

Poetickall Bomshell

A Person Named Allen Ginsberg

In September 1955, Gary Snyder—then a twenty-five-year-old unpublished poet and graduate student—wrote to his friend and fellow poet Philip Whalen in Oregon to say that he had been backpacking in the Sierras for ten days and that he'd thoroughly enjoyed the isolation of the outdoors. Now, he was living in a small cottage in Berkeley, he said, baking his own bread and studying Japanese. Moreover, he was preparing to read, with several other poets, at a place called the Six Gallery, perhaps the leading showcase for young artists in San Francisco. (In 1955 the Six Gallery exhibited the innovative work of Jay DeFeo and Richard Diebenkorn.) Whalen was in on the "deal," Snyder wrote. He had pulled a few strings and made all the necessary arrangements, and he was delighted to be able to report that they'd share the stage together after so many years of writing poetry together. Then, too, Snyder was delighted to tell Whalen

that his poems had been well received by the San Francisco literary underground. They had even reached a “certain subterranean celebration,” Snyder wrote, thanks to Kenneth Rexroth, the Bay Area’s bohemian impresario and veteran poet. Whalen had better “come as soon as possible” and join the festivities, Snyder urged. The reading at the Six Gallery, which was scheduled for the first Friday in October, was not to be missed.

Rexroth himself would be the master of ceremonies and Philip Lamantia, a successful young poet who was born in San Francisco in 1927 to an Italian American family, was to be the featured performer. André Breton, the French surrealist, had published Lamantia’s work in 1943, and *Erotic Poems*, Lamantia’s first book, had been published in Berkeley, with its small but lively poetry scene. Also on the program, Snyder added almost as an afterthought, was “a person named Allen Ginsberg,” whom he had recently met and was just getting to know. Snyder had not read widely in Ginsberg’s work—Ginsberg had almost no published work to read. But he was familiar with a letter that Ginsberg had written to William Carlos Williams, the grand old man of American poetry, a letter that Williams had thought well enough of to include in his long poem *Paterson*. Ginsberg was largely unknown and yet had a certain cachet among the poets in the West because he was a friend and disciple of Williams. Williams had even written a letter of introduction for Ginsberg before he left the East Coast, and that letter had gained him access to Rexroth’s salon, where artists met anarchists, workers met intellectuals, and there were plenty of literary fireworks.

Snyder predicted that the Six Gallery reading would be a “poetickall bomshell”—his liberties with the spelling of the words were meant to be playful. Snyder proved to be prophetic. The Six

Gallery reading turned out to be a big bombshell in the world of poetry, and in the world at large, a world that was preoccupied with atomic bombs, hydrogen bombs, blonde bombshells, and the classified secrets of the bomb—almost everything *but* poetical bombs.

Under Wraps

The Six Gallery reading was a direct and deliberate response to the culture of the bomb and to American power and wealth. To understand the cultural and political significance of the reading, it might be helpful to look at the United States in the era after World War II, an era that profoundly shaped Ginsberg and the Beat writers. Like *On the Road* and *Naked Lunch*, *Howl* was a product of the Cold War. During World War II, American writers were, on the whole, enthusiastic about the global battle to defeat fascism. Most novelists, poets, and playwrights were patriotic and optimistic. Some worked directly for the government at agencies like the Office of Strategic Information. Others wrote literature that celebrated American democracy. Allen Ginsberg was only seventeen in 1943, but he cast himself as the voice of his generation, and in high school wrote poetry that looked forward to the defeat of the Axis powers and the birth of a better world.

When the war ended in 1945, there was a sense of euphoria and liberation among writers and intellectuals as well as in the population as a whole. The troops came home. Families were reunited. Overt U.S. government censorship ended. The promise of peace and prosperity at home instilled an infectious sense that a new day was dawning. The euphoria was short-lived, however. In the aftermath of the war, citizens began to realize that the bombs

dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki not only ended the war; they also ushered in a new and frightening era. The horrors of the German concentration camps were revealed. The Iron Curtain descended on Europe and the Cold War began. As Americans became more aware of the dark side of the postwar era, and the dark side of humanity, too, the mood in America shifted and writers reflected it. It was the era of the noir novel and film noir.

Behind the calm exterior, the house beautiful and the happy family, there was anxiety, paranoia, and restlessness. In fiction, poetry, and the theater, writers described, in darkly pessimistic works—Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*, Arthur Miller’s *The Death of a Salesman*, and Robert Lowell’s *Lord Weary’s Castle*, to name just a few—the end of the American dream, the fissures in American society, and collective apprehension about the future. At the same time the mass media and the White House promulgated the idea that America was a near-perfect society—the apogee of historical progress—threatened by evil communism and all its agents.

Nineteen forty-eight was, as Ginsberg, noted, a pivotal year. Tennessee Williams, in an essay entitled “On the Art of Being a True Non-Conformist,”—published in November 1948, just after Truman defeated Dewey for the presidency—noted that “reactionary opinion descends like a ton of bricks on the head of any artist who speaks out against the current of prescribed ideas.” He added, “We are all under wraps of one kind or another, trembling before the specter of investigating committees.” Williams had achieved success with *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), but now he felt like an outcast in his own country, which seemed to be turning totalitarian at home even as it battled totalitarian nations abroad. Norman

Mailer, who published his antiwar novel *The Naked and the Dead* in 1948, observed sadly that war was an obscenity and that government officials “were leading us into war again.”

World War II, and the war economy generated by the Cold War and the Korean War, created a new class of American millionaires—a “Babylonian plutocracy,” Tennessee Williams called it. A small circle of writers enjoyed financial success, but most had to struggle just to survive. The American elite was “grossly affluent,” Williams noted, and it “should have exhibited a bit more concern for the fate of its young artists.” In the midst of unprecedented prosperity, American culture turned increasingly commercial, and writers turned increasingly to conformity. After an extensive visit to the United States, the British author Stephen Spender wrote in 1949 that authors like Henry Miller and Kenneth Rexroth were the “last remnants of a race of independent writers.” At the same time, Spender noted, American writers were often isolated and, unlike European writers, deprived of a sustaining cultural community.

The U.S. government—from the State Department to Congress—regarded writers as dangerous. Hollywood directors and screenwriters were jailed. Irish poet Dylan Thomas was investigated by the FBI and begrudgingly issued a visa; Arthur Miller was denied a passport and not allowed to leave the United States for years. Dashiell Hammett, the author of *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Thin Man*, was sent to prison for refusing to knuckle under to investigators and to name names. In academia and in the leading literary magazines of the day, teachers and critics warned against innovation and radicalism. W. H. Auden—a British-born poet who had become a naturalized American citizen in 1946—urged caution. It was not the time for “revolu-

tionary artists” or “significant novelty in artistic style,” he wrote in 1951. Before any new literary works could be written there would have to be a “cultural revolution,” he insisted. While Auden was dubious about any future cultural revolution, Tennessee Williams looked forward to it. In 1948 he anticipated the day when young people would discard “conservative business suits,” let their “hair grow long . . . make wild gestures, fight, shout and fall downstairs!” That day would be “brave and honest,” he predicted.

It took nearly a decade for the brave Beat Generation to flower in this hostile cultural environment. From the late 1940s to the mid-1950s, the Beats were under wraps. Ginsberg was closer to T. S. Eliot and to W. H. Auden than he was to William Carlos Williams and Walt Whitman. William Burroughs published his autobiography *Junky* under the pseudonym William Lee because books that accurately described the drug world were taboo. Granted, Kerouac went on writing in his own inimitable style, but from 1950 to 1955 almost no one would publish his work. Gradually, the underground scene spread and matured. In the mid-1950s, all over the United States, young artists felt the need to experiment, rebel, and turn to bohemia. Sylvia Plath, who was only twenty-two and a Smith College student in 1954, wrote, “I need to practice a certain healthy bohemianism . . . to swing away from the gray-clad . . . clock-regulated, responsible . . . economical, practical girl.”

Healthy Bohemianism

The 1955 Six Gallery reading was bohemianism at its best. It was something “brave and honest”—to borrow Tennessee Williams’s

phrase—in the midst of a society that seemed cowardly and insincere, and it marked the start of the cultural revolution that would sweep across America in the 1960s. Indeed, the Six Gallery reading helped create the conditions for both the San Francisco protests against the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1960 and the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley in 1964. The Six Gallery reading was living proof that the First Amendment hadn't been destroyed by McCarthyism and the committees that investigated artists, playwrights, Hollywood directors, and TV screenwriters. In America in the twentieth century, there was no public poetry reading that was a bigger bombshell than the Six Gallery reading. As Snyder himself noted in 1999, “That event launched all of us. It launched Allen Ginsberg, of course, and Phil Whalen and Michael McClure and Jack Kerouac. After the Six Gallery, poetry readings became regular cultural events not only in this country but all over the world.” Poetry came out of the closet at the Six Gallery, and off the printed page.

In October 1955, Allen Ginsberg had almost no published work to his name—except for a dozen or so poems that had appeared in his college literary magazine, a few book reviews in *Newsweek* and the *New York Herald Tribune*, and a playful poem about sex entitled “Song: Fie My Fum” that he had written with Kerouac and that had been published in *Neurotica*, the notorious magazine edited by Jay Landesman. Kerouac had a bit more to show for his literary efforts. Six months before the Six Gallery reading, in April 1955, he published, under the pseudonym “Jean-Louis,” a work of fiction entitled “Jazz of the Beat Generation” from a novel in progress he called *The Beat Generation*. Eventually that novel would be published as *On the Road*. Five years earlier, in 1950, he had published, under the name Jack

Kerouac, a novel entitled *The Town and the City*. Now, it was nearly forgotten; Kerouac was not widely known in Berkeley or San Francisco. At the Six Gallery almost no one knew him except for Ginsberg, Cassady, Rexroth, and a handful of local poets, including Robert Duncan. But by the end of the evening the crowd knew a great deal about Kerouac. As he himself noted in *The Dharma Bums* (1958), “I was the one who got things jumping.” He was Ginsberg’s co-conspirator, the essential link between the performers on stage and the people in the audience. It was Kerouac who helped break down the barriers.

The Six Gallery reading was—to borrow from Gary Snyder’s letter to Phil Whalen—a “subterranean celebration.” It was a gathering of underground poets and writers from the East Coast (Kerouac, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti) and from the West Coast (Snyder, Whalen, Lamantia). It was a festival of cross-continental and cross-cultural pollination. East met West. The urban poets who had been shaped by the culture of New York—the epicenter of American arts and letters in the 1940s and 1950s—met and mingled with their contemporaries who had been shaped by the culture on the western edge of the continent. The Six Gallery reading was also a pivotal moment when the subterranean world of dissident, nonconformist American writers defied the chilly climate of the Cold War and came out into the open. The voices that had been ignored, dismissed, and repressed came to the surface and began to be heard by the culture at large. Even the *New York Times* noticed and sent a reporter to cover the cultural explosion.

It was no accident that the Six Gallery reading took place in San Francisco in 1955—and no accident that Ginsberg wrote *Howl* in San Francisco, either. San Francisco, with its spectacular location

on the Pacific Ocean and its exuberant recklessness, had long been a hotbed of bohemian activity. And there was something about the city that encouraged poets and novelists to draw creative work from their innermost depths. “San Francisco is a mad city—inhabited for the most part by perfectly insane people,” Rudyard Kipling exclaimed. Frank Norris noted, “Things can happen in San Francisco . . . there is an indefinable air.” And John Steinbeck observed, “I felt I owned the city as much as it owned me.” In the 1950s, Kerouac felt much the same way. “San Francisco . . . always gives you the courage of your convictions,” he wrote. For Kerouac, as for Kipling, it was a mad city with mad people, and he loved it for its madness. “The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved,” he wrote in *On the Road*. San Francisco gave Kerouac the courage to write *San Francisco Blues*, his first book of poetry, and he praised the city to Allen Ginsberg, who experienced it as a kind of creative irritant that stirred up his worst nightmares and darkest memories.

San Francisco was a long way from the political and cultural establishment in Washington, D.C., and New York City, and that geographical distance engendered a sense of freedom that wasn’t found elsewhere in the United States in the era of the Cold War. It was an era, E. L. Doctorow noted in *Jack London, Hemingway and the Constitution*, that was dominated by an “ideology of fear” and by “sworn oaths of loyalty, blacklists, and public rituals of confession and repentance.” In San Francisco, the “ideology of fear” didn’t exert as powerful a force as it did in many other American cities. Anarchists, socialists, communists, pacifists, and Wobblies took part in the political and cultural life of San Francisco, giving it a distinctly left-leaning character. There

had been a general strike in San Francisco in 1934, which for many citizens was still a vivid memory and an inspiration, especially to the members of the International Longshoremen's Union. In the mid-1950s, Tillie Olsen was beginning to write again in San Francisco, after years of silence; her stories, including "I Stand Here Ironing," would be published in *Tell Me a Riddle*. Alexander Saxton, the proletarian novelist, was also writing about the power of art to create a sense of community, in his novel *Bright Web in the Darkness*. The Mattachine Society, the first American gay organization, had a strong though initially secret presence in San Francisco. Henry Hay, society founder and an influential San Francisco citizen, was a communist as well as a homosexual.

If the city provided a sanctuary for American bohemians and radicals, so too 1955 offered a respite from the rigidities of the Cold War. In 1955, McCarthyism as a political phenomenon had not run its course, but Senator Joseph McCarthy had been censured by his colleagues in the Senate and he was no longer the powerful demagogue he had been. In 1954 the televised Army-McCarthy hearings had exposed him as a bully and a lout. Liberals and radicals alike breathed a sigh of relief. The military-industrial complex, as President Dwight David Eisenhower called it in 1960, was as powerful as ever, but the Korean War was over, and the nation was at peace—relative peace—for the first time since 1950. Moreover, the country was in flux. In the South the civil rights movement was beginning to take shape and gather momentum. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled that racial segregation in schools was unconstitutional, and that landmark ruling spurred church leaders, activists, and radicals to demand freedom and equality for American blacks. Chicago teen-

ager Emmett Till was brutally murdered in Mississippi in 1955, and that same year his courageous mother, Mammie Till, spoke on television and described to the world the horrors of southern racism and the brutality of segregation. America was beginning to wake up.

There were visible cracks in the culture of the Cold War and sounds of liberation in rock'n'roll, in Hollywood movies like *Rebel without a Cause*, and in plays like Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* and Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. There were popular books like Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* that presented a critical perspective on American corporate culture, and there was provocative and innovative fiction like Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, first published in Paris. In baseball, the Brooklyn Dodgers defeated the New York Yankees in the 1955 World Series, an upset that showed Americans that the raggle-taggle team of bums could defeat the seemingly all-powerful machine and the men in pinstriped uniforms.

In San Francisco, at least, society was ripe for cultural breakthroughs like the Six Gallery reading. And the event happened in large part because Ginsberg made it a reality. Wally Hendrix—a painter and a veteran of the Korean War—approached Ginsberg in the summer of 1955 and asked him to organize a poetry reading at the Six Gallery—a “run down second rate experimental art gallery” at 311 Fillmore Street in San Francisco. At first, Ginsberg refused. He didn't know enough local poets, he said, and he didn't feel that there was enough worthwhile Bay Area poetry to warrant a reading. But once he'd written a rough draft of *Howl*, he changed his “fucking mind,” as he put it. A reading would provide an occasion both for his birth as a poet and for the birth of the Beat Generation, which had been slowly germinating for

years. Ginsberg learned that there was a tradition of poetry readings in San Francisco and in Berkeley where poets like Jack Spicer rejected the academic critics of poetry and embraced popular American entertainers and singers. “There is more of Orpheus in Sophie Tucker than in R. P. Blackmur,” Spicer proclaimed. In the spirit of Sophie Tucker, Spicer enlivened the literary scene with readings featuring himself, Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser, and Philip Lamantia.

Ginsberg liked the idea of being an outsider, a New Yorker, carrying on a local tradition. But the reading at the Six Gallery would be different from any other Bay Area poetry reading. It would be bigger and wilder and far more public. Everything would be allowed. Nothing would be sacred, not even poetry itself. Ginsberg set the date and time for the Six Gallery reading: October 7, 1955, at 8 P.M. His idea—and Jack Kerouac’s too—was to drink a lot of red wine, have fun, and act amateurish and goofy. On a more serious note, Ginsberg explained that the reading was meant to “defy the system of academic poetry, official reviews, New York publishing machinery, national sobriety and generally-accepted standards to good taste.”

Six Poets at Six Gallery

Having worked in New York and in San Francisco in marketing and advertising, and having worked as a literary agent for both Burroughs and Kerouac in the early 1950s, Ginsberg knew how to promote and sell a product, plan an event, and publicize an idea. With a minimal budget, he managed to squeeze out maximum marketing impact. He was a gadfly, energizing and stimulating the literary scene. His little cottage on Milvia Street in

Berkeley—where he lived with Kerouac and entertained the likes of Gary Snyder and Philip Whalen—served as the headquarters for the event and for the local poetry industry. The cottage was a beehive of activity, with constant comings and goings and conversations at all times of day and night.

Colorful signs about the event were posted in North Beach cafes and bars. About a hundred postcards with a catchy slogan—“6 poets at 6 Gallery”—were mailed to poetry aficionados in town. “A remarkable collection of angels on one stage reading their poetry,” the postcard read. There would be no admission charge for the “charming event,” Ginsberg wrote, but the organizers would take up a “small collection for wine.” The postcard also announced that the poets would read “sharp new straightforward writing.”

Ginsberg selected Kenneth Rexroth as the master of ceremonies. At fifty, Rexroth belonged to an older generation, but he was the perfect MC for the event. An anarchist and a bohemian, he also had an air of respectability. He’d been published by *New Directions* and he was the host of a popular radio program on KPFA, the listener-sponsored station in Berkeley. Rexroth’s job was to set the mood for the evening and to introduce the poets, none of whom, with the exception of Lamantia, were native to San Francisco. Many of the notable local poets—Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, and Robin Blaser—were not included in the program, and so the gala event at the Six Gallery was a cultural snub of sorts to the poets who thought they embodied the best of Bay Area poetry. The outsiders were taking over.

Ginsberg was understandably anxious about the cultural event that he was organizing. For weeks ahead of time he was apprehensive about his own imminent appearance on stage to read

what he called the “first scraps” of a long poem to a largely unknown audience in a city he thought of as foreign. But he wasn’t going it alone; he had a community, and he had Kerouac, his oldest and closest friend, to support him and give him a sense of self-confidence. At Milvia Street, on the day of the big event, he put on his best clothes—a charcoal gray suit, white shirt, and a tie. Then he and Kerouac took the bus together to San Francisco. There they were met by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who drove them in his vintage Aston Martin to the Six Gallery. They were exuberant as they arrived at 311 Fillmore Street. They were brash and swaggering and they were ready to crown themselves the reigning American poets. There was a sense of anticipation in the air. By eight o’clock the room was packed with North Beach bohemians and San Francisco State English teachers, as well as Ginsberg’s loyal friends and lovers: Peter Orlovsky, Neal Casady, and Natalie Jackson.

The Six Gallery reading was a radical departure for everyone—the members of the audience as well as the performers on stage. “This was no ordinary poetry reading,” Ginsberg and his fellow New York poet Gregory Corso wrote in the essay “The Literary Revolution in America.” There was nothing academic about the event and nothing refined about the behavior of the poets themselves, though the reading began on a note of formality. At first, the members of the audience were “rather stiff,” Kerouac observed, but they were gradually transformed into wild participants. Kerouac collected dimes and quarters and bought gallons of cheap California burgundy. He passed the wine around the room, encouraging everyone to “glug a slug from the jug”—including the poets themselves. “They got drunk, the audience

got drunk, all that was missing was the orgy,” Ginsberg and Corso noted. The orgy would come later.

Rexroth’s job as the master of ceremonies was to maintain a semblance of order. That wasn’t easy—not with an intoxicated audience and intoxicated poets, and especially with Kerouac at the back of the room uttering “little wows and yesses of approval and even whole sentences of comment with nobody’s invitation.” Rexroth was dressed for the part of impresario; he wore a pinstripe suit and a bow tie. He welcomed the audience and talked about San Francisco as an oasis of cultural freedom in a country of conformity, one of his favorite topics. As the evening unfolded over the next several hours, he introduced each poet in turn: Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder. The young men who read together at the Six Gallery could hardly be called a school of poets or a literary circle, though almost all of them admired William Carlos Williams and almost all of them were in rebellion against the stodgy academic poetry of the day, with its emphasis on ambiguity, irony, symbolism, and formalism. The poets came from very different geographical and aesthetic directions: from the backwoods of the Pacific Northwest and from the boroughs of Manhattan; from French surrealism and from American imagism. Moreover, they would soon go in different directions—Snyder would soon depart for Japan and life in a Buddhist monastery, while Ginsberg was bound for Los Angeles, New York, and the bohemian life on the Left Bank of Paris.

What they had in common was a profound love of poetry, a belief in the vitality and integrity of their own work, and a deep discontent with the militarism and materialism of American

civilization. They were all spiritual seekers of one sort or another, and they all were willing to take personal risks—to experiment not only with poetry but with politics, drugs, and sex. And, though they ascribed to very different ideas about death and rebirth, nature and civilization, they were bound together by a love of ancient myths and a penchant for transforming those myths to create new myths about the world. The historic reading at the Six Gallery provided the participants themselves with all the drama and excitement they needed to assert a grand cultural myth about the rebirth of poetry—the “Poetry Renaissance,” as it came to be called—in San Francisco in 1955.

In the lofty language of Ginsberg and Corso, the “reading was such a violent and beautiful expression of their revolutionary individuality (a quality bypassed in American poetry since the formulations of Whitman), conducted with such surprising abandon and delight by the poets themselves, and presenting such a high mass of beautiful unanticipated poetry, that the audience, expecting some Bohemian stupidity, was left stunned, and the poets were left with the realization that they were fated to make a permanent change in the literary firmament of the States.” It was as though Dionysus had come back from the dead, and as though art and religion were united again. And that was precisely what Ginsberg wanted—a return, as he put it, “to the original religious shamanistic prophetic priestly Bardic magic!”

Soon after 8 P.M. Lamantia began to read the work of John Hoffman, a fellow surrealist poet and friend who had recently died in Mexico. Lamantia declined to read his own poems, and in Kerouac’s eyes that personal gesture was an “elegy in itself to the memory of a dead young poet.” It also set the tone for the rest of the evening. Death was everywhere and so was life, and that

night poetry celebrated both life and death. Michael McClure, who had recently arrived in San Francisco from Kansas, read “For the Death of 100 Whales”—a short, angry poem inspired by a *Time* magazine story about seventy-nine American GIs with machine guns who slaughtered a pack of whales. Philip Whalen, who was born and raised in Portland, Oregon, read—in a tone of “mock seriousness”—“Plus Ça Change . . .,” which captured the sense of alienation and loneliness he saw as characteristic of the time. People wouldn’t look at one another or touch one another, Whalen noted in his poem. At 11 P.M.—after a brief intermission—it was Ginsberg’s turn. Wally Hendrix remembers that Ginsberg was in the bathroom, which faced the main room. Suddenly, the door opened and there he was sitting nonchalantly on the toilet. After pulling up his trousers, he made his way to the stage and began to read Part I of *Howl* in a “small and intensely lucid voice.” At that point, Part III did not exist at all, and Part II was only beginning to take shape. But no one felt cheated or left hanging; Part I seemed like a complete work in itself.

“Scores of people stood around in the darkened gallery straining to hear every word,” Kerouac wrote. After several hours of drinking cheap red wine, Ginsberg was drunk, but as he read he became increasingly sober, and as he gathered momentum he was surprised by his own “strange ecstatic intensity.” He developed a deeper sense of his own identity than he had ever had before. He thought of himself, he said, as a rabbi reading rhythmically to a congregation. Indeed, there was something of the Old Testament prophet about him. In the process of reading the poem, he found himself forging a new identity as a public poet sharing his private thoughts and feelings with eager, admiring listeners. *Howl* made Allen Ginsberg. The poem created the poet. The

audience was transformed too—indifferent spectators becoming energetic participants. “Everyone was yelling ‘Go! Go! Go!’” Kerouac wrote. No one had ever been at a poetry reading that was so emotional and so cathartic, not even the veteran Kenneth Rexroth.

By the end of his performance, Ginsberg was in tears, and Rexroth was “wiping his tears in gladness.” The ending of *Howl* provided an emotional climax, but the evening wasn’t over yet. Gary Snyder, who was wearing jeans, his beard neatly trimmed, read from *Myths and Texts*, a long work in progress, and the five-part poem “Berry Feast,” which celebrates the rituals and myths of the Native Americans of Oregon, particularly Coyote, their mythological trickster/hero. But Ginsberg was clearly the hero of the evening. Appropriately enough, Kerouac was among the first to congratulate him on his success. *Howl* would make him famous all over San Francisco, Kerouac observed. Rexroth was certain that the poem would make him famous all across America. “This poem will make you famous from bridge to bridge,” he exclaimed. After the reading, Ginsberg and Kerouac, along with Neal Cassady, Natalie Jackson, and Peter Orlovsky, drove to Nam Yuen in Chinatown “for a big fabulous dinner.” Then they went to The Place, a bohemian haunt in North Beach, where they drank, talked, and began to create the legend of the Six Gallery reading.

The Greatest Poet in America

Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who had attended the reading but had not been invited to join the revelers afterward, was full of praise for Ginsberg. Ferlinghetti was an accomplished poet—his first

book, *Pictures of the Gone World*, appeared in 1955—but Ginsberg thought of him in part as a “square bookstore owner.” Indeed, he operated City Lights Books on Columbus Avenue in North Beach. The day after the reading, Ferlinghetti sent Ginsberg a telegram at his cottage on Milvia Street. He wrote, “I greet you at the beginning of a great career. When do I get the manuscript?” The significance of Ferlinghetti’s words were not lost on Ginsberg. One hundred years earlier, in July 1855, Ralph Waldo Emerson had written Walt Whitman to praise *Leaves of Grass* as the “most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed.” In his letter to Whitman, Emerson exclaimed, “I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere.” Ginsberg was familiar with the celebrated letter; he had just read Gay Wilson Allen’s biography of Whitman, and he had also been rereading *Leaves of Grass*. Now, for the first time in his life he felt unequivocal in his enthusiasm about Whitman. He was “better than Pound & Eliot & Williams,” he insisted. As a high school boy, he thought that *Leaves of Grass*, though great literature, was flawed because of the poet’s own homosexuality. Now that he felt more accepting of his own homosexuality, he was less ambivalent about Whitman. And, for a poet who wanted to define himself in opposition to the literary establishment, Whitman was a near-perfect poet to adopt as a cultural hero. As late as 1955, Whitman was still largely untaught in college poetry classes and still largely unappreciated in academic circles, though he had a solid reputation in the nonconformist world.

And clearly there were similarities between Whitman and Ginsberg. Like Whitman, Ginsberg had a “long foreground”—a relatively long period before he emerged as a poet in his own

right. Like Whitman he wrote long poems with long, prose-like lines and long catalogues of things and people and events. Like Whitman, he wrote for America and about America, and like Whitman he sang about himself in the first person. Neither Whitman nor Ginsberg extinguished his personality in his poetry. Whitman had his “barbaric yap,” which he sounded “over the roofs of the world,” and Ginsberg had his animal howl, which he sounded “across the tops of / cities.” Both poets created striking public personae and myths about themselves. Both were self-dramatizing, and both were poseurs and promoters, as well as authentic and original.

Unlike Whitman, however, Ginsberg had a deep abiding sense of evil, and unlike Whitman he saw the city as the modern inferno. His world was darker than Whitman’s. Ginsberg seemed as innately pessimistic as Whitman was innately optimistic. Moreover, unlike Whitman, Ginsberg often did not like or trust the masses, nor did he believe wholeheartedly in the efficacy of American democracy. As he knew full well, the masses could be manipulated by demagogues like Senator Joseph McCarthy, and democracy could be subverted by military leaders like General Douglas MacArthur. At the start of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman wrote, “One’s-Self I sing, a simple separate person, / Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.” Allen Ginsberg sang of himself, but for the most part he did not consistently “utter the word Democratic.” On the contrary, he often sang about the fall of Whitman’s America, the fall of American democracy, and the degradation of the masses. A sense of doom and disaster informs *Howl*.

Unlike the writers of the American Renaissance of the

1850s—Whitman, Emerson—the writers of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance of the 1950s did not have a deep, abiding faith in American democracy. Neither did Ginsberg’s closest friends, especially Kerouac and Burroughs. “Democracy is cancerous,” Burroughs wrote in *Naked Lunch*. “America is not a young land: it is old and dirty and evil.” Kerouac was less cynical than Burroughs, though he too felt that America was in decline and that its best days had come and gone. Again and again in *On the Road*, he writes about “the end of America,” the “dregs of America,” the “washed-out bottom of America,” and the “whole mad thing, the ragged promised land, the fantastic end of America.” Granted, when Sal Paradise, Kerouac’s narrator, first arrives in California it looks “green and wondrous,” but before long he writes of the “end of the continent sadness,” and “the loneliness of San Francisco.” For Kerouac, the country’s newness, its bright hope, was a fast fading memory. By the 1950s, the nation, as well as its art and culture, was in decline.

Michael McClure, the youngest of the poets to read at the Six Gallery on October 7, expressed a sense of hope more clearly and strongly than any of the others, though he also expressed a sense of sadness and despair. For McClure, America on the eve of the Six Gallery reading was “locked in the Cold War.” The whole country “had the feeling of martial law,” and “there was no way, even in San Francisco, to escape the pressure of the war culture,” he wrote. When Ginsberg read *Howl*, McClure said, he and his contemporaries stood “cheering and wondering.” They understood that “a barrier had been broken, that a human voice and body had been hurled against the harsh walls of America, and its supporting armies and navies and academies and institutions and

ownership systems and power-support bases.” Of course, if you thought that everything was right with America, and that everything was going your way, you weren’t likely to praise *Howl*. It helped to feel, as McClure felt, that you were living under martial law, that America was an occupied country and that you belonged to the underground. From that perspective, Ginsberg looked and sounded like a defiant poet surfacing from below, prepared to change the world.

Despite his sense of despair and his ingrained gloominess, he wanted to be cheerful, even joyful, and to believe that utopia was possible. Even before the reading, he observed in his journal that there was a “primary good of this here civilization . . . the primary good . . . of individual suffering & conscience & creation.” Lionel Trilling, his mentor at Columbia College in the 1940s, had never recognized that goodness, he noted angrily, and now Ginsberg wanted to emphasize it. He wanted to see what Whitman had seen, but in a new way—to forge a vision about America that would reflect the realities of the twentieth century. He seemed to think that if Whitman had been alive in 1955 he might have written *Howl*. In his own peculiar way, Ginsberg did care profoundly about American democracy. Tellingly, as a young man in the 1940s he insisted that poets like Carl Sandburg, who revealed the flaws of America, were performing a democratic duty. The task of the poet of democracy wasn’t only or simply to speak well of the society, or to simply praise the masses. Now, in the 1950s, he saw it as his democratic duty to show the country that it had strayed from its democratic path. He would rescue the nation from the edge of the precipice. That too would be an act of poetic patriotism.

“The solitary and haunted individual is now the mass,” he wrote in his journal, as though describing himself, and he suggested that the poet—again thinking of himself—“who will speak for his own wild naked mind will also speak for the mass.” There was a genuine sense of patriotism in that perspective. Optimism didn’t come to Ginsberg easily, but he tried. When readers pointed out that *Howl* was dark and despairing, he would allow that the “surface” of the poem was “littered” with “rusty machinery & suicides,” but he insisted that at a deeper level the poem was “energetic & healthy & rather affirmative & compassionate.” And so it was. Beneath the weighty images of death and the waste land, there was a sense of joy, holiness, and freedom. In the mid-1970s, in the midst of the counterculture he had helped to create, he promised to rewrite *Howl*. Now that he was a hippie minstrel and a Pied Piper for the generation that advocated peace and love he would alter *Howl*, he said, so that it might reflect the euphoria of the hippies. He would include a “positive redemptive catalogue,” he said, and he would begin his poem with the upbeat line, “I saw the best minds of my generation turned on by music.” Of course, *Howl* lacked a long, affirmative, Whitmanesque catalogue. Ginsberg’s utopian vision was shrouded in 1955. Still, Six Gallery reading and the enthusiastic reception to *Howl*—including Ferlinghetti’s invitation to publish the book—gave Ginsberg more self-confidence and more of a sense of joy and pride than he had ever had in his whole life. As a boy, he had predicted that he would grow up to “be a genius.” Now, he felt he was that genius. In his journal in April 1956—six months after the Six Gallery reading—he exclaimed, “God! How great to be great like Hart Crane! To realize in one life all the longing for real

glory.” Ginsberg, who had been reading Philip Horton’s *Hart Crane: The Life of an American Poet*, felt that he had arrived. In that same journal entry, he wrote, “I am the greatest poet in America.” And then, seemingly aware of and embarrassed by his own enormous ego and his intense competition with others, especially Kerouac, he added in a characteristic spirit of generosity, “Let Jack be greater.”