

poet and the person, Lucky Pierre⁹ style, and the poem is correspondingly gratified. The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages. In all modesty, I confess that it may be the death of literature as we know it. While I have certain regrets, I am still glad I got there before Alain Robbe-Grillet¹ did. Poetry being quicker and surer than prose, it is only just that poetry finish literature off. For a time people thought that Artaud² was going to accomplish this, but actually, for all their magnificence, his polemical writings are not more outside literature than Bear Mountain is outside New York State. His relation is no more astounding than Debuffet's³ to painting.

What can we expect of Personism? (This is getting good, isn't it?) Everything, but we won't get it. It is too new, too vital a movement to promise anything. But it, like Africa, is on the way. The recent propagandists for technique on the one hand, and for content on the other, had better watch out.

September 3, 1959

1961

9. Having sexual intercourse with two other people simultaneously.

1. Experimental French writer (b. 1922) and theorist of the *nouveau roman* (new novel).

2. Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), French writer

associated with the experimental "theatre of cruelty."

3. Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985), French painter associated with *art brut* (raw art).

NOTES WRITTEN ON FINALLY RECORDING *HOWL*

In this essay, a version of which appeared as a liner note to the 1959 recording of *Howl and Other Poems*, Allen Ginsberg, the central figure of the Beat movement, explains the poetic innovations, such as "wild phrasing" and "rhythmic buildup," of "Howl"—an important long poem that combined the use of breath units with oracular proclamations and exceptionally long lines. Tracing his development, Ginsberg credits William Carlos Williams' measures based on units of breath and American speech patterns with inspiring him, as did the cadences, tonalities, and visions of William Blake, Walt Whitman, and Jack Kerouac. He also finds sources for "Howl," "Kaddish," "Sunflower Sutra," "America," and other poems in such heterogeneous sources as drug use, a madhouse wail, the Hebrew prophets, and the haiku. Ginsberg emphasizes the rapidity, associative psychology, and Romantic spontaneity of his initial outpourings, which—particularly in such long poems as "Howl" and "Kaddish"—he reshaped and carefully edited before publication. First published in *Evergreen Review* 3.10 (1959), the essay has been reprinted from *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays 1952-1995* (2000), ed. Bill Morgan.

ALLEN GINSBERG

Notes Written on Finally Recording *Howl*

By 1955 I wrote poetry adapted from prose seeds, journals, scratchings, arranged by phrasing or breath groups into little short-line patterns according to ideas of measure of American speech I'd picked up from William Carlos Williams' imagist¹ preoccupations. I suddenly turned aside in San Francisco, unemployment compensation leisure, to follow my romantic inspiration—Hebraic-Melvillean² bardic breath. I thought I wouldn't write a *poem*, but just write what I wanted to without fear, let my imagination go, open secrecy, and scribble magic lines from my real mind—sum up my life—something I wouldn't be able to show anybody, writ for my own soul's ear and a few other golden ears. So the first line of *Howl*, "I saw the best minds etc.," the whole first section typed out madly in one afternoon, a tragic custard-pie comedy of wild phrasing, meaningless images for the beauty of abstract poetry of mind running along making awkward combinations like Charlie Chaplin's walk, long saxophone-like chorus lines I knew Kerouac³ would hear *sound* of—taking off from his own inspired prose line really a new poetry.

I depended on the word "who" to keep the beat, a base to keep measure, return to and take off from again onto another streak of invention: "who lit cigarettes in boxcars boxcars boxcars," continuing to prophesy what I really knew despite the drear consciousness of the world: "who were visionary Indian angels." Have I really been attacked for this sort of joy? So the poem got awesome, I went on to what my imagination believed true to eternity (for I'd had a beatific illumination years before during which I'd heard Blake's⁴ ancient voice and saw the universe unfold in my brain), and what my memory could reconstitute of the data of celestial experiences.

But how sustain a long line in poetry (lest it lapse into prosaic)? It's natural inspiration of the moment that keeps it moving, disparate things put down together, shorthand notations of visual imagery, juxtapositions of hydrogen jukebox—abstract *haikus* sustain the mystery and put iron poetry back into the line: the last line of *Sunflower Sutra* is the extreme, one stream of single word associations, summing up. Mind is shapely, art is shapely. Meaning mind practiced in spontaneity invents forms in its own image and gets to last thoughts. Loose ghosts waiting for body try to invade the bodies of living men. I hear ghostly academies in limbo screeching about form.

Ideally each line of *Howl* is a single breath unit. My breath is long—that's the measure, one physical-mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of a breath. It probably bugs Williams now, but it's a natural consequence, my own heightened conversation, not cooler average-daily-talk short breath. I get to mouth more madly this way.

1. In the early twentieth century, Imagism emphasized cadenced free verse and direct language. William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), American poet.

2. Herman Melville (1819-1891), American poet, novelist, and author of *Moby-Dick* (1851). *Hebraic*: here, recalling the Hebrew prophets.

3. Jack Kerouac (1922-1969): American novelist

and spokesman for the Beat movement. Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977): English actor and film producer, famous for his "tramp" character.

4. William Blake (1757-1827), English visionary, poet, and printmaker. Ginsberg reported having heard in 1948 William Blake's voice reciting "Ah Sun-Flower" and "The Sick Rose."

So these poems are a series of experiments with the formal organization of the long line. Explanations follow. I realized at the time that Whitman's⁵ form had rarely been further explored (improved on even) in the U.S.—Whitman always a mountain too vast to be seen. Everybody assumes (with Pound?) (except [Robinson] Jeffers)⁶ that his line is a big freakish uncontrollable necessary prosaic goof. No attempt's been made to use it in the light of early twentieth century organization of new speech-rhythm prosody to build up large organic structures.

I had an apartment on Nob Hill, got high on peyote, and saw an image of the robot skullface of Moloch⁷ in the upper stories of a big hotel glaring into my window; got high weeks later again, the visage was still there in red smoky downtown metropolis. I wandered down Powell street muttering, "Moloch Moloch" all night and wrote *Howl II* nearly intact in cafeteria at foot of Drake Hotel, deep in the hellish vale. Here the long line is used as a stanza form broken into exclamatory units punctuated by a base repetition, Moloch.

The rhythmic paradigm for Part III was conceived and half-written same day as the beginning of *Howl*, I went back later and filled it out. Part I, a lament for the Lamb in America with instances of remarkable lamblike youths; Part II names the monster of mental consciousness that preys on the Lamb; Part III a litany of affirmation of the Lamb in its glory: "O starry spangled shock of Mercy." The structure of Part III, pyramidal, with a graduated longer response to the fixed base.

I remembered the archetypal rhythm of Holy Holy Holy weeping in a bus on Kearny Street, and wrote most of it down in notebook there. That exhausted this set of experiments with a fixed base. I set it as *Footnote to Howl* because it was an extra variation of the form of Part II. (Several variations on these forms, including stanzas of graduated litanies followed by fugues, will be seen in *Kaddish*.)

A lot of these forms developed out of an extreme rhapsodic wail I once heard in a madhouse. Later I wondered if short quiet lyrical poems could be written using the long line. *A Strange New Cottage in Berkeley* and *A Supermarket in California* (written same day) fell in place later that year. Not purposely, I simply followed my angel in the course of compositions.

What if I just simply wrote, in long units and broken short lines, spontaneously noting prosaic realities mixed with emotional upsurges, solitaires? *Transcription of Organ Music* (sensual data), strange writing which passes from prose to poetry and back, like the mind.

What about poem with rhythmic buildup power equal to *Howl* without use of repetitive base to sustain it? *The Sunflower Sutra* (composition time 20 minutes, me at desk scribbling, Kerouac at cottage door waiting for me to finish so we could go off somewhere party) did that, it surprised me, one long who.

Next what happens if you mix long and short lines, single breath remaining the rule of measure? I didn't trust free flight yet, so went back to fixed base to sustain the flow, *America*. After that, a regular formal type long poem in parts, short and long breaths mixed at random, no fixed base, sum of earlier experiments—*In the Baggage Room at Greyhound*. *In Back of the Real* shows what I was doing with short lines (see sentence above) before I accidentally wrote *Howl*.

5. Walt Whitman (1819-1892), American poet, who sometimes wrote in long, paratactic, free verse lines.

6. Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962) and Ezra Pound

(1885-1972), American poets.

7. Deity to which children were sacrificed in ancient Middle Eastern cultures. *Nob Hill*: in San Francisco.

Later I tried for a strong rhythm built up using free short syncopated lines, *Europe! Europe!* a prophecy written in Paris.

Last, the Proem to *Kaddish* (NY 1959 work)—finally, completely free composition, the long line breaking up within itself into short staccato breath units—notations of one spontaneous phrase after another linked within the line by dashes mostly: the long line now perhaps a variable stanzaic unit, measuring groups of related ideas, grouping them—a method of notation. Ending with a hymn in rhythm similar to the synagogue death lament. Passing into dactylic? says Williams? Perhaps not: at least the ear hears itself in Promethean⁸ natural measure, not in mechanical count of accent.

All these poems are recorded now as best I can, though with scared love, imperfect to an angelic trumpet in mind. I have quit reading in front of live audiences for a while. I began in obscurity to communicate a live poetry, it's become more a trap and duty than the spontaneous ball it was first.

A word on the Academies: poetry has been attacked by an ignorant and frightened bunch of bores who don't understand how it's made, and the trouble with these creeps is they wouldn't know poetry if it came up and bothered them in broad daylight.

A word on the Politicians: my poetry is angelic ravings, and has nothing to do with dull materialistic vagaries about who should shoot who. The secrets of individual imagination—which are transconceptual and non-verbal—I mean unconditioned spirit—are not for sale to this consciousness, are no use to this world, except perhaps to make it shut its trap and listen to the music of the spheres. Who denies the music of the spheres denies poetry, denies man, and spits on Blake, Shelley,⁹ Christ, and Buddha. Meanwhile have a ball. The universe is a new flower. America will be discovered. Who wants a war against roses will have it. Fate tells big lies, and the gay creator dances on his own body in eternity.¹

July 4, 1959

1959

8. Life-giving, courageously original; in Greek myth, Prometheus stole fire from Olympus for humankind and was severely punished for it.

9. Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), English Romantic poet.

1. "Need comment on end—This provocative even inflammatory peroration seems to have offended a number of straight poets, and was oft quoted, a declaration of absolute poetic purpose

that the critic Richard Howard [b. 1929] still remembered decades later, taking exception to my insistence of 'unconditioned Spirit.' This aggression may have exacerbated the Battle of Anthologies between Open Form and Closed Form poets. An incendiary tract, aimed at both Marxist and CIA Capitalist (*Encounter*) Critics, as well as bourgeois judgmental sociologists. Norman Podhoretz probably in mind" [Ginsberg's note].

THE MYTH OF A NEGRO LITERATURE

A leader of the Black Arts Movement, Amiri Baraka delivered this essay as an address to the American Society for African Culture on March 14, 1962, before he changed his name from LeRoi Jones and at a time when he was in between his early Beat aesthetic and his later black nationalism. Baraka attacks as derivative those writers who produce a "Negro literature" according to Euro-American models for the approval of middle-class white society. Instead, black artists should follow the models in African American music, particularly jazz and the blues, which best exemplify how African