

"Howl" and Me

I must have been fourteen and still in junior high school when I first encountered Allen Ginsberg's "Howl." How it crossed my path I'm not sure; probably my older brother Leonard, who was seventeen and mad about Garcia Lorca and William Blake, tossed it my way, as he did all of his poetic discoveries. We went around for weeks intoning favorite passages—the first two lines, of course, "I saw the best minds of my generation . . ." down to "looking for an angry fix," and "fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists" and "boxcars boxcars boxcars," which for some reason always cracked us up. We loved the poem for its phonic fireworks and flaming images, but we also mocked its solemn oracular quality, opportunistically applying an adolescent penchant for parody to any target within easy reach.

I have to say that "Howl" struck me from the first as a little ludicrous and overblown. In retrospect I think I may have been threatened by its intense emotions, and deaf to its more ironic registers. Then, too, much as we embraced Kerouac and Ginsberg as a retort to the "tranquilized Fifties," we were not immune to the ubiquitous parodies of them in the popular culture. Who could not giggle at Bob Hope's beatnik routine, wearing a beret and a fake goatee, banging bongos, snapping his fingers and crying "Yeah, man!" Still, we were much more pro-Beat than anti-; and "Howl," by virtue of giving America the finger, fit neatly into our bag of anarchic provocations, along with *Mad Magazine*, the raunchier lyrics of rhythm and blues, and, a bit later, Lenny Bruce.

I have a feeling some shards of Ginsberg's dangerous shrapnel lodged more deeply into my subconscious than I realized, because, soon after reading it, I wrote a poem called "I Hate It All" and turned it into my English teacher for creative writing extra-credit. This lurid rant enlisted every cliché about "gnawing rats," "crying men" and "the dirt of the slums," disguising my personal resent-

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ment, no doubt, at my parents for making us live in a ghetto, before coming to the noble realization, "But I am of it, of this thing I hate." It was, if you will, a precociously Baldwinesque moment of identification with all I was trying to flee. My English teacher, Miss Loftus, responded with sour surprise, "Phillip, I thought you were our most well-adjusted student!" and sent me down to the guidance counselor.

You must understand that, for all my extra-curricular dabbling in anarchic culture, I was pretty much a goody-goody, and had gotten myself elected student president, no mean feat in a mostly black school, so that when I began poetically denouncing the squalor of my immediate environment, the adults around me grew understandably chagrined. Getting sent to the guidance counselor was not the pat-on-the-head, extra-credit response I had anticipated. I found myself in a jam, needing to explain my ode to hate as somehow not really reflective of my true feelings, and I began describing it as a creative put-on, spouting showy-off references to the Dadaists and Surrealists (never mentioning Allen Ginsberg, which would have been too close to home). My dodge, I could tell, did not convince the guidance counselor; but she had no choice, given my refusal to be candid about what was bothering me, except to send me back to class.

The odd thing, I see now, is that I kept doing this, modeling the role of the perfectly calm, responsible, civic-minded, A student, while sending out flares that something was not right inside, I needed help. In high school, I again got myself elected to office, this time Chief Justice of the student court, meanwhile writing a very provoking piece about my feelings of alienation for a citywide essay contest. When my high school English teacher, Mrs. Gold, accused me of trying to "*épater le bourgeoisie*," I mocked her behind her back as a provincial ninny.

All this self-divided behavior culminated in my getting accepted to an Ivy League school on a scholarship, and trying to kill myself by my sophomore year. We do not need to revisit that incident. The point I am making here is that I knew more than I sometimes cared to admit about the screaming confusion, rage and lostness expressed by "Howl"; I had my own personal howl going on inside my head much of the time and I was trying to keep a tight lid on it.

Having sorted out, or anyhow survived, this adolescent crisis of yearning and negation, I would spend the rest of my life striving for skepticism and stoicism. You might say I turned away from “Howl,” with its suicidal grandiosity, gutter ecstasies and apocalyptic nightmares, trading them in for the smaller promise of humor, equilibrium and the everyday. Allen Ginsberg, a fellow Jewish writer who also went to Columbia before dropping out, was like an older brother (exactly seventeen years older) who had courageously blazed the trail ahead of me, smoothing the road not taken. I would stay in college, guard my scholarship, nose to the grindstone, graduate in four years and get married, showing everyone what a mature, responsible fellow I was.

The strongest pull that “Howl” exerted on me thus was cautionary. If it seemed an advertisement for madness, drug addiction, vagrancy, homosexuality, and rhetoric as the road to enlightenment, I knew with a shudder that those were not for me. I had come close—too close—to ending up like Carl Solomon in Rockland State Hospital: having landed in the psych ward after my suicide attempt, I’d suddenly needed to convince the staff that I was perfectly all right, I did not need any shock treatment, thank you very much. Needles had always terrified me, so becoming a junkie held no appeal. I was dead-set on clawing my way out of ghetto Brooklyn and into the middle class, too close to the poverty-line to entertain romantic notions about bums and clochards. Limited as my sexual repertoire was, I did not want to get fucked in the ass by anyone, much less “saintly motorcyclists.” And why “saintly”? I’d seen Brando in *The Wild Ones* and the motorcycle gangs in *Scorpio Rising*, and real live Hell’s Angels menacing the Lower East Side, and not a scintilla of sanctity did they radiate. If Allen Ginsberg wanted to have an orgasm with a guy, fine with me, but why insist that it was saintly, or that the sailors who blew him were “human seraphim”; that part struck me as sentimental. Besides, why was a good Jewish boy like Allen bothering with all that Christian imagery about saintly? Perhaps the “saintly” bothered me more than the “motorcyclists.”

“Howl” proffered one more temptation that I resisted mightily, and which was contained in the words “my generation.” This may not be the proper occasion to explore what lies behind my distrust of that (to my mind) smug, self-mythifying notion. Oh what the hell. To quote Ben Hecht: “It is, as I have long suspected, very dif-

ficult for a writer to write about anybody but himself.” Certainly true for me. I find the words “my generation” stick in my throat. They seem presumptuous; I don’t feel it’s my right to generalize for all those who happened to be born the same decade as myself. Or perhaps it isn’t humility but vanity that won’t allow me to speak of myself in any but idiosyncratic terms, resisting sociological categories that would place me in a collective epoch. Or am I merely envious that I never belonged to a glittering bohemian set, like the Parisians around Picasso in Roger Shattuck’s *The Banquet Years*, or the Harvard crowd who went on to comprise the New York School of Poetry? In any case, here was Ginsberg, lovingly canonizing his particular set of friends (“Holy Peter holy Allen holy Solomon holy Lucien holy Kerouac holy Huncke holy Burroughs holy Cassady”) as not only a generation, but “the best minds of” his generation. And what entitled them to this accolade? That they ran naked through “the negro streets,” smoked dope on rooftops, dropped out of the academy—in other words, that they made a mess of their lives. Am I being too literal here? Are we supposed to think that they started off as the best minds of their generation, and then the evil capitalist Moloch society ruined them, or that their own exquisite sensitivity led to their collapse, like Wordsworth’s couplet about poets in their youth who begin in gladness and end in madness?

Throughout the poem, Ginsberg seems torn between portraying his buddies as the divinely chosen damned and extending a more democratic laurel of beatitude to all the downtrodden and losers, as when he says “holy Cassady holy the unknown buggered and suffering beggars holy the hideous human angels!” What about all those working stiffs who would not end up raving lunatics, who could not afford to drop out, were we automatically judged mediocre, and condemned to a lower status than “the best minds,” by dint of neglecting or refusing to fall apart? Of course “Howl” is a young man’s poem, and I ought not to be subjecting it to this querulous, middle-aged, class analysis when what it has most to recommend it is its jazzy, generative enthusiasm, and its wholesome desire for redemptive embrace. The poem ends with these lines:

Holy forgiveness! mercy! charity! faith! Holy! Ours! bodies!
suffering! magnanimity!

Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of
the soul!

Okay, I can buy that. Not sure what it means, but I'm all for kindness and forgiveness. Where I have trouble is when the poet says: "the soul is innocent." He invokes the word "innocence" several times in "Howl," like a son pleading before a stern father-judge, demanding amnesty for all acts of self-destructiveness, and shifting the blame disingenuously onto Society, Moloch. Why not accept that we are not innocent?

Well, that is one reading of the poem, and probably the conventional one. A contrary reading would be that Ginsberg himself was something of a detached observer, more stable than the others, portraying clearly though with sympathy the screw-ups of those around him, even envying them their loss of control, yet in his own way being cautionary, undeceived by their pitiable attempts to rationalize all that insane behavior. For instance, is there not some irony when he speaks of those "who threw potato salad at CCNY lectures on Dadaism and subsequently presented themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse with shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy"? Or when he refers to "Dreams! adorations! hallucinations! religions! the whole boatload of sensitive bullshit!" Yes, the whole boatload of sensitive bullshit, indeed. That is what "Howl" throws at us, and also what the poem attempts to surmount—even managing, at times, to have it both ways.

I will always be grateful to "Howl" in the way it prepared me for the beauties of Whitman, whose cornucopia of inventories and one-line portraits struck me as both gorgeous and inevitable. These two American masters also shared a love of cities and public spaces, the undersides of bridges, the streets, rooftops, alleys—the whole consoling urbanistic shebang, which means more to me as I grow older. These days when I read "Howl," I forgive the Blakean seraphic bluster and am much more attentive to the superb atmospherics of place, the *mise en scène*, so to speak.

The poem of Ginsberg's that really floored me, of course, was "Kaddish." I could be indifferent, finally, to Carl Solomon rotting in Rockland's mental wards, indifferent to Neal Cassady's priapic triumphs ("secret hero of these poems, cocksman and Adonis of

Denver—”), but I could not be indifferent to Naomi, given my own embarrassed love for a difficult mother.

Hats off to Allen Ginsberg! I will end with a few anecdotes. During my years as a fellow traveler of the New York School of Poetry, I would run into him at parties and readings. We gave each other a wide berth; he seemed much more interested in cute young boys or being in Bob Dylan’s entourage than in my own person, and I, for my part, did not go out of my way to cultivate him, the more so as I drifted farther and farther away from a bohemian mindset. Instead I added him to that list of famous writers I knew casually but was unable to bring myself to cultivate, which I now only partly regret.

Once, after the Stonewall riots, I volunteered my services to a benefit poetry reading for gay rights, thinking it important at the time for straight writers such as myself to show solidarity publicly with the gay community. I read a long, comic, mother-son poem that night called “The Blue Pants,” and Ginsberg closed the reading. Afterwards, he came up and told me I should have read a little faster. My first thought, which thankfully I did not utter, was “What a putz!” I especially felt that way because here I was “magnanimously” going out of my heterosexual way to participate in a gay rights reading, and he was criticizing my delivery. Years later, I wonder if he may have been paying me a compliment: recognizing a fellow entertainer, and giving me a bit of professional advice. I probably *should* have read my poem a touch faster.

In the mid-1980s, I was on a committee to select the Pulitzer Prize in poetry. Unlike other awards, the Pulitzer is decided in two stages: first the writers’ committee goes through all the books in its designated area which were published the previous year and sends up three recommendations, then a group of newspaper and magazine editors makes a final selection. Since the editors are usually not as versed in poetry as one might wish, they often pick the most unchallenging, user-friendly collection. In any event, Allen Ginsberg’s *Collected Poems: 1947–1980* was published in 1984, and I pushed hard for it to be named one of the three finalists. Ginsberg’s achievement as a major American poet seemed to me self-evident, but I did not succeed in convincing the other two committee-members to include it. Outraged, I took the unusual step of filing a minority recommendation to the editors, who were thus obliged to consider Ginsberg’s *Collected*, along with the other three finalists.

As it turned out, the editors also rejected Ginsberg for the Pulitzer Prize. I phoned Allen at his home to tell him he had at least been one of the finalists. He was philosophical about it, saying, “They don’t want to give the big prizes to me. They still hold against me all that stuff from the Sixties.”

I suppose you can either be King of the May or Poet Laureate but not both in the same lifetime. By then he was elderly and infirm, and we chatted for fifteen minutes, mostly about his ailments, but also about teaching creative writing. I remember none of what he said—nothing except for the tone, which was extremely amiable. He struck me as a *mensch*, a sweet, elderly, realistic Jew of a sort I was familiar with from my youth, and I chastised myself for having misjudged him before as a showboating *putz*. (The truth is that he was probably, like most of us, a *putz* and a *mensch*.) I had probably misjudged “Howl” all along as well, and am misjudging it still. But I can’t be too hard on myself for that. How can anyone whose formative years had intersected so primally with such a storm of a poem be expected to judge it with objectivity? “Howl” is lodged in my psyche, at the crossroads of my adolescent confusions.