually cooperating group of polities which came together because of the will of the population. This was a population made up of citizens, who were not merely residents of a particular nation but persons actively engaged in every aspect of that nation's life, including choosing its leaders, and, when necessary, criticizing their actions even when said criticism might prove unpopular. That's why they each placed so much emphasis on resisting overzealous authority, particularly when that authority might lead to war. Whitman and Ginsberg both urge America to be ever vigilant in analyzing what the government is doing. If citizens stopped actively partaking in what went on around them, their democratic states and the nation itself would literally die.

Small wonder then that Allen Ginsberg employs a powerful instance of coughing to illustrate the sickly state of his America, which has become a place "where we hug and kiss the United States under our bedsheets the/United States that coughs all night and

won't let us sleep." (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 133). The coughing United States referred to in these lines must surely be the United States of Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. It is coughing because it is tubercular, that is, as thoroughly diseased as the "tubercular sky" Ginsberg likewise lamented. It is the United States of boundless ideas, of a willingness to try and change the world, a willingness to challenge authority overstepping its bounds, a willingness to say no to a culture only out for itself. That United States is coughing under the bedsheets because, in Ginsberg's view, it is on life support. However, it is still breathing because it will not let men like Allen Ginsberg forget the principles they believe in.

While it is true that a large segment of America's younger population did eventually bring about an end to the war in Vietnam in 1975, and that also by that time the civil rights movement had ended many of the forms of brutal segregation previously plaguing America's minorities, the fact remains that in the 1950s and 1960s, Allen Ginsberg believed he and his contemporaries had ample reason to be despondent.

In his poem "Respondez!" (1856) Walt Whitman essentially gives Allen Ginsberg and his Beat Generation comrades their marching orders when he writes:

Respondez ! Respondez!

Let every one answer! Let all who sleep be waked! Let none evade---not you, any more than others!

Let that which stood in front go behind! and let that which was behind advance to the front and speak! (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 591).

Those principles are embedded in a mutual vision of America's true democratic destiny, as exemplified in the initial ideals of the Republic contained in the Declaration of Independence. The ideals ring with the intensity of a revivalist minister in Whitman's "Poem of Remembrances for A Girl or A Boy of These States." (1860)

Remember the organic compact of These States!

Remember the pledge of the Old Thirteen thenceforward
to the rights,
life, liberty, equality, of man!

Remember what was promulged by the founders, ratified by The States,
signed in black and white by the Commissioners, read by
Washington at the head of the army!

Remember the purposes of the founders!---Remember Washington!

Remember the copious humanity streaming from every
direction toward America!

Remember the hospitality that belongs to nations

and men!---(Cursed be nation, woman, man, without hospitality!

Remember, government is to subserve individuals!

(Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 588-89).

Walt Whitman in "Song For Occupations" (1855) also agrees that it is not everyday items and concerns like money, or food, or decrees, or public pressure that will hold a Democratic community together.

We thought our Union grand, and our Constitution grand,
I do not say they are not grand and good, for they are,
I am this day just as much in love with them as you,
Then I am eternally in love with you, and with all my fellows upon
the earth.
The President is there in the White House for you, it
is not you who are here for him,
(Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 213-215).

For Whitman, nothing and no one ranks above the spirit of the average person, and the will of the individual to freely achieve what he or she can without interference. He brought this same idea of innovation to his poetry.

Furthermore, he believed that America gave people the chance to make this realization more easily and more readily in any other country on Earth. "Other states indicate themselves in their deputies—but the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors, or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors—but always most in the common people..." (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 710). A citizen to Whitman, as apparently to the founding fathers, and much later to Allen Ginsberg, appears as a person who understands their role in America. Such a person understands he is important and can by his own effort improve themselves, the country, and the world. Whitman and Ginsberg share the belief that people working freely together will naturally breed democracy. This, in turn, will build nations which will truly stand together not just

because some king or prince tells them to, but because the people desire that it should be so. Walt Whitman reminds us of democracy's "most alluring record", arguing that "it alone can bind, and ever seeks to bind, all nations, all men, of however various and distant lands, into a brotherhood, a family" (Whitman, *Specimen Days* 282).

So often in America today we say the phrase "the United States of America" without really considering what it means. It has become just a name. Particularly, when we say the word "United," most of us likely don't give it a second thought, believing at least on some level that the "United States" are united because they just somehow should be. When Walt Whitman spoke of "these United States," he understood what those of us at the beginning of the new millennium might hardly consider for our entire lives, that the United States are each unique with separate cultures, needs, hopes, and desires. They came together to form a nation not because some generalissimo demanded it, but because the bulk of the American people found enough in common, despite regional differences, to desire such a union. Thus, although Whitman's United States were certainly united, they were neither entirely homogeneous, nor did they wish to be.

Although Walt Whitman had his admirers, especially in Europe, many people did not understand his poetry in his time. It seems that of all the people between Whitman's time and our own, the one person who most understood him, made it his life's work to camp in Whitman's vision of what America had been and needed to become again, was Allen Ginsberg. Through declarations like "Howl," Ginsberg tries to show America how its founding principles have been twisted around.

Ginsberg likely saw himself as living out not only Whitman's idea that people should speak out, but also the idea that government must serve the people not the other way

around. Whitman believed that American citizens were not there to serve the President but to be served by him. It may be argued that Ginsberg largely shaped his own worldview on a Whitmanian model. That very shaping grew out of Ginsberg's commitment to what Chris Challis in *Quest for Kerouac* calls "the intense and loving comradeship, the personal and passionate attachment of man-to-man," (71) which Ginsberg perceived in Whitman. It seems that for Ginsberg the political should flow naturally out of individual relations. Consider, for instance, these lines from Ginsberg's poem "A Vow":

I will haunt these States

 leaning over taxicab seat to admonish

 an angry cursing driver

 hand lifted to calm

 his outraged vehicle

Common Sense, Common law, common tenderness

 & common tranquillity

our means in America to control the money munching

 war machine, bright lit industry

everywhere digesting forests & excreting soft pyramids

of newsprint (Ginsberg *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 460)

As seen in this poem, the speaker's attempt to calm and pacify an outraged driver demonstrates and reaffirms his commitment to meet a curse with a blessing. As he makes plain, such is the only way to control not only the dogs of war but also the specter of industry disfiguring the American landscape. Moreover, it appears that at least as much damage is done to the American soul when tenderness is abandoned.

Not only does Ginsberg echo the phrase "these States," which Whitman originally picked up from the Declaration of Independence, in order to show his affinity with Whitman's belief that the United States are a collection of states, and in turn a collection of many individuals, many consciousnesses, and many souls, but moreover he specifically alludes to *Common Sense*, as the pivotal document leading directly to American independence, which Whitman must have deeply admired. That admiration showed through when he paid tribute to Thomas Paine in a speech given at Lincoln Hall in Philadelphia on January 28, 1877, related in the chapter of *Specimen Days* titled "in memory of Thomas Paine" (Whitman 122). Keep in mind that Thomas Paine, before coming to America, had been a complete failure in everything he did under the hierarchical system of England. He only helped to build something new in America after everything else had failed him.

Whether Paine's document entered the thinking of soldiers in the American Civil War we may never know. Regardless, it is nevertheless of great importance to Whitman as he writes, in "States" (1860) "States!/Were you looking to be held together by the lawyers?/By an agreement on paper?/Or by arms?" (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 608-609). At first glance, it may seem strange for Whitman to say that America cannot be held together by documents, since it is in fact to a large extent the Declaration of

Independence and the Constitution that help to hold America together. However, he seems to say that true unity takes more than treaties, which can be broken, ignored, or simply forgotten. He likely saw the secession crisis of that time as a stark case in point. No, to Whitman and to Ginsberg, mere conventions will not hold society together. "Nations" of that sort are spectral in that they appear artificial. They were constructed by people who did not understand, or who chose to ignore that which a child or a poet can often understand, that everyone is more alike than different. Truly embracing that understanding would be almost like fighting for and establishing independence every day. What is needed is mutual understanding. Moreover, to endure, a society must come to understand that it is a community, and must function as such in every sense of the word. Clearly Ginsberg and Whitman agree on the ideal of a nation as such. As Whitman observes "The old breath of life, ever new,/Here! I pass it by contact to you, America" (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 609). However, they largely agree on the idea of the nation-state as a political entity. The federal union of Walt Whitman's time was relatively loose, operating, at least at times, on the principle that the government that governs least governs best. By contrast, the union of Cold War America had become highly centralized, at least in the public mind, with its recognizable government agencies like the FBI and televised congressional hearings on un-American activities. In short, Ginsberg and Whitman do not disagree over the necessity of America's federal union; instead, it appears that the union has changed for the worse around them. That change manifested itself in America's changing political attitude toward the rest of the world, particularly the Communist bloc. America's leaders, fearful of losing ground to the Soviets, and paranoid about any

ideas that they deemed sympathetic to communism, began to more readily employ censorship controls in most aspects of American life. Moreover, because of such tensions the American government began to seal itself off from, and demonize, those nations it perceived as unfriendly. Invariably, an attitude that one must either believe in American policy verbatim or be branded a traitor began to permeate the average American's daily thought process. Such an attitude ran polar opposite to that which Whitman and Ginsberg felt America should hold about itself.

Whitman, Thomas Paine, George Washington, and others who believed America should welcome everyone and try to live in harmony with other nations likely would have been horrified by Cold War America. I do not, by any means, wish to portray the early American Republic as a complete utopia devoid of social problems. Societal evils, such as slavery, mistreatment of Native Americans, and the oppression of women, were serious and widespread. I mean only to say that early America usually welcomed diverse immigrant groups and their ideas. That is what Whitman, Thomas Paine, and George Washington would have desired for Cold War America, and the absence of any such attitude certainly would have troubled them. Such would have been all the more the case, because anyone who believed as they did found themselves ostracized from society. Finding himself again an outsider, Ginsberg may have identified even more strongly with Thomas Paine and his compatriots because of their defiance of another central government and widely held morality and worldview more than a century prior. Jason Shinder in *The Poem that Changed America: "Howl" Fifty Years Later*, offers that "Allen Ginsberg tapped into the one essential element of this "old American devotion to the idea of revolutionary individualism," that of being

an outsider. The poem empathizes most strongly with those who are victims of large and seemingly impersonal forces-politics economics the dictates of culture.” (xxii)

Schinder moreover assesses Ginsberg’s relationship with the disaffected as a desire on his part to make America accountable for the fate of those left behind in the wake of Cold War conformity. He does so primarily through stark horrific imagery.

Furthermore, as Lawrence Ferlinghetti observes in his introduction to *Howl on Trial: the battle for free expression*, edited by Bill Morgan and Nancy Peters, “The world had been waiting for this poem, for this apocalyptic message to be articulated. It was in the air waiting to be captured in speech” (XII). Overall, Ferlinghetti sees Cold War America as particularly in need of the message contained in “Howl” due to the era’s white picket fence suburban mentality which severely marginalized any dissenting viewpoints. Indeed, he feels the entire era “cried out for it” (XII). Such was the case, though that cry was probably at first more of a muffled curse or strangled prayer for deliverance than a scream. Even into the 1960s with a counterculture movement firmly established (if that is even the right word for what specifically happened), resistance continued. Still, Allen Ginsberg and the beats kept fighting for good reason.

Ginsberg desired to deeply connect with America and remind his audience what the country should stand for. He wrote, "In publishing 'Howl,' I was curious to leave behind after my generation an emotional time bomb that would continue exploding in U.S. consciousness in case our military-industrial-nationalist complex solidified into a repressive police bureaucracy" (Schinder 146). It seems he had reason to believe that "Howl" would have to serve as both the nourishment Cold War society could not provide

the individual soul, and as a call to desperate action. Consider Ginsberg's pacifist stand against blatant police aggression during the Yippie protests against the Vietnam War in 1968 at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. (Charters, "Allen Ginsberg's Life.") His remarkable composure under harrowing conditions, along with a deep genuine concern for the well being of all mankind, endeared him to many seeking new solutions to old dilemmas. Moreover, he never lost his desire to work for positive social change even when it might prove unpopular. Perhaps that is why in the 1970s he often lent his image, especially while wearing a red white and blue top hat, to protests against the war in Vietnam. Ginsberg undoubtedly hoped his message of mutual understanding would still resonate generations beyond his own lifetime.

Of course, it is not only positive peaceful ideals that can continue resonating long after their originator is moldering in the grave. Ginsberg attempts to reconcile that unpleasant reality in these lines from "Who Will Take Over the Universe?" (1961):

The Ghost of John F. Dulles hangs
over America like dirty linen
draped over the wintry red sunset,
Fumes of Unconscious Gas
emanate from his corpse

(Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 265).

It does not seem too outlandish to see the conflict in Vietnam as entirely rooted in the politics and paranoia of the Cold War. United States Secretary of State John Foster

Dulles was unshakably convinced of Soviet designs on world domination. Moreover he believed if communism were allowed to take root anywhere in the world, it would inexorably gain increasing strength and eventually overwhelm America and her allies. In his book, *The Transformation of John Foster Dulles: From Prophet of Realism to Priest of Nationalism*, Mark G. Toulouse tells us that Dulles felt that the overriding Soviet objective amounted to nothing short of “world domination to be achieved by gaining political power successively in each of the many areas that have been afflicted by war so that in the end the United States would be isolated and closely encircled” (227).

Therefore, once America became militarily involved in Vietnam, no President in those years could risk bringing the troops home regardless of battlefield reverses for fear of being considered soft on communism. Moreover, how appropriate it seems to say that the legacy of the major Cold War policymaker hangs over the nation like dirty laundry. Remember that Dulles, as Secretary of State under President Dwight Eisenhower from 1953 until shortly before his death in 1959, gained notoriety for his unwavering stance that America would go to the very edge of nuclear holocaust in order to achieve her goals. Such “brinksmanship” caused many to view him as an uncompromising patriot. Unfortunately, it also helped to spread the fear among many Americans that nuclear war was not long in coming. Such fears likely grew all the more palpable, in the eyes of the public, when Dulles spoke of dealing with a potential Soviet nuclear attack by delivering “retaliatory blows so costly that aggression will not be a profitable operation.” (Toulouse 243)

That is the legacy Ginsberg refers to when he speaks of Dulles’s corpse. Such a legacy needs to be expunged but never forgotten. If it is forgotten, the fumes emanating

from his corpse, in other words his philosophy, might gain even more strength. Moreover, the references to winter and sunset point directly to a time of darkness and cold. Such feelings can lead to thoughts of stagnation and hopelessness, both of which Whitman and Ginsberg abhorred. Trying to break America out of that pre-made intellectual mold was one of Ginsberg's core objectives. Ginsberg's work appeared so revolutionary for the simple reason that it did not find its roots in the conformist xenophobic icons around it, cookie-cutter beliefs that in all sectors of life had lulled the American people to sleep intellectually and caused them to take what their government said at face value without critical analysis. Ginsberg refers to that self-same phenomenon in these lines from his poem, "Bayonne Turnpike to Tuscarora" (1967):

What are the popular songs on the Hiway?

"Home I'm Comin Home I am a Soldier ---"

I did the best job I could

Helping to keep our land free

I am a soldier"

Lulled into War

thus commercial jabber Rock & Roll Announcers

False False False

"Enjoy this meat ---"

Slowly the radio war news

steals o'er the senses---

(Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 468-71).

People can indeed be lulled into war by patriotic songs and slogans that they sing mindlessly without analyzing. All right, we might say, so the soldier did the best job he could. Did he really? Did he make sure within himself that his own conscience agreed with his going to war? If he did, did he examine why he agreed with the war? If he didn't, than perhaps the soldier did not do the best he could. Perhaps then the soldier in fact did a disservice to his country by going along with a conflict not in anyone's best interests. "Enjoy this meat" could have two meanings, either that the soldier should enjoy the adulation from family and friends because it won't last, or that the war machine itself should enjoy this meat and all the people thrown away in a meaningless conflict. By saying this is "False False False" Ginsberg is again showing himself not as the prototypical adult American male but as someone most people would call childish or at least idealistic. Allen Ginsberg believes that a truly engaged thinking person must try to view reality as it really shows itself, uncontaminated by the temporary turbulence of everyday life. He continues this overall line of reasoning in "Wichita Vortex Sutra" (1966) as he writes:

What if I opened my soul to sing to my absolute self

Singing as the car crash chomped thru blood & muscle

tendon skull?

What if I sang, and loosed the chords of fear brow?

What exquisite noise wd

shiver my car companions?

I am the Universe tonite

riding in all my Power riding
chauffeured thru my self by a long haired saint with eyeglasses
What if I sang till Students knew I was free
of Vietnam, trousers, free of my own meat
free to die in my thoughtful shivering Throne?
(*Collected Poems 1947-1980* 397).

When Ginsberg says he might sing while dying in a car crash, he appears to echo the absurdist philosophy of Albert Camus, who held that every moment of life, even the moment of death, should be fully embraced because all we have to count on is the ecstasy of living. His companions would likely shiver because they do not share his philosophy and probably only fear for their lives and worldly possessions. Remember that, according to Bill Morgan in *I Celebrate Myself: the Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg*, to Allen Ginsberg it was a case where "Either we would all live or we all would die; individual nations didn't really matter" (358). Such is a more than fair statement, considering the power of thermonuclear weapons to wipe out enemies in one heartbeat and perhaps friends in the next. Small wonder, then, that at one point he wrote, "All we got to do is really love each other" (Morgan, *I Celebrate Myself* 378).

Perhaps no poet since Whitman himself has taken that ideal so much as a credo to live by as has Allen Ginsberg. The constant talk of positive thinking and never-ending

material prosperity he heard every day bothered him no end.⁷ Such was especially true because the fear, anger, and hatred between the United States and the Soviet bloc was palpable. In his poem "America" he accuses America of over eagerness for war, by laying out the generally held idea that it is the Soviet Communists who are oppressors, and then saying the reasons the Russians desire to go to war is to take away all the material goods that he believes are the real cause of tensions between the superpowers anyway. The negative reaction to this and other poems in "Howl" is not terribly surprising considering that Cold War America was, to say the least, extremely pleased with the position it had gained for itself as a world leader. Such a self perception stood in contrast to the sort of nationalism Americans might have expressed in Whitman's time. Nineteenth century America, through the doctrine of manifest destiny, believed that America would inevitably expand across the whole of the North American continent. By Allen Ginsberg's time, such expansionist attitudes clearly continued.

In barely half a century following the Spanish-American war of 1898, the first major foreign intervention in the nation's history, America had gained not only material wealth on a previously unconscionable scale, but also several Pacific Territories, victory in two world wars, and a general feeling that America had the right to interfere with anyone she pleased. In foreign policy, the United States often supported brutal dictators in Latin America just because they were nominally anti-Communist. For example, Stephen G. Rabe, in his essay "Dulles, Latin America, and Cold War Anticommunism" states that The United States lavished praise and honors, such as "a Legion of Merit," on Latin

⁷ It seems appropriate, at this point, to note some of most important contemporary intellectual literature that surely influenced Ginsberg. Foremost, perhaps, is John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society* (1958) a withering assault on consumer culture and Eisenhower Republicans. Galbraith's work inspired Michael Harrington's, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (1962) another striking study which helped inspire President Kennedy's "War on Poverty" and President Johnson's "Great Society."

American strongmen including “both Manuel Odría, the military dictator of Peru, and Marcos Pérez Jiménez of Venezuela.” (*John Foster Dulles and the Diplomacy of the Cold War* 170) The fact that these regimes, with America's blessing, brutalized many of their own people seemed a small price to pay for America's ever escalating affluence and world influence, as evidenced by the fact Dulles turned away requests from concerned citizens that his department should take steps to assist “the political prisoners rotting in the dungeons of Pérez Jiménez.” (*John Foster Dulles and the Diplomacy of the Cold War* 170-171). By this I mean simply to attempt to illustrate how typical Americans imagined themselves as a country in the world. Essentially, 1950s Americans felt on top of the world, and the media did little to challenge that notion. As Raskin observes in *American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the making of the Beat Generation*, “For the most part people didn't hear negative political news about America in the mid-1950s. They certainly didn't read it in the pages of popular magazines” (122). Raskin goes on to characterize Cold War America's general distaste for poetry in similar terms. In short, Americans of the era wanted little to do with the deep difficult issues often tackled in poetry, issues which might cause them to question the fundamental values of their nation. Moreover, most Americans of the era likely felt that the newer, more experimental poetic styles emerging in the post-war years were too unconventional to be easily understood. Randall Jarrell, in his essay “The Obscurity of the Poet,” bemoans the situation when he writes “since most people know about the modern poet only that he is obscure-i.e., that he is difficult, i.e., that he is neglected-they naturally make a causal connection between the two meanings of the word, and decide that he is unread because he is difficult” (3). Ginsberg had no such misgivings about grappling with what America had become. Hence

his fervent belief in the necessity of “Howl” should come as no surprise. Ginsberg therefore fits the definition of the consummate outsider in relationship to his times, due to his longing for the American Republic as he perceived it in Whitman.

In the early Republic of Whitman's day, it appears that individual persons of conscience could still speak out freely against injustice without substantial fear of social condemnation. Whitman believed fervently in the ideals of the founding fathers. He likewise believed in the ideals of men like Thomas Paine, who spoke out sometimes on pain of death or other severe punishment in an attempt to correct perceived injustice. Allen Ginsberg attempts to speak out similarly when he writes at one point in “Wichita Vortex Sutra” (1966):

Put it this way

Lincoln Nebraska morning Star---

Vietnam War Brings Prosperity

Father I cannot tell a lie!

(Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 399).

In such a vision it appears prosperity is available exclusively to the warmongers. Perhaps it is also to be had by the munitions makers. In fact, it might have been assured to those running for office on promises of escalating conflict. Not to the average person, will any real prosperity come. Nor will the wives, mothers, and children of those killed in battle prosper in any meaningful way. By prosperity, is the reader supposed to think of the jobs in munitions plants created by a military buildup? Did the man on the radio even

know such an answer? War can bring prosperity, in terms of the National pride of a victorious country. Additionally, innovations developed during wartime, such as Radar, can have useful peacetime applications. To Ginsberg, however, this hardly justifies war. Moreover, it is interesting that Ginsberg invokes George Washington, American icon and paragon of virtue, in protest of war. He is trying to remind America of one of its founding principles: the right to say “no” to seemingly unjust governmental action. A century earlier Whitman had tried to do the same by reminding people that the president serves them, not the other way around. Just as Walt Whitman believed the instruments of government should serve the people, so he believed all other societal developments should do the same.

Such an idea was likely to resonate deeply with the generation whose President seemingly on no authority but his own sent thousands to their deaths in Vietnam. Furthermore, as Ann Charters notes in “Allen Ginsberg’s Life,” Ginsberg “was the archetypal Beat Generation writer to countless poetry audiences and to the general public.” (Charters, “Allen Ginsberg’s Life”). Additionally, Ginsberg never lost his contempt for imposed mores or his belief that every individual, if left unhindered by societal expectations, could eventually find ultimate fulfillment and enlightenment.

What then is this enlightenment which Ginsberg embodies? Who has found, or is in the process of finding, it? Ginsberg answers that it is “those who will not work for money, or fib and make arms for hire, or join armies in murder and threat, those who wish to loaf, think, rest in visions, act beautifully on their own, speak truthfully in public, inspired by Democracy” (Ginsberg, *Deliberate prose* 3). Ginsberg deeply fears that the United States is gradually getting ready for war, and the carnage that implies carnage

Whitman also saw firsthand in the Civil War. Though Walt Whitman did not necessarily scorn working for money, he expressed no feeling of material loss when he doled his out to wounded Union soldiers. That attitude seems to originate from a conviction that there is more to maintaining Democracy than mere affluence. Perhaps then it is no stretch to imagine Whitman cheering on high as he heard Ginsberg say,

"The stakes are too great-an America gone mad with materialism, a police-state America, a sexless and soulless America prepared to battle the world in defense of a false image of its authority. Not the wild and beautiful America of the comrades of Walt Whitman" (Ginsberg, *Deliberate prose* 4).

Ginsberg believed people naturally gravitated to peace, mutual cooperation, and self determination, and that if allowed to act for themselves naturally, they will assist each other and eventually form a union not unlike that which Whitman envisioned for the United States. Whitman says that he loves the union and the Constitution, but no more so than he does the average person, because it is working people not princes and kings who created the Constitution he loves. He goes on to remind the reader that the President, Congress, and all the bureaucrats would be totally impotent without the powers granted to them by the average person. In turn, because government officials are nothing more than individuals and groups of individuals elevated into office by others not unlike themselves, they should never for a moment begin to think themselves omnipotent or superior to their neighbors who elected them. Such a message likely rang poignant in Allen Ginsberg's ears. Throughout the Cold War he witnessed the government ostensibly

elected to carry out the will of the people engaging in censorship and warfare seemingly on its own accord. How it must have enraged him to find that at first hardly anyone protested. Instead, most people took the attitude that the government knew best. Hence, most people did not question the warmongering of John Foster Dulles because they believed, at least in part, that America, their beloved America, was in the right in everything she did, and therefore if the decision to use nuclear weapons ultimately came it must be because such was the best course of action. In most people's minds the government could do no wrong. So why bother to question its policies or the underlying motives behind them? To Allen Ginsberg, this mindset was the opposite of the way a truly engaged citizen of a democratic nation ought to think, especially regarding potentially devastating military conflict.

The idea of passivity in the face of potential nuclear holocaust terrified Ginsberg to the very marrow of his bones. Michael Schumacher, in *Family Business: Selected Letters Between a Father and Son* reminds us that Allen believed "The alternative is individual action." Allen often said he favored "warning your neighbor, actual individual responsibility, in cooperation with others who feel an actual threat" (Ginsberg, *Family Business* 186). Along the same line of reasoning, he once warned his father, "Don't let the government do your deciding for you that's like asking for it" (Ginsberg, *Family Business* 189). This may explain why he also once told his father, in the same letter "the government is mad. The USA is off its rocker if it thinks the atom bomb is in implement of peace" (Ginsberg, *Family Business* 189).

It may seem odd to us today that a weapon of mass destruction could be viewed by anyone as in any way peaceful, but at the time the US government in its policy of

containment and mutual deterrent thought that being better armed than the Soviet Union was the only way to preserve world peace. Allen Ginsberg neither understood nor agreed with this idea. Perhaps that is why, in another of his letters to his father, he suggests tensions might dissipate if “the Russians could read the New York Times every day. It would be equally helpful if we could read Pravda every day.” (Ginsberg, *Family Business* 189) In an even more drastic demonstration of his frustration with the spin doctoring swirling all around him, he suggested that it would benefit all concerned if “somebody cut them both up and mixed them at random and dished up the mixture for international consumption. Try taking a statement by America about bomb tests and a statement by Russia about bomb tests, cut them to ribbons with a razor blade, shake in a paper bag and reassemble at random. You'll emerge with a complete coherent international manifesto displaying the subconscious intentions of both parties.” (Ginsberg, *Family Business* 189)

His obvious mistrust of distant government enterprises seemingly seeking nothing but their own private agendas may be the background for these lines in his poem, “America” (1955):

America I've given you all and now I'm nothing.

America when will we end the human war?

Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.

Your machinery is too much for me.

There must be some other way to settle this argument.

America you don't really want to go to war.

America it's them bad Russians.

Them Russians them Russians and them Chinamen.

And them Russians.

The Russia's power mad. She wants to take

our cars from out our garages.

America this is quite serious.

America this is the impression I get from looking in the television set.

America is this correct?"

(Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 146-148).

That final line, that simple question, seems at the heart of Allen Ginsberg's discontent. Mind you, most of America encountered no such misgivings about the state of society at large. That's why "in the 1950s, "Howl" shocked the middle class and pundits of positive thinking Ginsberg aimed to wake America up from its slumber. 'God damn, the optimists of this generation!' He railed in his journals" (Raskin 121). It almost goes without saying that Ginsberg felt positive thinkers willfully ignored America's shortcomings, and those same shortcomings had caused America to fail in its task of becoming the Nation its founders had intended. He felt that disappointment profoundly in the socioeconomic and racial divisions seething below the surface of society. Moreover, America's militaristic stand against communism in Korea and Vietnam stood directly against what he believed a free, open, all-encompassing democratic society should strive for. To him, the madness would not end until America remembered how to welcome and incorporate different viewpoints. As a consequence, Raskin notes that "In Howl, there are references to wars, wartime, and the scholars of war but what wars, and what wartime

Ginsberg does not say.” (134-35) Perhaps that is meant to show that such destructive conflict is, and will remain, all pervasive in societies until people realize the need to look past petty differences. Until people, both capitalist and communist, could truly come to that realization no conventional timeframe could legitimately be assigned at all to the conflicts contained in “Howl.” Such a destiny of eternal strife and resultant devastation stood in diametric opposition to the open minded peaceful nation Walt Whitman had imagined.

CHAPTER 3

"I RAISE THE PRESENT ON THE PAST": AMERICA AS A VISION OF POSSIBILITY

Both Allen Ginsberg and Walt Whitman not only saw America as it appeared to them in their times, but also as a vision of what a truly democratic nation could become. They both look to the future, a future which they saw as partly rooted in a return to America's past ideals as embodied in the original ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Those ideals, they believed, included everyone, and welcomed all but the narrow minded. Both believed that America's intellectual and spiritual boundaries will and must expand as her physical boundaries had already done. Both Whitman and Ginsberg see as central the idea of embracing diverse peoples and ideals, be they newly arrived immigrants or perceived political enemies. Both perceived hope to the west not yet fully achieved but within reach of dedicated effort. This effort would be put forth by innately innocent souls working for the betterment of everyone. Such they believed America would again become one day, because she had been such previously.

It was abundantly clear by the state of the nation in the midst of the Cold War that America had somehow lost some essential ingredient out of the original recipe of the country's character since the time of Walt Whitman. Yet dreary as things undoubtedly appeared to observers at the time, Whitman himself in "For Him I Sing" (1871) offers a small measure of hope when he says "I raise the Present on the Past" (Whitman, *Leaves*

of Grass 8). With the nation now returning to relative peace after World War II and the Korean conflict, adventurous spirits everywhere were able once again to turn their attention and their ambitious dreams toward the West, particularly California.

Many other pioneers and visionaries obviously preceded the writers of the beat generation into the golden land of California. Whitman himself had a century earlier written of his belief that California by virtue of its resources and unspoiled beauty held the essence of the nation's future. San Francisco, because of its rough-and-tumble Gold Rush past and relative isolation at the furthest edge of America, viewed itself is largely separate from the rampant conservatism engulfing the "political and cultural establishment" (Raskin, 10). of America's ever expanding white-picket-fence suburban culture. Such relative isolation seems to have encouraged unconventionality in many aspects of life. As long ago as the Gold Rush days, California has appeared to many a sort of separate entity not fully subject to the cares and concerns running rampant in the rest of the country. It often seems so even today, thanks to the glamour of Hollywood as the one place most of all where an individual person can make an impression that thousands, maybe millions, will feel and respond to.

Though neither was a starlet, Whitman and Ginsberg both possess as an overriding feature of their character exceeding desire to see and be seen to affect the world around them and be affected by it. "The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it," Whitman sometimes observed. (McWilliams 218) Moreover, Stiles points that "The individual's contribution to reality not only trickles down the timeline to those who follow, but also moves outward spatially" (40).

In this regard, in "On Journeys through the States" (1871), Whitman lays out his hope that even if America forgets itself (which, I contend, by Ginsberg's time it had), she will be drawn back to her initial values by poets who can still sing of them.

We, willing learners of all, teachers of all, and lovers of all.

We confer on equal terms with each of The States,

We make trial of ourselves, and invite men and women to hear;

We say to ourselves, Remember, fear not, be candid, promulge the

body and the Soul;

Dwell a while and pass on---Be copious, temperate, chaste, magnetic,

And what you effuse may then return as the seasons return,

(Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 10).

Along with telling people they should not just passively accept what they are told by those in authority, Whitman tells future poets that they must speak of America and their world in the ways that they see it. Such an attitude would largely disregard attitudes that have come before unless, and only unless, the poet feels that those ideas resonate with his times and his own unique poetic voice. For instance, in one portion of "Song of Myself" (1881) Whitman advises a future protégé that,

You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through

the eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books;

You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me:

You shall listen to all sides, and filter them from yourself.

Loafe with me on the grass---loose the stop from your throat

(Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 33).

Considering the course of his own poetic career, one could easily imagine Allen Ginsberg loafing beside Whitman on the grass soaking up such wisdom as an apprentice might from his master, or a son might from a father. One thing Allen Ginsberg never did was accept American culture on its own conventional terms. As his friend and mentor, William Carlos Williams, said in his introduction to *Howl and Other Poems*, "Poets are damned but they are not blind, they see with the eyes of the angels." (Williams 8) Among the many troubling images which greeted him, Ginsberg did particularly perceive an ever-increasing groundswell of people trying to throw off Cold War paranoia. He refers to these first rumblings in his "Independence Day" manifesto:

At the same time there is a crack in the mass consciousness of America -- sudden emergence of insight into a vast national subconscious netherworld filled with nerve gases, universal death bombs, malevolent bureaucracies, secret police systems, drugs that open the door to God, ships leaving Earth, unknown chemical terrors, evil dreams at hand." (Ginsberg, *Deliberate prose* 4).

Ginsberg also waited eagerly for the reemergence of what Walt Whitman referred to in the 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*. Concerning the American character, Whitman says "America prepares with composure and good-will for the visitors that have sent word. The talented, the artist, the ingenious, the editor, the statesman, they fall in their

place and do their work. The soul of the nation also does its work. It rejects none, it permits all" (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 729). Whitman believes that a person, regardless of social standing or political affiliation, who comes to America willing to work hard to contribute to the development of the nation should and will be accepted into the larger society. To Whitman, no one is more worthy of notice than anyone else. He contends that every person should be dealt with on his or her own terms without traditional preconceptions. He carries the same attitude into his views about poetry. He says "the messages of great poems to each man and woman are, come to us on equal terms, only then can you understand us. We are no better than you, what we inclose you inclose, what we enjoy you may enjoy." (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 717). Whitman seemed to believe that every American was capable of understanding his or her own world and the canonical literature contained in it.

Much like Ginsberg, Whitman seems almost obsessed with the idea that the actions of one individual will trigger the actions of others. Take, for instance, this ominous warning to tyrants in his classic poem "Europe, The 72d and 73d Years of These States" (1871):

Suddenly , out of its stale and drowsy lair, the lair of slaves,
Like lightning it le'pt forth, half startled at itself,
Its feet upon the ashes and the rags---its hands tight to the throats of kings.
Those corpses of young men,
Cold and motionless as they seem, live elsewhere with unslaughter'd vitality.
They live in other young men, O kings!
They live in brothers, again ready to defy you! (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 266-68).

On the literal level the poem warns America, then still a slaveholding nation, that the peace it felt could not and would not endure. Moreover, it appears a slap in the face of many of the monarchs of Europe, particularly those of the Austrian dominated German Confederation and Habsburg Empires, who experienced massive nationalism among their subject peoples around this time, and ultimately again around the time of World War I. Concerning poetry, Whitman, in these lines, points to a figure like Allen Ginsberg who will resurrect his ideas of long non-hierarchical verse structures enfolding everything they come in contact with. He does so through the idea that beliefs whether about physical emancipation or poetic expression often endure despite difficult opposition. It appears that prediction came true in the space of one night.

The debut of "Howl" has gone down in the history of 20th century poetry. None in attendance could contain their excitement at finally hearing their mutual yearning for true creative freedom articulated in verse. It appeared to all that, as Michael McClure, one of the poets reading his work on the night Ginsberg's "Howl" made its now legendary debut, put it in his book *Scratching the Beat Surface*, "A human voice and body had been hurled against the harsh wall of America and its supporting armies and navies and academies and institutions and ownership systems and power-support bases" (McClure, 45).

That desire and need to approach life and be approached by it unhesitatingly invariably found expression in the new free-form nonacademic verse of the beat generation. McClure goes on to say, "None of us wanted to go back to the gray, chill, militaristic silence, to the intellectual void to the spiritual drabness" (46). Overall, those present had reached a point of complete disillusion with the state of poetry they saw

around them. As a result, they eagerly sought out anything that offered alternative viewpoints and the possibility of vision.

Undoubtedly, they wanted vision, they wanted to see clearly. Yet what exactly did they wish to see? Ginsberg's body of work demonstrates his generation's intention to see America, the world, and their role in the universe as they really were without the idealistic trappings of stylized verse forms such as the sonnet. "Poetry is the record of individual insights into the secret soul of the individual and because all individuals are one in the eyes of their creator, into the soul of the world. The world has a soul," (*Deliberate Prose* 5) Ginsberg declared. The quest to reveal that soul and the inherent beauty and goodness it contained may have motivated these observations about conservative attitudes made in an interview with Seth Goddard later in his career:

They were so mean-spirited and lacking in humor and enthusiasm in old American values. What would they do with Walt Whitman? What would they do with Thoreau if they were going to do that with us? They were out of sync with basic American values--Emerson, Thoreau and all that. I thought they were sort of un-American. ("Interview with Allen Ginsberg").

Ginsberg refers, of course, to the censorship troubles which he and many of his fellow beat poets encountered in the 1950s. The chief among these was undoubtedly the obscenity trial of "Howl" in 1956. It is at the same time tantalizing and terrifying to think what America's conservative Cold War establishment might have made of Walt Whitman, someone who did not see the world in "free world" versus "Communist bloc"

terms. In *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews, 1958-1996* David Carter shows that as if to leave no doubt about his sentiment, Ginsberg contributed these words to an antiwar rally:

I accept America and red China
to the human race
Madame Nhu and Mao Tse Tung
are in the same boat of meat (Carter 11).

It is intriguing that he mentions in this case the ironic idea of meat. In "Wichita Vortex Sutra," he also talks about enjoying meat, implying that to the warmongers all human hopes, ambitions, and talents are just slabs of beef ready to be tossed into the grinder. What becomes of them afterward hardly seems relevant to those making such decisions. In *Spontaneous mind: selected interviews, 1958-1996* David Carter notes that Ginsberg himself once remarked; "It's like a big booby trap of massed hatred and anxiety that cuts off all soft feelings in the body and ultimately results in a mass illusion of fear manifested in an H-bomb. Another alternative resolution of the conflict is apparent which is we all surrender to each other, all of us bankrupt, and find a friendly human universe where we can all completely exist at once" (Carter 13).

The simple fact of Ginsberg's dissatisfaction with the Cold War conservatism in America pushed him heavily towards attempting to supplant it. When he was asked by conservative colossus William F. Buckley Jr. what he hoped for regarding some sort of "new order" to replace the status quo of American society, he replied "I'm hoping it will

be orderly and gentle." He went on to say that the goal of any counterculture movement he supported was "alteration of consciousness toward some greater awareness and greater individuality" (Carter 77).

Such a vision adheres closely to that which Walt Whitman had foreseen for America scarcely a century earlier. He stated in his 1872 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* that America would, "become the grand producing land of nobler men and women—of copious races, cheerful, healthy, tolerant, free—to become the most friendly nation, (the United States indeed)—the modern composite nation, form'd from all, with room for all, welcoming all immigrants...the leading nation of peace" (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 741). He goes on to emphasize his belief that poetry will assist in such an endeavor saying that 'Leaves of Grass' already publish'd, is, in its intentions, the song of a great composite *democratic individual*, male or female" (Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 743-44).

Such is also Ginsberg's idea of what American poetry that tells the truth should inspire. Poetry must reach beyond the fleeting and the fashionable in order to embrace everyone regardless of social standing or political leanings. In a way, to truly relocate America, one had to step out of American time. As was the case in "Howl" among those who cast their vote for eternity, anyone who turns away from militarism, nationalism, and consumerism is outside of conventional factory-whistle-type time and is in communion with the greater universe. Such appears a clear goal of the Beat movement.

Whether one approved of the movement or not, it was undeniably different. It seemed an attempt by a myriad of diverse people fed up with the status quo to wrest control of an American conscience gone into stasis. These were visionaries,

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, (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 129).

The phrase “hopeless cathedrals” implies that conventional religion gave no comfort to those trying to change American society, and in fact probably only served to reinforce the goals of Cold War suburbia. The soul’s showing itself for a second, however, does imply that there is still some hope as long as people are unwilling to just accept consumer culture and the military and industrial complex at face value without examination. In other words, there is hope for anyone who is unwilling to be indoctrinated, and therefore willing to remain open-minded. However, that very open-mindedness can also be seen as childish and un-American to a nation obsessed with settling down in the suburbs, raising a family, and buying a car. Therefore, it is not just to his mentally unstable friend Carl Solomon that Allen Ginsberg directs his message when he says “where you bang on the catatonic piano the soul is innocent and/immortal it should never die ungodly in an armed madhouse” (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 133).

To Ginsberg, the soul is innocent as long as it is not corrupted essentially by the pursuit of the well-known American dream. By implying the soul is immortal, but that it can die when surrounded by war and hatred, Ginsberg reminds us that so-called childish ideas of understanding, forgiveness, and working for the benefit of others are intrinsic to the human spirit and that even if they die in one person or group of people, they will endure in others. One idea likely to live on is the idea of taking the time to see what lies

beyond oneself, attempting to take in all that life has to offer without overlooking anything. Furthermore, in a fast-paced world obsessed with materialism, a line such as this, from "America" (1955), rings as an indictment simply because it is likely to be overlooked: "America the plum blossoms are falling" (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 146).

Here is something that the average person obsessed with making a living would not notice. Moreover, government officials obsessed with containing communism and keeping the American industrial giant running would hardly care about falling blossoms. That same idea of taking the time to see what lies beyond oneself, to realize that one is not the universe but only inhabits it to no more of a degree in any other life form, permeates these lines from "Sunflower Sutra" (1955):

Poor dead flower? when did you forget you were a flower? when did you
look at your skin and decide you were an impotent dirty old locomotive?
the ghost of a locomotive? the specter and shade of a once
powerful mad American locomotive?

You were never no locomotive, Sunflower, you were a sunflower!

we're all golden sunflowers inside (Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980* 139).

It seems somehow fitting to portray America's descent from a wide-open, all accepting, and predominantly agricultural society to a xenophobic, industrial giant in terms of a sunflower, which now in Ginsberg's mind thinks of itself as a beat-up

locomotive. By invoking America in the course of such a metaphor, Allen Ginsberg is trying desperately to show America that what it has lost through materialism, what it is moreover continuing to lose by virtue of paranoia, is the very essence of itself. America in his view should be the sunflower, open, cheerful, and hospitable. America should not be like the locomotive, concerned only with getting from place to place and accomplishing one goal after another ultimately leaving itself exhausted and ravaged. However, Ginsberg seems to feel that such a fate is not inevitable for America. Indeed through that same defiled sunflower he holds out a glimmer of hope for eventual rebirth.

By saying that we are all sunflowers, Allen Ginsberg reaffirms his belief in the resiliency of humanity and also his apparent commitment to flowers as a symbol of renewal and childish exuberance, the kind he himself displayed when Jack showed him the flower. When he asks the flower when it forgot it was a flower, he is instead asking all of us when we forgot that we are all citizens of the universe with the responsibility to come together for the good of everyone, as opposed to dividing ourselves into nations, armies, and socioeconomic classes.

Whether challenging conformity, censorship, materialism, or the urge on the part of some to go to war, Allen Ginsberg interrogates America on nearly every conceivable level. America's own unwillingness to answer those questions, or dissatisfaction with the answers they can give seem to have more to do with the enduring resonance of Ginsberg's work and even his poetic innovations, which, as I have shown, are not really innovations but instead new sharper renditions of many of the poetic ideals of his idol Walt Whitman. Ginsberg succinctly sums up his connection to Whitman's legacy when he wrote in "I Love Old Whitman So" (1984):

Tip the hat on my skull

To the old soldier, old sailor, old writer, old homosexual, old Christ poet

journeyman,

inspired in middle age to chaunt Eternity in Manhattan...

(Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1997* 900).

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