

long non drunken recollection of a party we'd met at in NY 5 years ago, he remembered the conversation in detail, I'd just got out of hospital and was hung-up on the religious experience in the Groundhog poem.

English publishers won't handle *Howl*, that is English Printers (Villiers) and so there is now difficulty in getting it through unexpurgated. I revised it and it is now worse than it ever was, too. We're now investigating Mexico, if necessary will spend extra cost and have it done here tho. Civil Liberties Union here was consulted and said they'd defend it if it gets into trouble, which I almost hope it does. I am almost ready to tackle the U.S. government out of sheer self delight. There is really a great stupid conspiracy of unconscious negative inertia to keep people from "expressing" themselves. I was reading Henry Miller's banned book *Tropic of Cancer*, which actually is a great classic—I never heard of it at Columbia with anything but deprecatory dismissal comments—he and Genet are such frank hip writers that the open expression of their perceptions and real beliefs are a threat to society. The wonder is that literature does have such power. [...]

Allen

[*The following is Ginsberg's most famous letter, written to poet and critic Richard Eberhart, in which Allen took a good deal of time to explain the construction of Howl.*]

Allen Ginsberg [San Francisco, CA] to Richard Eberhart [New York, NY]
May 18, 1956

Dear Mr. Eberhart:

Kenneth Rexroth tells me you are writing an article on S.F. poetry and asked for a copy of my manuscript. I'll send it.

It occurred to me with alarm how really horrible generalizations might be if they are off-the-point as in newspapers.

I sat listening sans objection in the car while you told me what you'd said in Berkeley. I was flattered and egotistically hypnotized by the idea of recognition but really didn't agree with your evaluation of my own poetry. Before you say anything in the *Times* let me have my say.

1) The general "problem" is positive and negative "values." "You don't tell me how to live," "you deal with the negative or horrible well but have no positive program" etc.

This is as absurd as it sounds.

It would be impossible to write a powerful emotional poem without a firm grasp on "value" not as an intellectual ideal but as an emotional reality.

You heard or saw *Howl* as a negative howl of protest.

The title notwithstanding, the poem itself is an act of sympathy, not rejection. In it I am leaping out of a preconceived notion of social "values," following my own heart's instincts—allowing myself to follow my own heart's instincts, overturning any notion of propriety, moral "value," superficial "maturity," Trilling-esque sense of "civilization," and exposing my true feelings—of sympathy and identification with the rejected, mystical, individual even "mad."

I am saying that what seems "mad" in America is our expression of natural ecstasy (as in Crane, Whitman) which suppressed, finds no social form organization background frame of reference or rapport or validation from the outside and so the "patient" gets confused thinks he is mad and really goes off rocker. I am paying homage to mystical mysteries in the forms in which they actually occur here in the U.S. in our environment.

I have taken a leap of detachment from the artificial preoccupations and preconceptions of what is acceptable and normal and given my yea to the specific type of madness listed in the Who section.

The leap in the imagination—it is safe to do in a poem.

A leap to actual living sanctity is not impossible, but requires more time for me.

I used to think I was mad to want to be a saint, but now what have I got to fear? People's opinions? Loss of a teaching job? I am living outside this context. I make my own sanctity. How else? Suffering and humility are forced on my otherwise wild ego by lugging baggage in Greyhound.

I started as a fair-haired boy in academic Columbia.

I have discovered a great deal of my own true nature and that individuality which is a value, the only social value that there can be in the Blake-worlds. I see it as a "social value."

I have told you how to live if I have wakened any emotion of compassion and realization of the beauty of souls in America, thru the poem.

What other value could a poem have—now, historically maybe?

I have released and confessed and communicated clearly my true feelings tho it might involve at first a painful leap of exhibition and fear that I would be rejected.

This is a value, an actual fact, not a mental formulation of some second-rate

sociological-moral ideal which is meaningless and academic in the poetry of H-, etc.

Howl is the first discovery as far as *communication* of feeling and truth, that I made. It begins with a catalogue sympathetically and *humanely* describing excesses of feeling and idealization.

Moloch is the vision of the mechanical feelingless inhuman world we live in and accept — and the key line finally is "Moloch whom I abandon."

It ends with a litany of active acceptance of the suffering of soul of C. Solomon, saying in effect I am *still* your amigo tho you are in trouble and think yourself in a void, and the final strophe states the terms of the communication "oh starry spangled shock of Mercy"

and mercy is a real thing and if that is not a value I don't know what is.

How mercy gets to exist where it comes from perhaps can be seen from the inner evidence and images of the poem — an act of self-realization, self-acceptance and the consequent and inevitable relaxation of protective anxiety and self hood and the ability to see and love others in themselves as angels without stupid mental self deceiving moral categories selecting *who* it is safe to sympathize with and who is not safe.

See Dostoyevsky and Whitman.

This process is carried to a crystal form in the *Sunflower Sutra* which is a "dramatic" context for these thoughts.

"Unholy battered old thing O sunflower O my soul
I LOVED you then."

The effect is to release self and audience from a false and self-denying self-deprecating image of ourselves which makes us feel like smelly shits and not the angels which we most deeply are.

The vision we have of people and things outside us is obviously (see Freud) a reflection of our relation to our self.

It is perhaps possible to forgive another and love another only after you forgive and love yourself.

This is why Whitman is crucial in development of American psyche. He accepted himself and from that flowed acceptance of all things.

The *Sunflower Sutra* is an emotional release and exposition of this process.

Thus I fail to see why you characterize my work as destructive or negative. Only if you are thinking an outmoded dualistic puritanical academic theory ridden world of values can you fail to see I am talking about *realization* of love. LOVE.

The poems are religious and I meant them to be and the effect on audience is (surprising to me at first) a validation of this. It is like "I give the primeval sign" of acceptance, as in Whitman.

The second point is technical. This point would be called in question only if you have not Faith. I mean it is beside the true point and irrelevant because the communication, the *sign* of communication if successfully made should begin and end by achieving the perfection of a mystical experience which you know all about.

I am also saying have faith that I am finally referring to the Real Thing and that I am trying to communicate it.

Why must you deny your senses?

But as to technique — [Ruth] Witt-Diamant said you were surprised I exhibited any interest in the "Line" etc.

What seems formless tho effective is really effective thru discovery or realization of rules and meanings of forms and experiments in them.

The "form" of the poem is an experiment. Experiment with uses of the catalogue, the ellipse, the long line, the litany, repetition, etc.

The latter parts of the first section set forth a "formal" esthetic derived in part incidentally from my master who is Cézanne.

The poem is really built like a brick shithouse.

This is the general ground plan — all an accident, organic, but quite symmetrical surprisingly. It grew (part III) out of a desire to build up rhythm using a fixed base to respond to and elongating the response still however containing it within the elastic of one breath or one big streak of thought.

As in all things a reliance on nature and spontaneity (as well as much experience writing and practicing to arrive at spontaneity which IS A CRAFT not a jerk-off mode, a craft in which near-perfection is basic too) has produced organic proportion in this case somewhat symmetrical (i.e. rationally apprehensible) proportion.

This is, however, vague generalization.

The Long Line I use came after 7 yrs. work with fixed iambic rhyme, and 4 yrs. work with Williams' short line free form — which as you must know has its own mad rules — indefinable tho they be at present —

The long line, the prose poem, the spontaneous sketch are XX century French forms which Academic versifiers despise their continental interests (in XIX century French "formal" forms, Baudelaire) have completely ignored. Why?

This form of writing is very popular in S.A. and is after all the most interesting thing happening in France.

Whitman
Apollinaire
Lorca

Are these people credited with no technical sense by fools who by repeating the iambic mouthings of their betters or the quasi-iambic of Eliot or the completely irrational (tho beautiful) myth of "clear lucid form" in Pound—who works basically by ear anyway and there isn't any clear mentally formulizable form in him anyway, no regular countable measure* [an error here, as Pound attempted to approximate classical quantitative measure. Allen Ginsberg, 1975]—I'm straying—people who by repeating etc., are exhibiting no technical sensitivity at all but merely adeptness at using already formulated ideas—and *this* is historically no time for that—or even if it were who cares, I don't. I am interested in discovering what I do *not* know, in myself and in the ways of writing—an old point.

The long line—you need a good ear and an emotional ground-swell and technical and syntactical ease facility and a freedom "esprit" to deal with it and make of it anything significant. And you need something to say, i.e. clear realized feelings. Same as any free verse.

The lines are the result of long thought and experiment as to what unit constitutes *one speech-breath-thought*.

I have observed my mind
I have observed my speech 1) Drunk
 2) Drugged
 3) Sober
 4) Sexy etc.

And have exercised it so I can speak *freely*, i.e. without self-conscious inhibited stoppings and censorships which latter factors are what destroy speech and thought rhythm.

We think and speak rhythmically all the time, each phrasing, piece of speech, metrically equivalent to what we have to say emotionally.

Given a mental release which is not mentally blocked, the breath of verbal intercourse will come with excellent rhythm, a rhythm which is perhaps unimprovable.

[Unimprovable as experiment in any case.
Each poem is an experiment
Revised as little as possible.]

So (experiments) are many modern canvasses as you know. The sketch is a fine "Form."]

W. C. Williams has been observing speech rhythms for years trying to find a regular "measure"—
he's mistaken I think.

There is no measure which will make one speech the exact length of another, one line the exact length of another.

He has therefore seized on the phrase "relative measure" in his old age.

He is right but has not realized the implications of this in the long line.

Since each wave of speech-thought needs to be measured (we speak and perhaps think in waves)—or what I speak and think I have at any rate in *Howl* reduced to waves of relatively equally heavy weight—and set next to one another they are in a balance O.K.

The technique of writing both prose and poetry, the technical problem of the present day, is the problem of transcription of the natural flow of the mind, the transcription of the melody of actual thought or speech.

I have leaned more toward capturing the inside-mind-thought rather than the verbalized speech. This distinction I make because most poets see the problem via Wordsworth as getting nearer to actual *speech*, verbal speech.

I have noticed that the unspoken visual-verbal flow inside the mind has great rhythm and have approached the problem of strophe, line and stanza and measure by listening and transcribing (to a great extent) the coherent mental flow. Taking *that* for the model for form as Cézanne took Nature.

This is not surrealism—they made up an artificial literary imitation.

I transcribe from my ordinary thoughts—waiting for extra exciting or mystical moments or near mystical moments to transcribe.

This brings up problems of image, and transcription of mental flow gives helpful knowledge because we think in sort of surrealist (juxtaposed images) or haiku-like form.

A haiku as the 1910-20's imagists did *not* know, consists of 2 visual (or otherwise) images stripped down and juxtaposed—the charge of electricity created by these 2 poles being greater when there is a greater distance between them—as in Yeats' phrase "murderous innocence of the sea"—2 opposite poles reconciled in a flash of recognition.

The mind in its flow creates such fantastic ellipses thus the key phrase of method in *Howl* is "Hydrogen jukebox" which tho quite senseless makes in context clear sense.

Throughout the poem you will see traces of transcription, at its best see the

last line of *Sunflower Sutra*, "mad locomotive riverbank sunset Frisco hilly tin-can evening sitdown vision."

This is a curious but really quite logical development of Pound-Fenelossa-Chinese Written Character-imagist W. C. Williams' practice.

I don't see the metrics or metaphors as revolution, rather as logical development, given my own interests, experiences, etc. and time.

This (explanation) is all too literary as essentially my purpose has been to say what I actually feel, (not what I want to feel or think I should feel or fit my feelings into a fake "Tradition" which is a *process* really not a fixed set of values and practices anyway—so anybody who wants to hang on to traditional metrics and values will wind up stultified and self-deceived anyway despite all the sincerity in the world). Everybody thinks they should learn academically from "experience" and have their souls put down and destroyed and this has been raised to the status of "value" but to me it seems just the usual old fake death, much under Professor T-, whom I love, but who is a poor mental fanatic after all and not a free soul—I'm straying.

2) *The poetry situation in S.F.*

The last wave was led by Robert Duncan, highly over-literary but basic recognition of the spontaneous free-form experiment. He left for Mallorca and contacted Robert Creeley, editor of *Black Mountain Review*; they became friends and Duncan who dug Williams, Stein, etc. especially the Black Mountain influence of Charles Olson who is the head peer of the East Coast bohemian hipster-authors post Pound. Olson's *Death of Europe* in *Origin* last year (about a suicide German boy)—"oh that the Earth / had to be given / to you / this way." is the first of his poems I've been able to read but it is a great breakthrough of feeling and a great modern poem I think.

Creeley his boy came here [San Francisco] last month and made contact with us—and next issue of *Black Mountain Review* will carry me, Whalen and:

- 1) William S. Burroughs, a novelist friend of mine in Tangier. Great Man.
- 2) Gary Snyder, a Zen Buddhist poet and Chinese scholar 25 years old who leaves next week for further poetry study in a Zen monastery in Kyoto.
- 3) Jack Kerouac, who is out here and is the Colossus unknown of U.S. Prose who taught me to write and has written more and better than anybody of my generation that I've ever heard of. Kerouac you may have heard of but any review of the situation here would be ultimately historically meaningless without him since he is the unmistakable fertile prolific Shakespearean genius—lives in a shack in Mill Valley with Gary Snyder. Cowley (Malcolm) is trying to peddle him in N.Y.C. now* [Cowley as editor at Viking was having difficulty per-

suading the management to publish *On the Road*. Allen Ginsberg, 1975] and can give you info. Kerouac invented and initiated my practice of speech-flow prosody.

I recount the above since anything you write will be irrelevant if you don't dig especially Kerouac—no shit, get info from Kenneth [Rexroth] or Louise Bogan who met him if you don't take my word.

The W. S. Burroughs above mentioned was Kerouac's and my mentor 1943-1950.

I have written this in the Greyhound between loading busses and will send it on uncensored.

I've said nothing about the extraordinary influence of Bop music on rhythm and drugs on the observation of rhythm and mental processes—not enough time and out of paper.

Yours,

Allen Ginsberg

Summary

I. Values

1) *Howl* is an "affirmation" of individual experience of God, sex, drugs, absurdity, etc. part I deals sympathetically with individual cases. Part II describes and rejects the Moloch of society which confounds and suppresses individual experience and forces the individual to consider himself mad if he does not reject his own deepest senses. Part III is an expression of sympathy and identification with C. S. [Carl Solomon] who is in the madhouse—saying that his madness basically is rebellion against Moloch and I am with him, and extending my hand in union. This is an affirmative act of mercy and compassion, which are the basic emotions of the poem. The criticism of society is that "Society" is merciless. The alternative is private, individual acts of mercy. The poem is one such. It is therefore clearly and consciously built on a liberation of basic human virtues.

To call it work of nihilistic rebellion would be to mistake it completely. Its force comes from positive "religious" belief and experience. It offers no "constructive" program in sociological terms—no poem could. It does offer a constructive human value—basically the *experience*—of the enlightenment of mystical experience—without which no society can long exist.

2) *Supermarket in California* deals with Walt Whitman, Why?

He was the first great American poet to take action in recognizing his individuality, forgiving and accepting *Him Self*, and automatically extending that

recognition and acceptance to all—and defining his Democracy as that. He was unique and lonely in his glory—the truth of his feelings—without which no society can long exist. Without this truth there is only the impersonal Moloch and self-hatred of others.

Without self-acceptance there can be no acceptance of other souls.

3) *Sunflower Sutra* is crystallized “dramatic” moment of self-acceptance in modern terms.

“Unholy battered old thing, O sunflower O my soul, I loved you then!”

The realization of holy self-love is a rare “affirmative” value and cannot fail to have constructive influence in “Telling you (R.E.) [Richard Eberhart] how to live.”

4) *America* is an unsystematic and rather gay exposition of my own private feelings contrary to the official dogmas, but really rather universal as far as private opinions about what I mention. It says—“I am thus and so I have a right to do so, and I’m saying it out loud for all to hear.”

II. Technique

A. These long lines or Strophes as I call them came spontaneously as a result of the kind of feelings I was trying to put down, and came as a surprise solution to a metrical problem that preoccupied me for a decade.

I have considerable experience writing both rhymed iambs and short line post-WCW [William Carlos Williams] free verse.

Howl’s 3 parts consist of 3 different approaches to the use of the long line (longer than Whitman’s, more French).

1. Repetition of the fixed base “Who” for a catalogue.

A. building up consecutive rhythm from strophe to strophe.

B. abandoning of fixed base “who” in certain lines but carrying weight and rhythm of strophic form continuously forward.

2. Break up of strophe into pieces within the strophe, thus having the strophe become a new usable form of stanza—Repetition of fixed base “Moloch” to provide cement for continuity. *Supernarker* uses strophe stanza and abandons need for fixed base. I was experimenting with the form.

3. Use of a fixed base, “I’m with you in Rockland,” with a reply in which the strophe becomes a longer and longer streak of speech, in order to build up a relatively equal nonetheless free and variable structure. Each reply strophe is longer than the previous I have measured by ear and speech-breath, there being no other measure for such a thing. Each strophe consists of a set of phrases that can be spoken in one breath and each carries relatively equal rhetorical weight. Penultimate strophe is an exception and was meant to be—a series of

cries—“O skinny legions run outside O starry spangled shock of mercy O victory etc.” You will not fail to observe that the cries are all in definite rhythm.

The technical problem raised and partially solved is the break-through begun by Whitman but never carried forward, from both iambic stultification and literary automatism, and unrhythmic shortline verse, which does not yet offer any kind of base cyclical flow for the build up of a powerful rhythm. The long line seems for the moment to free speech for emotional expression and give it a measure to work with. I hope to experiment with short-line free verse with what I have learned from exercise in long.

B. Imagery—is a result of the *kind* of line and the kind of emotions and the kind of speech-and-interior flow-of-the-mind transcription I am doing—the imagery often consists of 1920s W.C.W. [Williams] imagistically observed detail collapsed together by interior associative logic—i.e., “hydrogen jukebox,” Apollinaire, Whitman, Lorca. But *not* automatic surrealism. Knowledge of Haiku and ellipse is crucial.

Allen Ginsberg [USNS Sgt. *Jack J. Pendleton*, Wainwright, Alaska] to Robert LaVigne [San Francisco, CA] August 3, 1956

Dear Bob:

Settled down in trip more, now up at a place in Arctic Circle called Wainwright, Alaska—so far no ice, snow, icebergs, aurora, whales, dolphins, seals, fish—nothing but grey sea and occasional bright day, and day which truly does last all night. The light if you’re interested of these northern nights has a kind of deadbluish-grey immanence, as if not out of sun (usually hidden behind solid cover of clouds also dead grey color past midnight) but lunar reflected out of the water. But it is enough to think it’s day by.

Reading mostly pious works, the lives of the Saints and the Bible, the small comfort all that since I feel my own egotism and irresolution more painfully for the striking though doctrinally confusing examples set up in my imagination by St. Francis (have 2 different biographies aboard). Death of my mother² has brought me more close to understanding inevitability of death feeling that already I see a part of me my childhood in the grave, a piece of my own life gone and the rest surely to go, and rereading my own writings the skimpiness and hollowiness of most of that. Enclosed a pamphlet of Mexican poem I mimeographed last weekend. Really I feel miserable the isolation not so much

31 Naomi Ginsberg died in Pilgrim State Hospital on June 9, 1956.