

MCNEES, MATTHEW J., Ph.D. *Suffering and Liberation: The Personal Poetics of Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg*. (2011)  
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This dissertation examines Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg's personal poetry. While both poets attend to the random details of daily life, thereby establishing common ground as autobiographical writers, they differ markedly in their perspectives about the value of those details. Lowell possesses a stark, often nihilistic view, attesting to the irredeemable suffering of humanity; Ginsberg ascribes to a self-confident, sometimes larger-than-life persona, believing that complete freedom from fear is possible for everyone.

My approach is roughly chronological, beginning when both poets committed themselves to personal, autobiographical poetry during the 1950s. The temporal frame of the study, with a few exceptions, spans from the early 1950s through the 1970s. I give due attention to each poet's "breakthrough" work in the 1950s--like Ginsberg's *Howl* and Lowell's *Life Studies*--but I also place both poets on a larger continuum that began before they wrote their breakthrough works and lasted beyond their initial success.

I explain Lowell and Ginsberg's place in the broader literary history of the modern poets that immediately preceded them. Each found the tenets of modern poetry limiting to his personal approach and found it necessary to resuscitate the value of individual, personal subjectivity, something that countered the prevailing notions of objective poetry as put forth most notably by T. S. Eliot. Lowell's commitment to personal poetry came after he had already established his reputation in the 1940s, so his

break into personal poetry was highly self-conscious; Ginsberg committed to it early and he never wavered in his approach.

Most importantly, I bring the two poets together historically. Throughout, I make clear that their poetry embodies certain changes that occur simultaneously in American society and culture. In chapter 4, I examine a set of poems they wrote in relation to the Vietnam War protests of the late 1960s. Their opinions and strategies in these poems are consistent with their general views on humanity and emerge in relation to larger social views of the time. In addition, I bookend my study with two historical moments: the first and the last times that the poets were together. My prologue discusses their first meeting, in 1959, when they two were just beginning to gain their reputations as influential autobiographical poets: Ginsberg had just made a great splash with *Howl* in a volume that came to represent beat poetry, and Lowell was making his own bold statement with *Life Studies* in a volume that came to define confessional poetry. At this time, they criticized each other and thought more about their perceived differences in style and perspective than they did about the common ground they shared as personal poets. My epilogue discusses the only reading that the two poets ever gave together, in 1977, a time when they seemed less and less polar opposites to each other and more and more, as Lowell quipped at the time, “opposite ends of William Carlos Williams.” In essence, my study is itself an extension of this claim.

This study therefore mirrors the way that these two poets committed themselves to and pursued a personal aesthetic. They began by rigorously examining themselves as

the subjects of their poems and they ended with the same strategy. As Ginsberg wrote in *Howl*, “the absolute heart of the poem” should be “butchered out of their own bodies”; as Lowell reflected in his “Epilogue,” “why not say what happened?” This study explores what happened along the road, so to speak, with particular emphasis on the contrast between Lowell’s belief that humankind’s condition is turmoil and Ginsberg’s that we can ultimately liberate ourselves from pain.

The manner in which Lowell and Ginsberg treated the individual subject, one they usually assumed to be themselves, led to their own particular explorations of pain and liberation. As Lowell delved more deeply into his own turmoil, he came to write about the pain associated with sight: he seemed to see a world as it plainly presents itself in everyday reality, yet he suffered more and more as a result of his inability to accurately explain what he saw. As Ginsberg sought out ways to liberate himself and others, he made an example of himself as one who could remove what he believed to be social masks forced upon all human beings. He therefore wrote many poems aimed to alleviate basic fears about society and its norms, fears that he thought everybody experienced and must overcome. These authors’ unconventional dedication to personal poetry asks that we constantly reconsider how suffering and liberation can play vital roles as we negotiate our own identity and move between our own private and public selves, broadening the scope of discourses that define the role of the individual in literature.

SUFFERING AND LIBERATION:  
THE PERSONAL POETICS OF  
ROBERT LOWELL AND  
ALLEN GINSBERG

by

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## DEDICATION

For Heather and Maggie Pearl.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of  
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## CHAPTER I

### PROLOGUE -- A BRIEF EXCHANGE OF LETTERS IN 1959

In 1959, the year of *Life Studies*, Allen Ginsberg and Robert Lowell met at Lowell's apartment. Ginsberg, joined by his lover Peter Orlovsky and the beat *poète maudit* Gregory Corso, showed up to drop off some recent work. More than literature brought Ginsberg and his friends to Lowell's. Ginsberg had met with Timothy Leary and thought he might, perhaps, turn on Lowell to Leary's mind-altering, experimental lysergic acid. But by the time of the visit Ginsberg thought better of it since he had heard rumors that the prized Bostonian poet was already near the edge. At one point Ginsberg shocked his host, as he often shocked his readers, when he emerged from Lowell's bathroom carrying Orlovsky on his shoulders.<sup>1</sup>

Lowell remained more at odds with Ginsberg's beat poetics than with his antics, and his initial response to Ginsberg's work was harsh. In fact, Lowell probably equated the two at this point in his career. Lowell and Ginsberg probably saw little hope of getting along, and this first meeting seemed rather stagey. They carried too many preconceived notions of each other as leading parties of two different kinds of American poetry--the countercultural and the academic. Those labels translated directly into each poet's belief that he was the one who wrote the right way.<sup>2</sup>

Given all of this, it is surprising that a correspondence ensued. Their letters to each other reinforce their differences; they are curt and defensive. Lowell believes that

Ginsberg's poetry is sloppy and careless, and Ginsberg thinks Lowell's stiff and formal, too institutional. On April 1, 1959, a few days after they met, Lowell criticized almost every aspect of beat poetry, even going so far as to call the poems that Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac co-wrote "a lot of bull" (Mariani 274). On April 5, Ginsberg responded emotionally to Lowell in two ways: he claimed that he had been victimized by the institution of poetry, and he implied that Lowell was part of that institution:

I've been the object of much--that's made me a little hypersensitive, sure--you have no idea the barrage of garbage I've had to swallow from Kenyon, Hudson, etc. without losing my temper the last few years. (*Letters* 742)

Lowell backed off a little on April 10, for he must have thought of himself as something of an outsider by this point. However, he still maintained that an essential difference in style separated the two poets, for he did, after all, hold traditional poetic form much more dearly than Ginsberg:

I think letters ought to be written the way you think poetry ought to be [...] breezy, brief, incomplete, but spontaneous and not dishonestly holding back. (*Letters* 344)

Ginsberg and Lowell would not elaborate on their personal or literary differences in any further correspondence, but they would reveal their similarities and differences in highly personal volumes of poetry in the decades following this brief exchange.

The most important of the many differences between the poetry of Robert Lowell and that of Allen Ginsberg is this: seeing and writing about the particulars of everyday experience causes Robert Lowell great personal turmoil, while seeing and writing about

this affords Allen Ginsberg much freedom and allows him to try to liberate others.

Though they both wrote personal poetry in the 1950s, they clearly wrote in different styles.

This contrast between Lowell and Ginsberg is apparent throughout their work.

Ginsberg often draws attention to how his poems serve humanity. He regards his poetry as helping others who experience social problems common to all:

Well, while I'm here I'll  
do the work--  
and what's the Work?  
To ease the pain of the living.  
Everything else, drunken  
dumbshow.  
("Memory Gardens," *The Fall of America* 135)

Lowell writes about poetry quite differently. He emphasizes how the poet's work is self-defeating: the poet who seems to overcome its problems is lying to himself. It's not that he does not think that others suffer; rather he explores his own suffering without intending to connect it to others. In fact, his language creates an ambiguous mood suggestive of intense isolation. This makes Lowell, as Vereen Bell has said, a hero in his suffering:

A nihilist has to live in the world as is,  
gazing the impossible summit to rubble.  
("The Nihilist as Hero," *Notebook* 211)

These examples do not stand for all of their work. Lowell reaches out to others, and Ginsberg despairs, but such moments are rare. Lowell is the sufferer, like a fallen angel; Ginsberg is the liberator, like a saint. But these autobiographical personae nonetheless blend together at times, for Christ despaired in the garden and Satan hesitated before the fall.

Lowell and Ginsberg reveal in juxtaposition certain social and literary dimensions that cannot be discovered by reading them separately. They both responded to postwar America and to a crisis in modern poetry by choosing to write autobiographical poetry. But they took strikingly different paths in doing so. Lowell began as the inheritor of literary modernism, but Ginsberg was never interested in that tradition. The two poets enrich and clarify each other's parallel responses. Reading the two together sharpens an understanding of their achievements and illuminates their contrasting perspectives on the individual in American society.

## CHAPTER II

### INTRODUCTION -- ROBERT LOWELL AND ALLEN GINSBERG

#### **An Overview of Their Scholarly and Historical Contexts**

This chapter introduces some scholarly and historical contexts essential to understanding the similarities and differences between the personal poetics of Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg. Their contrasting literary genealogies suggest their own similarities and differences, so I begin by explaining each poet's role as a newcomer to the field of modernist poetics that preceded them. In doing so, I briefly explain how Lowell and Ginsberg latched on to the ideas of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams in order to negotiate the dominance of T.S. Eliot and high modernism. Because of the way the careers of these modernists played out, Lowell and Ginsberg were able both to connect with and rebel against their predecessors.

By the 1950s, both Lowell and Ginsberg stood out as autobiographical poets, breaking out of what would typically be considered the modern/postmodern continuum in literary history. After their work in the 1950s, they cared little for earlier modernist practices; they now had more in common with autobiographical writers from ages past than with their immediate predecessors. But Lowell and Ginsberg did not leave modernist poetry behind so fully as this might sound. After all, like all poets, they were forced to grapple with their predecessors, just as other figures grappled with modernist poetry in

the years just before Lowell and Ginsberg's breakthrough works. So I explain how such a turnabout in American poetry was possible by focusing on one of the most important writers of this generation, Delmore Schwartz. Less obvious as a direct influence on Ginsberg than Lowell, he nonetheless was, to some degree, part of each poet's milieu. I believe that Schwartz's essays predict an inevitable break from modernist poetry more than a decade before Ginsberg wrote *Howl* and Lowell wrote *Life Studies*. In the late 30s, through the 40s, and into the early 50s, Schwartz wrote about certain isolating effects of modern poetry in ways that presage the break from Eliotic and New Critical modernism and in terms that Lowell and Ginsberg would have found sympathetic. As I show, change was definitely on the way, though Schwartz himself did not actually create it.

As one would suspect, scholars connect Lowell and Ginsberg to a degree based on their similar role as autobiographical poets. A larger, critical narrative about the self in poetry places Lowell and Ginsberg in the same light. However, since they comprehend the nature of everyday experience differently, bringing them together can be difficult. Their starkly contrasting views about humanity--Lowell's deep personal turmoil and Ginsberg's celebratory liberation--force me to work through this potential issue throughout, so I foreground the criticism of Steven Hoffman and Steven Gould Axelrod, two scholars who analyze the similarities and differences between Lowell and Ginsberg. These poets commit to an identifiable speaker in poems filled with personal details, and in this way I agree with Hoffman that they "painstakingly reconstruct identity" (689). Their commitment to autobiography represents an antithetical stance against certain high



modernist poets. (Delmore Schwartz's essays suggest this general intellectual current.) After engaging with Hoffman and Axelrod's essays, I move on to consider the broader debate among critics who discuss high modern or New Critical ideas in relation to the poetry of Lowell and Ginsberg.

### **Lowell and Ginsberg in Twentieth-Century Literary History**

*The Waste Land* rendered Pound and Williams nearly obsolete, while the entire New Critical school bolstered Eliot's reputation through criticism that lasted not only quite beyond the publication of *The Waste Land* but persisted beyond Lowell and Ginsberg's breakthrough publications in the 50s (Perkins 208). A prominent example of this fact in American literary history is G.T. Wright's *The Poet in the Poem* (1960) in which he claims paradoxically that a mask "asserts and concentrates, not hides" the poet or speaker in a poem (164). Ginsberg and Lowell write poems that require no reading strategies or critical theories specifically developed to explain revelation through concealment, as their 1950s volumes *Howl* and *Life Studies* demonstrate, though, like any poet, they construct social and artistic speakers by necessity. Because of this, Ginsberg and Lowell gravitated more toward Williams and Pound than Eliot.

William Carlos Williams had never had a significant reputation compared to Eliot and Pound. He was perhaps better known for his criticisms of high modern poetry (believing it to be inaccessible for the reader and therefore too academic) than for his own book at the time, *Spring and All* (1923). His rise to become perhaps the most

important model for postwar poets had, according to David Perkins, as much to do with his moral vision (opposing the perceived elitist, distanced, classical stance of Eliot and New Criticism) as it did with his later poetry (208). Nevertheless, he began publishing *Paterson*, the great poem of his late resurgence, in 1946. Ezra Pound, every bit as influential as Eliot during the early years of the expatriate modernist movement, fell out of fashion, was imprisoned, and then spent time at St. Elizabeth's hospital. Pound's *Pisan Cantos*, published in 1948 and contentiously awarded the first ever Bollingen Prize (Robert Lowell was a judge who voted in favor of Pound's book) reestablished his reputation for good (Perkins 207-09).

So, where were Ginsberg and Lowell during Williams' and Pound's late careers? They were just starting out, and in short, when Williams and Pound reemerged, Lowell and Ginsberg established a direct connection with modern poetry without also connecting to the institutionalized modernism of Eliot and the institutionalized New Critics. Lowell had to disconnect from the critics who guided him through his early work, the most prominent being Allen Tate, in an act that Jeffrey Meyers calls an "attack" on Tate (29). Pound and Williams, seen in the late 1940s as opposing Eliot to some degree, became the neo-modern models for Lowell and Ginsberg. In general, they appealed to Lowell and Ginsberg because Pound's later poetry had a more personal voice, while Williams, opposed to anything already accomplished, had a particular dislike for academic poetry.<sup>3</sup>

Lowell, from the 50s onward, and Ginsberg wrote very little that can be seen as indebted to high modernism. Like Lowell and Ginsberg, scholars eventually turned from

the critical imperatives associated with New Criticism. Robert Langbaum's *The Poetry of Experience* (1957), for example, links modern and romantic poetry. He views modernist poetics not as their own force but as another post-Enlightenment form extending from Romanticism (11). At the end of the decade that saw Ginsberg and Lowell's breakthroughs in personal poetry, critics continued to use the concepts of speaker, persona, and mask, but they now saw the concepts outside of the the context of impersonality (Beardsley 260).

Robert Lowell's career spans these changes in modern influence, so New Critical ideas shape his first publications, *Land of Unlikeness* (1944), *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946), and *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1951). Though these monographs arguably show glimmers of the powerful personal voice that emerged in the late 1950s, they mostly contain difficult poems laden with myth and symbol, stunted by alliterative, dense syntax, and stilted with challenging, sometimes pompous, diction. In 1959, with the publication of *Life Studies*, Lowell rejected this way of writing, putting it behind him for good. He came to speak of T. S. Eliot as if he were speaking of his own early, difficult poems. In an essay titled "T. S. Eliot," Lowell says that "Eliot's faith seems almost willfully crooked, dry, narrow, and hard" (*Collected Prose* 50). Nonetheless, Lowell's reputation as an institutionalized figure always hindered him in the company of more radical poets, especially Allen Ginsberg and the beats, who remembered Lowell's early, academic allegiances.

Allen Ginsberg connects to modernism because of the late resurgence of Williams and Pound, and he is not influenced, as is Lowell, by Eliotic or New Critical modernism. Instead, Ginsberg dismissed high modernism, speaking of it only with derision and antagonism, and always using Eliot as a foil. In “T. S. Eliot Entered My Dreams,” Ginsberg creates a fictional conversation in which he accuses Eliot of being a C.I.A. operative. When Ginsberg claimed Walt Whitman as his great American predecessor, he chose, according to David Perkins, Eliot’s antagonist in American poetry (542). And while his indebtedness to Whitman is obvious, it came partly as a way to skip back over the high modern experiment in search of poetry that is social and political.

Ginsberg also relates to late modernism in a few other contexts: open form and the counterculture. Practitioners of open form, like Charles Olson and the Black Mountain poets, rated Pound and Williams as the most important “modern” models (Perkins 488). Historically, open form reacts against the perceived closed forms espoused in New Criticism. Ginsberg saw Williams and Pound, then, as part of a clear line that connects him with Whitman. But Ginsberg also emerged directly from the counterculture. William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac passed on to him a romantic pathos mixed with a countercultural ethos. Kerouac’s theories of prosody shaped *Howl* arguably more than anything else. Bringing these various contexts together, William Carlos Williams helped to legitimize the beats by writing the introduction to *Howl*. He put his stamp of authority on a new tradition that was partly inspired by him.

### **Delmore Schwartz's Essays in the 1930s and 1940s**

Though Lowell and Ginsberg offered alternatives to earlier twentieth-century poetry, there were others who grappled with alternatives to high modernism before them. Probably the most-cited transitional figure is W. H. Auden. Jerome Mazzaro, in *Postmodern Poetry*, establishes Auden as the key transitional figure, particularly when considering certain psychoanalytical tenets widespread in the 1940s. Other transitional figures are Weldon Kees, who helped move along the New York avant garde and the San Francisco Renaissance; Frank O'Hara, who remained skeptical of modernism as a prominent member of the New York School; and Kenneth Fearing, whose poetry in the 1930s often sarcastically took on the multiple voices of American culture. Reemergent, reinvented moderns such as William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens also can be seen as transitional figures. Born in 1917, Lowell was himself a transitional figure along with other poets born at about the same time, namely, John Berryman, Elizabeth Bishop, Randall Jarrell, Theodore Roethke, and Delmore Schwartz. From the outside looking in, the early beat writers Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs were also transitional figures, though at the time most saw them as beyond the pale.

Of all these, Delmore Schwartz stands out as an exemplary figure because of his essays discussing challenges facing the "modern poet." He and Lowell were friends and fellow writers from the 1940s until Schwartz's death in 1966. They lived together for a time in the 1940s and Lowell lectured on Schwartz at Harvard (*Letters* xvii, 475). He kept up with Schwartz's essays throughout his career. In a letter to Elizabeth Bishop in

1958, Lowell mentions his high regard for Schwartz's prose: "The Library of C[ongress] sent me three lectures, and I think Delmore's is *excellent*" (*Words* 287). Schwartz was also a familiar figure to Ginsberg as a fringe "Villager" when Schwartz taught in New York and frequented Greenwich Village bars. Both Lowell and Ginsberg empathized with Schwartz and his belief that the poet suffers at the hands of society.

In "To Delmore Schwartz" (*Life Studies* 53) Lowell, whose comic awareness of the two writers' torment, remembers an evening they spent together in 1946. Lowell focuses on a "stuffed duck" in Schwartz's apartment that "cooled our universal / *Angst*" (ll. 8, 19-20). They smoked cigarettes, drank gin, fell under the "inert gaze" of a Coleridge bust, and watched Schwartz's cat "cartwheel for joy in a ball of snarls" (ll. 27, 30). Schwartz quoted Wordsworth, situating their own madness and despair in the great tradition of poetry in English. Lowell includes the noticeable misquotation ("sadness" for "gladness") as the poem moves to closure:

*"We poets in our youth begin in sadness;  
thereof in the end come to despondency and madness;  
Stalin had two cerebral hemorrhages!"*  
The Charles  
River was turning silver. In the ebb-  
light of morning, we stuck  
the duck  
- 's web-  
foot, like a candle, in a quart of gin we'd killed. (ll. 33-41)

Schwartz's quotation summarizes his view on the poet in society. The longer a poet continues his craft, the more isolated and alienated he becomes. The liquor the poets

drink helps them deal with their coming “madness” and points toward their own demise.

Allen Ginsberg, who empathized with all suffering, joins Lowell and Schwartz by way of his belief that poems are “butchered from the heart” (*Howl* l. 88).

Schwartz’s ideas stand on their own as essential writing about the poet’s role in American culture during the years immediately prior to Lowell and Ginsberg’s work in the 1950s, operating as a kind of guide or warning. I want to provide a brief analysis of Schwartz’s essays to show how personal isolation was a pre-determining factor in Lowell and Ginsberg’s soon-to-arrive, newly formulated view of the self in confessional poetry.

Based on his monograph *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities* (1938), Schwartz was for a time hailed by many as the great writer of his generation. He admired T. S. Eliot, and, like Hart Crane tragically before him, was maddened by his inability to write the next great *The Waste Land*. (Schwartz’s *Genesis* [1943] is his failed attempt.) Between his early success and later failure, Schwartz documented his feelings about the modern artist. He left behind a framework for discussing the certain limiting factors inherent in the modern perspective that Lowell shed with *Life Studies* and that Ginsberg opposed as a beat poet.

Schwartz finds in Eliot a stunning perspective on the human plight. In “T.S. Eliot as an International Hero” (1945), Schwartz states that “Eliot was the one who looked into the abyss and refused henceforward to deny or forget the fact” (*Selected Essays* 121).

Schwartz believes that Eliot’s poems powerfully relate to “modern life”:

The reader of T. S. Eliot by turning dials of his radio can hear the capitals of the world, London, Vienna, Athens, Alexandria, Jerusalem. What he hears will be news of the agony of war. Both the agony and the width of this experience are vivid examples of how the poetry of T. S. Eliot has a direct relationship to modern life. (120-21)

Schwartz sees Eliot's poetry not only in terms of its polyvocal "width" but also through the lens of horrible, worldwide strife. The "many voices" of Eliot's poetry isolate the artist because of their capacity to expose the artist to violence and make him feel generally at war with himself.

Schwartz praises Eliot's use of multiple voices in another essay, "T.S. Eliot's Voice and His Voices" (1954), in which he says that Eliot created a new method of "sibylline (or subliminal) listening." Eliot provides "energy and mobility." "It can hardly be denied," Schwartz observes, "that the modern poet possesses, by virtue of his method, an immense energy and mobility, which is new" (139, 140). For Schwartz, Eliot's method began something that gets the poet into serious trouble (141). This method carries inherent risks that expose the poet:

It must be admitted that the new method is a dangerous one, requiring not only a great deal of passive receptivity, but also the operation of a severe critical sense to assure the greatness and purity of what is received. (140)

The isolation is a process: the poet sacrifices his singular point of view and instead gives himself over to a multiplicity. In turn, he makes sacrifices because of the great intelligence required to understand and appreciate this type of work. Schwartz, wary of



“passive receptivity,” finds Eliot’s lines in “The Dry Salvages” haunting and prophetic: “The future has many voices, / Many gods and many voices” (ll. 24-5). To give oneself over to passivity is dangerous for the poet because as he sacrifices his singular point of view, loses his credibility as a thinking, problem solving entity and instead becomes a relatively hopeless function of the chaotic world.

Schwartz believes that Eliot accurately depicts the isolation of the modern poet and argues that state of isolation has become unavoidable for modernists:

The fundamental isolation of the modern poet began not with the poet and his way of life; but rather with the whole way of life of modern society. It was not so much the poet as it was the poetry, culture, sensibility, imagination, that were isolated. (7)

He further explains Eliot’s impersonal and passive method, arguing that the modern poet did not create his own isolation but simply pointed out “the whole way of life of modern society” (7). In this age of war and privation, Schwartz seems to be saying, the only thing for a poet to do is to record its horrors, thereby giving in to a deterministic view. This part of Eliot’s achievement, to give himself over to multiplicity rather than to rally for the individual poet’s single perspective, shows how high modernism operated differently from the autobiographical perspective that brings Lowell and Ginsberg together after Eliot and Schwartz. Although the two poets would re-imagine Schwartz’s inevitable isolation and claim an active, social and personal role for the poet (as opposed to Eliot’s passivity), Schwartz remains trapped with his sense of inevitable isolation.

Schwartz's point of view suggests that Lowell's sense of suffering, as opposed to Ginsberg's sense of liberation, is evidence of his early career's roots in modernism, making his later suffering a theme that carries over and his later poems primarily a matter of stylistic change. Lowell had to live with the problems that tormented Schwartz. Schwartz never escaped from the intellectual and creative impasse that Lowell was always trying to get out of--the turmoil particular to the "modern" poet. Ginsberg, who was not part of the same generation, did not feel victimized by "modern isolation" and saw different antecedents to his poetry besides Eliot. Ginsberg did not need not make a transition to personal poetry because he wrote it all along.

### **Critics on Lowell and Ginsberg**

Although Ginsberg and Lowell, in *Howl* and *Life Studies*, steered poetry away from New Criticism, the influence of Eliot and the reputation of his work remained strong. The essays of Schwartz are typical in celebrating Eliot but atypical in their warnings to poets about modern isolation. Schwartz was, after all, writing to poets about dangers that did not exist for critics. Critics continued to debate the antithetical relationship between impersonality and personality that poets like Lowell and Ginsberg left behind and that tormented writers like Schwartz. Some critics, presumably to Schwartz's horror, even looked for ways to emphasize the walls that poetry raises between real life and artifice (Mack 81-3). T. S. Eliot did so himself. In *The Three Voices of Poetry* (1954) Eliot emphasizes the dramatic in poetry and declares that the term

“‘persona’ was just” (22) in thinking about the three voices that exist in poems. G. T. Wright in *The Poet and the Poem* (1960) delineates the various modes of modernist impersonality and believes that disembodied consciousness represents the human condition most fully (59). On the other hand, critics such as Northrop Frye in *Fables of Identity* (1963), oppose the notion that a mask reveals identity (235). According to Don Geiger in *The Dramatic Impulse in Modern Literature* (1967), critics even began to question the once ubiquitous acceptance of Wimsatt’s intentional fallacy.<sup>4</sup> Lowell and Ginsberg, having placed great emphasis on the author’s intentions, built their poems around such “fallacies.”

By the 1970s, criticism fell more in line with the basic beliefs that led Lowell and Ginsberg to personal poetry back in the 1950s. The criticism was catching up to the poetry. Lionel Trilling, Irvin Ehrenpreis, and Robert Langbaum argued in favor of personal poetry. In *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), Trilling renounced impersonality as dishonest (8). In *Literary Meaning and Augustan Values* (1974), Ehrenpreis favored “real speakers and real listeners” (56). In *The Mysteries of Identity* (1977), Langbaum boldly stated that the question of personal identity “involves nothing less than our humanity” (15). Both Lowell and Ginsberg weigh in on the side of real speakers and real listeners. Their poems implement a single speaker who has a specific audience in mind.

In essays on Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, and their contemporaries, Steven K. Hoffman and Steven Gould Axelrod explain how Lowell and Ginsberg belong to the same literary history as a result of their autobiographical poems. In the 1950s, both poets

offered powerful and lasting alternatives to modernist poetry. They both experience personal pain associated with their confessional poetry, yet they are affected differently. In general, Hoffman and Axelrod both believe that Lowell suffers irredeemably whereas Ginsberg experiences catharsis.

Hoffman states that Lowell's and Ginsberg's confessional poetry includes more personal details from everyday life than any poetry before it and therefore risks more personal anguish. Axelrod suggests that Lowell's and Ginsberg's poetry operates subversively in order to break from the relatively stable forms of sexuality in modernist poetics. He connects Lowell's and Ginsberg's personal lives to their poems and draws little distinction between what they risk personally and what they portray as risk through their speakers. Both critics also see Lowell as the poet whose work embodies great torment, as if he has fallen like the well-known speaker of "Skunk Hour" who says "I myself am hell" (l. 37).

Lowell rarely depicts the kind of redemptive liberty felt by Ginsberg. Both Hoffman and Axelrod suggest that Lowell cannot formulate solutions about individual suffering. Hoffman explains this difference in terms of spirituality. He argues that Lowell "left his orthodox religious views behind" whereas Ginsberg "took it upon himself to reestablish a paradisaal state by projecting authentic human contact with the divine spirit" (339). Axelrod explains this difference more broadly, but reaches a similar conclusion. For him, both Lowell and Ginsberg "detach themselves" from their modern predecessors, but Lowell remains somehow detached from others as well. In contrast,

Ginsberg “was ultimately able to achieve balance through his diverse, rich relations with people and places” (12). Recent biographies of the poets bear titles that suggest this distinction: Bill Morgan’s life of Ginsberg is *I Celebrate Myself* (2006), whereas Paul Mariani’s life of Lowell is *Lost Puritan* (1994).

Modernists constructed identity as well; they just did so differently. As Charles Altieri says, modernists “treated expression as an ideal based not on the character of the writer but on the constructive activity giving the object a distinctive play of forces that is impossible to summarize in any discursive practice” (*Art* 5). Modernists in general, as Altieri explains, express themselves more objectively than Lowell and Ginsberg who identify their identity through their personal character. Their poetry represents personal expression based on a single, identifiable speaker because they, like others of their generation such as Schwartz, perceive the potentially isolating factors involved with entertaining multiple voices. Lowell and Ginsberg, as Hoffman says, engage in a “painstaking reconstruction of identity” (337).

Hoffman claims that the confessional poetry of Lowell and Ginsberg represents more than the recording of facts by solipsistic individuals and, instead, sheds light on broader cultural conditions. He believes that Lowell and Ginsberg work within a tradition of group salvation. To support this claim, he offers a broad genealogy: Augustine’s *Confessions* and Wordsworth’s poetry filtered through several representative American autobiographical voices such as Jonathan Edwards, Benjamin Franklin, and Walt Whitman. Hoffman draws broadly on M. H. Abrams’ *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971), in

which Abrams engages with writers who write as “God’s chosen” and who “transform” their lives into a Christian mission (84).

According to Hoffman, Ginsberg and Lowell also relate to their audiences differently. Lowell seems to separate himself from others and therefore creates a speaker whose detachment reveals a state of turmoil. Ginsberg, on the other hand, connects his “own self with all self” (334) more constructively, presenting a speaker more willing to form a socially and politically productive relationship with the reader. In particular, Ginsberg differs from Lowell because he relies on popular mysticism that breaks down borders with his readers. But to separate them fundamentally and play up these distinctions seems foolish to Hoffman; he believes that doing so leads to an inaccurate accusation of solipsism that underestimates both poets’ work.

During the 1950s, Lowell and Ginsberg developed similar beliefs about how a poet should choose a subject. Axelrod takes this to mean that these “poets of the midcentury exposed a world of sensual drift, in which deviance was no longer foreclosed and borders no longer maintained” (3). They certainly write straightforwardly about their own private lives, as such representative examples as Ginsberg’s “Please Master” (*Fall of America* 84) and Lowell’s “Man and Wife” (*Life Studies* 87) show. As Axelrod says, they “both identified themselves with sexual otherness” (6); they “broke the connection between poetry and heteronormativity”; and they “queered the subject and therefore queered the very idea of poetry” (8). In this way Lowell and Ginsberg protect themselves against “the chaos of subjectivity” (8). The “formal experiment” of *The Waste Land*

offers a diverse, invisible subjectivity much different from that of Lowell and Ginsberg's autobiographical speakers, and he shows that Lowell and Ginsberg, in fact, resisted the impersonal passivity associated with Eliotic subjectivity.

Lowell and Ginsberg "began to access the discourses of popular culture in the 1950s" (15); they collapsed the dividing line between anti-war journalism and poetry; and they had a friendly rivalry, even one that made them "political comrades" (17). But for Axelrod, Lowell and Ginsberg may also be a bit crazy:

Their experience of psychological abjection made these poets resistant to mainstream social values. Perhaps they recognized in their mood disorders a way to combat the social conformity and "other-direction" of their time and place. Perhaps their confinements in the heterotopic [out of place, not normal] spaces of the hospital helped them register the larger social upheavals of their era. (10)

Axelrod's labeling of their experience as "psychological abjection" carries the connotation of social deviance and madness from which Lowell and Ginsberg's reputations have suffered for years.<sup>5</sup> However, Axelrod ends his argument in an attempt to explain the ways that Lowell and Ginsberg successfully ushered in something exciting yet hard to define and in this way brings him together with Hoffman's sense that they reconstruct identity through autobiography:

These poets participate in the exciting and enigmatic project of poetry between modernism and postmodernism, in which both subject and language turn on themselves, changing in new, perhaps mistaken, but seemingly productive ways. (19)

Lowell and Ginsberg's poetry is "exciting" because they risk the personal. It is "enigmatic" because the nature of the personality is subjective, complicated, momentary, and emotional. They "turn in on themselves" because personalities are "enigmatic." They represent "new ways" because they said no to modern polyvocality. Their ways were "perhaps mistaken" because there is no ultimate truth in language and poetry, but their ways were "seemingly productive."

According to both Axelrod and Hoffman, these two poets do not necessarily represent a more authentic version of reality; rather, they force us, by delving so honestly into everyday life, to eliminate social barriers for the sake of directness and clarity. Both Hoffman and Axelrod demonstrate that Lowell and Ginsberg are part of the same literary history in that they reject earlier twentieth-century poetry to some degree. Additionally, Hoffman's statement that they "painstakingly reconstruct identity" emerges as a productive way to think about Lowell and Ginsberg in relation to much earlier twentieth-century poetry.

As Hoffman and Axelrod's essays show, Lowell and Ginsberg's personal poetry introduces them into a scholarly debate about autobiography and personality. This debate involves certain irresolvable binaries about personality and impersonality that run through twentieth-century American poetry. Three different views over the last five years, in studies that question autobiography and personality in poetry, show how critics think in diverse ways about the author's ability to write about himself. These views reveal some



of the many ways that one might investigate Lowell and Ginsberg's similarities and differences.

Deborah Forbes' *Sincerity's Shadow* (2004), Susan Rosenbaum's *Professing Sincerity* (2007), and Sharon Cameron's *Impersonality* (2007) discuss personality in the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry. Forbes states that the poem's structure, not the poet, gets in the way of sincerity. She believes that mere "shadows" of the poet's personality emerge when she attempts to get a sense of a poet's sincerity. Her method cuts to the core of our most common sense about autobiography: the poet tries to tell the truth, perhaps, but can't possibly do so since language always inhibits the truth.

Rosenbaum believes that truth or reality is always rhetorical, and, what's more, guided by commerce. Following this belief, she dismisses any hope of true sincerity and instead defines the concept through the individual poet's commercial exchange: she believes that poets construct sincere poses to sell books. Authorial claims to sincerity inspire irony and skepticism, and only duplicitously do claims inspire trust in the reader (1-2). She would find Lowell and Ginsberg to be savvy and would argue that they merge morality and commerce more than their readers know (6-7). "Sincerity" is not just rhetorical but quantifiable (18).<sup>6</sup>

Cameron gets at personality somewhat paradoxically by asking whether it is possible that impersonality could mean subjective objectivity. She argues that "one way of approaching impersonality" is by "penetrat[ing] through or a falling outside of the boundary of the human particular" (ix). Images of subjectivity do not look like

subjectivity because they are indistinguishable from natural elements (xvi). Both Lowell and Ginsberg, like all poets, explore and complicate the line between subjectivity and objectivity. Lowell writes poems about the impossibility of objectivity through his subjective approach. Ginsberg writes poems about the possibility of objective knowledge by transcending subjectivity.

Cameron's arguments that tie together subjectivity and objectivity are fascinating, but I do not know how they can be fully explored in a study that hones in on personal poetry in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Her study seems part of a ever-developing body of scholarship that attempts to explain what happened after high modernism. Although I include statements of my own about this literary history in the pages to come, I leave this critical territory behind after this introduction, having made my claims about the modern crisis as I move on to two poets who turned away from their immediate past.

### **Dissertation Outline**

Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg believe that, in their own confusing social times, poetry should carry personal meaning to readers as a vehicle for political and social change. My chapters respond to their personal crises: serious, sometimes desperate, attempts to write poems that bear their actual personalities and hide nothing of quotidian reality with its vast amount of random, often disturbing, seemingly random details.

In the following two chapters, I examine Lowell and Ginsberg's personal poetics mostly independent of each other. In Chapter 2, "Gazing the Impossible Summit: The

Sufferer in Robert Lowell's Poetry," I explain how Lowell attempts to convey his vision of the world and his relationship to it--and how this vision troubles him intensely. Lowell dramatizes his ever-increasing distress at the sight of some of realistic portrayal that he labels an "impossible summit." I argue in this chapter that his obsession with representing what he believes he sees, as truthfully as language allows, leads him to suffer from the impossibility of the task. Not only does Lowell come to believe that it is impossible to see accurately, but he also believes that it is impossible to represent what he sees. Lowell works within this paradigm, and he becomes so tied up in his potentially nihilistic suffering that his career actually ends with a final example, "Epilogue," of his failure to present reality accurately.

In Chapter 3, "Vow to Mankind -- Release of Particulars: Allen Ginsberg's Poetry as Liberation," I explain how Ginsberg accepts the Lowellian condition of the sufferer and attempts to move beyond it. He conveys his vision of the world and his relationship to it by claiming that this vision is, in fact, universal, and by arguing that he can pass on his own freedom to his readers. First, I examine Ginsberg's earliest attempts to remove his socially impeding masks as he yearns for personal liberation, particularly as these writings set examples of rising above cultural homophobia as a form of social fear. Second, I explain how he wedded his idea of poetry to the idea that art must emphasize productive social communication. Finally, I explain how Ginsberg, after his breakthrough success of *Howl* and follow-up success of *Kaddish*, adopts a strategy to create an ever-widening sphere of influence for the sake of individual freedom. All in all, my loosely

chronological view of Ginsberg's poetry demonstrates the fundamental workings of his personal style by showing how he arrives much differently from Lowell at greater universal--or at least representative--pronouncements through autobiography. It is not that Lowell relegates himself to the merely idiosyncratic or particular and that Ginsberg always universalizes his condition, but that they generally view the world differently in ways that lend themselves to a more compartmentalized view for Lowell and a more capacious view for Ginsberg.

In my fourth chapter, "Critique of America: Lowell and Ginsberg in the Late 60s," I bring the two poets back into direct contact with each other by focusing on the years 1967 and 1968. They were both involved in the major protests of these years. As they wrote poems about these similar events, they developed similar yet competing views on American society. More specifically, their respective views on how poets should record history uncover the interesting ways that their personal poetry aligns with these differing views on history. But they are never far apart as they share a unifying belief: the more personal, the better. They come a long way from their catty letters of 1959, and in the late 1960s, they become not opposing poets, but poets who oppose political factions together.

I end with an epilogue, "Impossible Love: February 1977," that describes the two aging poets when they come together for a poetry reading in New York. The evening was not without its intrigue. I demonstrate how it played out by engaging with the question about the extent to which Lowell and Ginsberg force us to consider how suffering and

liberation can play vital roles in our attempts to define the role of the individual in literature.

## CHAPTER III

### “GAZING THE IMPOSSIBLE SUMMIT”: THE SUFFERER IN ROBERT LOWELL’S POETRY

#### Survey of Criticism

In *Purity Of The Heart Is To Will One Thing*, existential philosopher Søren Kierkegaard says that “the real sufferer does not benefit others by his suffering, but rather is a burden upon them” (153). This defines Robert Lowell’s confessional speakers rather well. His speakers attempt to explain their own state of suffering as if their personal anguish is the key to their consciousness, yet they remain acutely aware of the turmoil they cause others, suffering more as a result. Lowell’s conclusion to “Eye and Tooth” (1963) describes this state most succinctly: “I am tired. Everyone’s tired of my turmoil.”

Because personal suffering is so essential to Lowell’s confessional speakers, critics have focused on it. As soon as Lowell published *Life Studies* (1959), M. L. Rosenthal reviewed it along exactly these lines:

Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is not hard to think of *Life Studies* as a series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal. (64)

Rosenthal goes on, in his touchstone review, to praise Lowell’s craftsmanship and invention. But he separates Lowell from autobiographical poets in the past due to

Lowell's personal approach, his "rather shameful personal confidences." For Rosenthal, Lowell's confidences reveal so much anguish that they make him into a strange specimen and separate him from autobiographical poets of previous generations:

Lowell, like Yeats and Thomas, casts over his autobiographical pose a certain whimsy (though often morbid) and childlike half-awareness. But the poems are overborne by sadness first and then by the crash of disaster. (68)

Lowell embraces this view of his poetry. In his post-*Life Studies* career he explores his own disasters in more and more detail. He became his own greatest critic in this regard.

As Lowell's career continued into his later work, he attempted to convey his personal vision of the world more fully and accurately. This vision troubled him intensely. He sees a world filled with disturbing random details. In experiencing them and trying to understand their essential nature, he dramatizes his increasing distress about how everyday life offers a glimpse of something both actual and horrible.

I argue in this chapter that Lowell's obsession with representing what he believes he sees, as truthfully as language allows, leads him to focus on how he suffers from the impossibility of the task. Not only is it impossible to see precisely in this way, but it is also impossible to precisely represent what one sees. Furthermore, it is increasingly impossible to present oneself as representing things honestly. Add to this the fact that poetry itself is often thought of as a medium that attempts to represent that which cannot be represented accurately or adequately in prose, and Lowell's project causes him even

greater distress regarding his quest to explain everyday reality with clarity. He continues to work within this paradigm, and he becomes so tied up in his potentially nihilistic suffering that his final poem in his final volume, "Epilogue," testifies to his failure to present reality accurately. In "Reading Myself," Lowell calls his work an "open coffin." If reading his work is depressing, especially from *Life Studies* on, it is because he not only digs his own grave but also etches on his own self-styled tombstone an inscription of hopelessness.

With the publication of *Life Studies* (1959), Lowell permanently changed his poetics. He left behind his New Critically-influenced early style and simplified his writing so that he could communicate a recognizable version of himself who would speak more directly to his audience. Although, arguably, he had shown glimpses of a confessional style earlier, Lowell actually turned his back on his former style in *Life Studies*, making our attempts to find a confessional voice in his early poems difficult. When Lowell made this change in the 1950s, he became, along with Allen Ginsberg, the leading proponent of the new style that began to dominate American poetry. To this day, writing personal poetry, wherein an identifiable speaker represents a version of the author, remains the dominant mode for American lyric poets. This makes Lowell a dangerous model, similar to admiring a famous statesman and then, upon reading their biography, finding hidden depravity.

Lowell regularly wrote poems about his self-perceived inner turmoil. The New Critical approach he adhered to in the 1940s required an impersonal style, but he now



wrote from the opposite impetus: the more personal the better. In a letter to Chard Powers Smith, written in the year he published *Life Studies*, Lowell opens up about his new process. He explains that he “really couldn’t answer [Smith’s letter] without a bit of confession” and begs Smith to see how genuine his 1950s poetry had been: it represents what Lowell wanted to say and what he actually experienced.

It’s in the last ten years, the years of my second marriage, and the birth of my daughter, that I have written to my mind what I really have had to say. During this time I have had five manic depressive breakdowns: short weeks of a Messianic rather bestial glow, when I have to be in a hospital, then dark months of indecision, emptiness, etc. So the dark and light are not mere decoration and poetic imagery, but something altogether lived, inescapable. (*Letters* 354)

Just as in this letter, Lowell’s poetry holds back little about his personal bouts with mental illness and instead encourages his readers to connect between art and life. As he writes at the end of “Home After Three Months Away,” “I keep no rank or station. / Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small” (*Life Studies* 84).

In *Pity the Monsters* (1974), a psychoanalytic study of Lowell’s work published when Lowell was still alive, Alan Williamson draws on the kind of diction found in M. L. Rosenthal’s review of *Life Studies*, arguing that Lowell suffers because his “vision of civilization” is “particular, painful and dark” (2). For Williamson, Lowell puts his confessional style into action as a way to make meaningful connections between his own peculiar, strange subjectivity and the world around him, or, to find “a source for metaphors for understanding aspects of the public world” (4). In my opinion, Williamson,

like other critics, emphasizes certain “public” aspects of Lowell’s body of work that do not actually exist. Placing too great a stake in Lowell’s public poetry, which usually entails focusing excessively on “For the Union Dead,” takes away from his more important achievements in individual personality.

After the “inescapable” reality of *Life Studies*, Lowell goes on to develop methods of representing his suffering as directly as possible; in doing so he continues to foreground the anguish that this causes him. As his career continues, he places greater and greater emphasis on how his confessional writing style exacerbates his suffering. This begins most prominently in *For the Union Dead*. Lowell comes to believe that writing poetry requires a simple but dangerous process: the poet sees or remembers things as accurately as possible, proceeds to express these things, and then encounters something--the completed poem--either too difficult to witness or impossible yet essential to understand. Lowell’s choice of title (*For the Union Dead*) misleads critics by suggesting that the volume is in line with that much admired public poem.<sup>7</sup> Also, Lowell commented to others about his developing oeuvre in ways that, if taken at face value, make Lowell’s intentions seem less personal. For example, in a letter to Stephen Spender on October 19, 1959, Lowell said he would attempt a “more impersonal” type of poetry after *Life Studies*, one that, we know now, he never wrote (*Letters* 357).<sup>8</sup>

Scholars who write about Lowell generally recognize that he intended his poems and his personal life to form a greater whole. In *Nihilist as Hero* (1983), Vereen Bell attempts to account for Lowell’s dramatization of the suffering experienced by his

speakers' experience. As Hoffman and Axelrod pointed out before her, Bell observes that Lowell finds no redemption in his suffering. She also carries on with Williamson's claim that Lowell's poetics represent the maturation of his public character. She believes that Lowell feels a certain pressure to lessen the distance between his own experiences and the experiences of history before him. She sees Lowell's suffering in part as his attempt to fuse an individual vision with a social vision. As she says, "the effect of the pressure of history is to narrow the gap for Lowell between art and life and therefore foreclose any chance of redemption through mere sensibility" (7).

Jeffrey Meyers, in *Manic Power* (1987), places Lowell at the head of a deranged group of poets who "felt that anguish was the true path to art and declared that all poets, though mentally ill, had to confront their deepest fears in order to survive and to write" (13). Meyers believes that the idea of confessional poetry is wrapped up in madness: "the literary manifestation of the mental illness of Lowell, Berryman and Roethke came to be known as confessional poetry" (21). He describes Lowell's part in literary history as if he plays the dual role of White Swan and Black Swan. Lowell's good side ("powerful personality," "impressive engagement with political events," "brilliant wives") plays opposite his negative side ("eminent lineage of insanity," "high-mindedness," "profound guilt") (29) and reveals a complex and inconclusive man lost on stage. As Lowell's speakers engage in this complex state of turmoil, the complicated personal suffering becomes Lowell's most relevant subject matter.

Thinking about Lowell's "madness" tends to overwhelm critical attempts to get at his personal approach to poetry. Katherine Wallingford, in *Robert Lowell's Language of the Self* (1988), views Lowell's poetry--all of it--as evidence that his mental illness tortures him: "how, then, did Robert Lowell bear the life he was given to live?" (11) She emphasizes moments that showcase the poet's struggles with bipolar disorder. Often, she reminds her reader that he rejected psychoanalysis and oversimplified his mental state. She arrives at a Lacanian view of his poetry, reading *For the Union Dead* as a problem of memory (106). For example, she says that "Eye and Tooth" shows how "the eye is both judge and instrument of punishment, the superego made concrete" (111). But, though Wallingford correctly identifies the dual role of the "eye" in *For the Union Dead* as both an organ of seeing and instrument of suffering, her notion about Lowell's concrete superego sidesteps what I believe to be the poet's primary intention in drawing attention to acts of "seeing" or "vision" in the book: Lowell presses on in spite of what is typically thought of as the superego. Self-critical reflections about learned standards do not stop him; they confuse and torment him, creating feelings that lead to more poems about pain.

The many critical attempts to explain the role of personal turmoil in Lowell's poems sometimes seem limited. This can be a result of trying to establish a single, unifying way of discussing Lowell's complicated suffering. In *Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors* (1999), William Dorenski argues that Lowell's poetry can be seen as a unified body of work--unlike his real-life bipolar extremes--and can be brought together by the fact that Lowell was totally open to the seamless interaction between art and life (xv).

Dorenksi then questions many previous studies of Lowell that, he feels, too insistently explain the poetry in terms of Lowell's mental illness. He reexamines Williamson's reasons for portraying Lowell as politically impulsive, and he wonders why Bell arrives at a "smoldering nihilism." He questions all previous totalizing explanations of Lowell's work--before introducing his own. Dorenksi believes that the only possible force that dominates Lowell's work is the poet's desire to express himself as "a single identity" (xxiii). In this way, he sees Lowell's various sides as a single attempt to present an authentic, though inexplicable, self. This is the closest, in my opinion, that a critic of Lowell comes to enacting the same strategy with which Lowell seems to critique his own speakers.

Thinking about Lowell's speakers as single entities imports a set of binaries into his poetry and then emphasizes these binaries. Nick Halpern in *Everyday and Prophetic* (2003), presents the view that Lowell attempts to create speakers that become single entities. He explains that his study is "about the tension between the prophetic voice and the everyday voice in postwar and contemporary American poetry" (3). Halpern's starting point is close to mine. But he separates Lowell's "everyday" and "prophetic" voices so much that his book ends up discussing the different voices in different sections, overemphasizing these different voices and making them seem to come from two different people. As I explicate Lowell's poems, I am careful to take the speakers as individual cases, not because Lowell presents speakers that are strikingly unique next to each other, but because simplifying personalities leads to nonrealistic assumptions.

### **Moments of Seeing and Suffering in *Life Studies***

After the 1950s, Lowell's unique literary challenge was to write about personal anguish in a way that stems coherently from his own narrative of turmoil that he originally articulated in *Life Studies*. He does this by way of degree. The poems increasingly become epitomes of intense personal anguish. In *For the Union Dead* (1963), Lowell's speakers are obsessed with the way they see things as he plays up the personal suffering that ensues. He even organizes *For the Union Dead* around the poem "Eye and Tooth." As he enters his *Notebook* phase (1970), he continues the obsession with increasing personal anxiety. In his final book, *Day by Day* (1977), he brings elegant closure to his entire oeuvre with an "Epilogue" that dwells on the challenge of seeing and presenting reality accurately. Though he was not aware that he would be dead within months of its publication, "Epilogue" nonetheless serves as a fitting conclusion.

But before his obsession with seeing and suffering becomes so apparent in the 1960s and 1970s, Lowell writes about the problems of representing his past as truthfully as possible in about half of his *Life Studies* sequence, and does so prominently in the sequence's longest piece, "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow." Much of Lowell's appeal to readers comes from the way he dramatizes his personal history; *Life Studies* is Lowell's most systematic such dramatization. As M. L. Rosenthal noted in 1967, the book's original appeal as a personal document remains the most powerful and captivating reason to read *Life Studies* (*New Poets* 25).

The *Life Studies* sequence narrates Lowell's private life chronologically. He begins by using his timidly observant 5-year-old persona and ends with then-current formulations of himself as a tormented and tormenting middle-aged man. Lowell's first poem in the sequence portrays the poet as a child who witnesses his young uncle's death. Next, Lowell includes poems about his grandparents and their deaths. After that, Lowell writes about the deaths of each of his parents. With his parents gone, he shifts to his wife and children, Elizabeth and Harriet, writing poems that describe his role as father and husband. Lowell concludes his *Life Studies* sequence with "Skunk Hour," a complex, masterful poem in which he depicts a strange, New England setting filled with references to St. John of the Cross's "Dark Night of the Soul" and Milton's Satan, in an "ill season" and amidst an ambiguous procession of moonstruck skunks. Throughout *Life Studies*, about half of the poems make reference to the speaker's ability to see himself, other people or events accurately. Other poems draw attention to the ironies of vision in general. These moments of seeing reveal Lowell's impending obsession that will emerge full-blown in his later work.

Lowell begins with "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," and lays it out as a family drama told by a single narrator, presumably the middle-aged man looking back on his 5-year-old self who witnesses death for the first time. Though the poem dramatizes events before and after his "last afternoon" with his uncle, Lowell designates the specific time and place when he last sees his uncle as "*1922: the stone porch of my Grandfather's summer house.*" The poem begins with a quotation from the 5-

year-old Lowell which indicates the boy's desire to spend time with his grandparents instead of his less responsible parents:

“I won't go with you. I want to stay with Grandpa!”  
That's how I threw cold water  
on my Mother and Father's  
watery martini pipe dreams at Sunday dinner. (ll. 1-4)

Lowell's opening does a few things that are relevant to his theme of seeing and suffering: by preferring his grandparents, he plays up a brotherly closeness with his young uncle, Devereux, and he questions his parents' authority. Thus he establishes his independence at a young age, relevant to his sense of suffering because it is so personal and even idiosyncratic.

When the boy first appears on the actual day in 1922 when he last sees his uncle, he stares through a dark screen. As he does so, the boy struggles to make sense of his uncle's death. The screen symbolizes Lowell's profound thoughts on “seeing” life and the problems that result from looking deeply into his personal life:

One afternoon in 1922,  
I sat on the stone porch, looking through  
screens as black-grained as drifting coal.  
*Tockytock, tockytock*  
clumped our Alpine, Edwardian cuckoo clock  
slung with strangled, wooden game.  
Our farmer was cementing a house under the hill.  
One of my hands was cool on a pile  
of black earth, the other warm  
on a pile of lime. (ll. 13-22)



The boy, staring through the screen, mixing white and black with his hands, dramatically confronts death with the symbolic gesture of staring down and mixing earth and lime. Meanwhile, ordinary life goes on around him as the farmer continues his work. Lowell's speakers do not often reach out to secondary characters with empathy.

This scene is the first of three in "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" in which Lowell places his youthful persona in a contemplative state brought on by seeing or looking. In the next section, the young boy tries again to comprehend the realities of life and death. This time, he finds himself staring into a water basin mirror:

I was five and a half.  
My formal pearl gray shorts  
had been worn for three minutes.  
My perfection was the Olympian  
poise of my models in the imperishable autumn  
display windows  
of Rogers Peet's boys' store below the State House  
in Boston. Distorting drops of water  
pinpricked my face in the basin's mirror.  
I was a stuffed toucan  
with a bibulous, multicolored beak. (ll. 53-63)

The boy's "Last Afternoon" has something to do with his distorted vision. The image of the innocent, rather ridiculously uppity child in his fussy, Waspy clothes opposes his new, more profound identity. He is dressed up pristinely in "pearl gray" yet, like the white and black piles he was mixing with his hands in the previous section, the new, dark thoughts

of death suggest the roots of his suffering. These roots, which the young boy already connects with seeing and vision, are now reflected on his own face.

Lowell heightens the effect that this form of suffering potentially has on the boy by focusing on death. In the final section, the young boy's ability to see things now makes up his identity. He feels both invisible yet "all-seeing":

I cowered in terror.  
I wasn't a child at all--  
unseen and all-seeing, I was Agrippina  
in the Golden House of Nero. . . . (ll. 120-23)

If the child is like Agrippina, the ruthless mother of the young emperor Nero, Lowell suggests how profoundly the boy is conflicted. By relating him to a woman who fell in and out of power and also in and out of repute based on her ability to successfully predict the future of powerful men in Rome, Lowell raises the stakes, and vision becomes a consequential theme. The allusion seems negative since it implies that the boy somehow possesses a way of seeing situations in which he will try to manipulate but ultimately fail, as was the case with Agrippina. Lowell's strange inversion prepares the reader for the striking image of death that leads to closure: Uncle Devereux's death-haunted image looms over the young boy. In his pristine clothes the boy "sat on the tiles / and dug at the anchor on my sailor blouse." Meanwhile "Uncle Devereux stood behind me" (127-9), and "his face was putty" (131).

The poem is not only about seeing accurately. More deeply, it communicates Lowell's first experience of mortality. He emphasizes what the boy sees, and what he sees when he thinks about death at least partly transforms and permanently shapes his life:

He was dying of the incurable Hodgkin's disease. . . .  
My hands were warm, then cool, on the piles  
of earth and lime,  
a black pile and a white pile. . . .  
Come winter,  
Uncle Devereux would blend to the one color. (ll. 138-43)

In each section of this poem about death, Lowell emphasizes how and what the boy symbolically sees. As he reveals one of his most pressing concerns about reality, he does so by recognizing how our ability to see things accurately is rooted deeply in our developing personalities. Lowell attaches his problems with accurate representation all the way back to childhood. Therefore, "My Last Afternoon" serves as the fundamental beginning for the many ways that Lowell explores accurate representation. It leaves the reader with Lowell's argument that his vision of the world is not simply rooted in memories but also that he associates those memories with personal pain.

The characters in *Life Studies* and their distorted perspectives reflect the complicated state of personal suffering that Lowell writes about and that many of the critics I discussed have attempted to understand. Lowell chooses to emphasize the many facets of his turmoil in spite of both the fundamental impossibility of portraying his suffering with plain facts and the inescapable trauma that these everyday facts inevitably

cause him. I cannot therefore point to specific sets of binaries or totalizing strategies that explain his penchant to see and suffer as a result. While he is nihilistic, as Bell says, and while he certainly tries to hold his poetry together by means of a “single identity,” as Dorenski argues, each poem expresses Lowell’s inner emptiness and terrible anguish ambiguously. He writes about this emptiness most directly by indulging in the paradoxical need to express the details of his life and the pain that his confessions cause him.

As Lowell proceeds through *Life Studies*, he consistently emphasizes the act of seeing. In part, he depicts his grandparents, his mother and father, himself, his wife and child, and even the ominous skunks that end the book as characters who struggle to see things accurately or to make sense of their troubling, distorted perspectives. None of them, of course, are successful. Yet, as I am arguing, the success or failure to actually see things is not the issue since Lowell remains acutely aware of the impossibility of the task.

In “Dunbarton” (65), Lowell continues to underscore his problematic relationship with his parents by emphasizing how, as a youth, he felt closer to his grandfather: “He was my father. I was his son” (l. 10). The poem ends with two ways of seeing himself, one natural and one unnatural. First, “I saw myself as a young newt / neurasthenic, scarlet / and wild in the coffee-colored water” (ll. 55-7). Second, “In the mornings I cuddled like a paramour / in my Grandfather’s bed, / while he scouted about the chattering greenwood stove” (58-60). Both self-images are isolating. The picture of Lowell as a newt connotes mental disorder and strangely wild, skittish behavior. The

second picture disturbingly suggests incest. In the first, Lowell is a swimming salamander, and in the second, he lies like a pastoral lover in his grandfather's arms. Lowell's sense of vision in this poem continues the disorienting effect that his representations of seeing in "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" began.

Since Lowell's struggles with seeing and suffering are linked to his identity, he mentions seeing several times in reference to his parents. In "Terminal Days at Beverly Farms" (73), Lowell derides his father, as he does many times in *Life Studies*, as ineffectual, superficial, and a failure. After a litany of his father's shortcomings (his physical appearance, his choice of homes and cars, his careers) he notes that "his vision was still twenty-twenty." Lowell places his father in opposition to himself. His father, inextricably a failure, sees perfectly, but the poet suggests that such vision operates only on the surface.

Lowell does not portray his mother as negatively as his father. So, her vision is distorted like his own. In "During Fever" (79), Lowell dramatizes his failing mental state. As he begins to slip into mania, he flashes back to memories of his mother. The poem, ultimately an apostrophe to her, eventually includes images about seeing. "Mother, your master-bedroom / looked away from the ocean" (ll. 20-1). Next, Lowell includes a memory within this apostrophe: "Mother, you smile / as if your Father / inches away yet hidden, as when he groused behind a screen" (ll. 35-6). The speaker feels bad that his mother's bedroom offers no view of the ocean. Lowell's mother is somehow knowledgeable about what is going on "behind the screen"--from where her own father

tries to peep and through which the young boy in “Last Afternoon” tried to look. Lowell brings this symbolic screen back into his *Life Studies* sequence in “During Fever” in order to emphasize the elements of darkness and limited vision that impede his attempts to interpret his life.

Lowell does more than blame his parents for his inability to see things accurately. He begins to blame himself as the sequence moves forward. “Waking in the Blue” (81) and “Home After Three Months Away” (83) both concern his stay at McLean’s Hospital and his ensuing return home to his wife and child. The way the speaker sees things is important in these poems. With the other “mental cases” in McLean’s, Lowell rises one morning to consume a large breakfast and walk about:

After a hearty New England breakfast,  
I weigh two hundred pounds  
this morning. Cock of the walk,  
I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor’s jersey  
before the metal shaving mirrors,  
and see the shaky future grow familiar  
in the pinched, indigenous faces  
of these thoroughbred mental cases,  
twice my age and half my weight.  
We are all old-timers,  
each of us holds a locked razor. (ll. 40-50)

The speaker realizes that his future is determined by his vision of himself and of the others. Lowell feels the anguish of a future ruled by his own shaky visions that bring him face to face with his future self. Apart from his weight, this future self is not so different from the present self.

Lowell makes clear that his ability to function outside of McLean's has a lot to do with his ability to create the proper image of himself. In "Home After Three Months Away," he faces the question of whether or not he can be himself. In a scene that emphasizes his own shaky state, Lowell dramatizes an emotional scene between himself and his young daughter. The scene combines his love for his daughter, his mistrust of himself, and, as a mediating factor between the two, his attempt to remain mentally stable:

Three months, three months!  
Is Richard now himself again?  
Dimpled with exaltation,  
my daughter holds her levee in the tub.  
Our noses rub,  
each of us pats a stringy lock of hair--  
they tell me nothing's gone.  
Though I am forty-one,  
not forty now, the time I put away  
was child's-play. After thirteen weeks  
my child still dabs her cheeks  
to start me shaving. When  
we dress her in her sky-blue corduroy,  
she changes to a boy,  
and floats my shaving brush  
and washcloth in the flush. . . .  
Dearest, I cannot loiter here  
in lather like a polar bear.  
Recuperating, I neither spin nor toil. (ll. 10-28)

Lowell's daughter, playfully making an innocent and imaginative game of her father's shaving, has no idea that he equates the razor and shaving mirror with the "shaking future growing familiar" in the previous poem about McLean's. Lowell cannot stay at the sink

with his daughter because he does not trust himself with the razor. As he shaves, he finds himself in the same situation that the young boy in “My Last Afternoon With Uncle Devereux Winslow” experienced while staring into the basin. As was the case in the earlier poem--and, the reader can assume, as is the case consistently throughout the speaker’s life--his confused self-image, father and aging mental case in “Home After Three Months Away” and death-haunted child in “My Last Afternoon,” conspire to detach him from others, usually his family. His inability to see things accurately, to work through the harsh realities of his complicated personal life, manifests itself in images that draw our attention to vision.

Lowell makes clear his growing personal isolation in his “Life Studies” sequence. In “To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage” (88), he presents a negative account of himself from his wife’s point of view. In the poem, the “hopped up husband drops his home pursuits / and hits the streets to cruise for prostitutes, / free-lancing out on the razor’s edge” (ll. 3-5). The razor motif sustains the ideas of trying to see himself accurately and of being dangerous to himself. He piles up the self-deprecation through his wife’s imagined monologue:

[“]My only thought is how to keep him alive.  
What makes him tick? Each night now I tie  
ten dollars and his car key to my thigh. . . .  
Gored by the climacteric of his want,  
he stalls above me like an elephant.” (ll. 10-14)



Transformed, the tyrannical husband is an extreme image of himself different from the recovering father of “Home After Three Months Away” who is “frizzled, stale and small” (l. 40). In this version of himself, Lowell numbly smashes his way through life in an attempt to forget about figuring things out. As his critical view of this version of himself makes obvious, Lowell will not let himself off the hook by simply drinking himself to death. He effectively presents a message of hope by putting the limits on his negative, mindless behavior. But once again, the alternative means pursuing the impossible task he has set out for himself: to somehow see the personal details of everyday experience in a way that might satisfy his desire to know enough about life or to end the resultant personal turmoil which, it turns out, he always ends up extending.

Lowell places “Skunk Hour” at the end of the “Life Studies” sequence. To a certain extent, the mystery about this poem hinges on his sense of seeing and suffering. The first half of the poem diagnoses an “ill season” by listing several images of degenerate wealth and focusing on characters who have either left this “ill season” or remain to contribute to its dreadfulness. In the second part of the poem, the speaker emerges on “one dark night” to look down on the townspeople and to confess his failing mental state:

my Tudor Ford climbed the hill’s skull;  
I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,  
they lay together, hull to hull,  
where the graveyard shelves on the town. . . .  
My mind’s not right. (ll. 26-30)

Though he watches for others, he finds himself completely alone, and explains his isolated state with an image of internal pain that flows through his veins and leagues him with Satan's infinite solitude:

I hear  
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,  
as if my hand were at its throat. . . .  
I myself am hell;  
nobody's here-- (ll. 32-6)

At this point in the *Life Studies* sequence the physical and psychological torture reach a crescendo, thereby revealing the extent of Lowell's suffering. The speaker's blood pumps with sobbing pain a million times over in his body, like Satan's legions increasing their infernal leader's fallen pain. The key difference is that Lowell's pain is internal.

Much can be claimed about the skunks that next appear, mostly because Lowell seems to welcome both positive and negative assessments of them. On one hand, they apparently rescue Lowell from his Satanic plight. On the other, they might be Satan's minions. They arrive in the poem laden with symbolism, yet Lowell introduces them as

only skunks, that search  
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.  
They march on their soles up Main Street:  
white stripes, moonstruck eyes red fire  
under the chalk-dry and spar spire  
of the Trinitarian Church. (42-7)

Their possessed eyes further Lowell's trope about seeing, and in this case they are threatening. But they are also touching, for they are a happy family and they only desire "a bite to eat." In the final stanza, the mixed message continues:

I stand on top  
of our back steps and breathe the rich air--  
a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage pail.  
She jabs her wedge-head into a cup  
of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,  
and will not scare. (ll. 48-53)

The skunks are horrifying because the speaker cannot chase them away, yet, as the stanza makes clear, they pose no real threat, for the speaker stands above them. But Lowell plays up the creepy sense that the skunks will somehow, en masse, overrun him. Then again, these are no manic killer skunks and the speaker may simply return to his home, close his porch door, and be with his own family. The fact that they "will not scare" suggests that--at the end of the sequence--Lowell feels some hope about his own mental state. All of this shows that Lowell, in the *Life Studies* sequence, uses images that reveal his complicated relationship with personal identity. As also is apparent throughout *Life Studies*, Lowell's complicated identity goes hand in hand with a state of personal turmoil that isolates him from those nearest to him.

## Lowell's Later Poetry

In his later poems, Lowell continues to dedicate himself to a poetics of accurate representation that involves suffering and the imposition of suffering on others, and his relationship to others continues to focus on his personal isolation. As Lowell writes at the end of "Man and Woman," "I watch this night out grateful to be alone / with my wife-- your slow pulse, my outrageous eye" (*History* 24). His "outrageous eye" implies an excess of vision, i.e., a heightened ability to look at the world and see it for what it unfortunately is. He believes that his "outrageous eye" is fundamental and he pursues its subjective qualities. In the later poetry, he regularly expresses this problem of sight through autobiographical speakers who seem increasingly vulnerable and fragile; he often dwells on his inability to comprehend his immediate physical surroundings by creating speakers who articulate this inability. For example, he ends "Bird?" (*History* 25), by describing another failed attempt at verifiable knowledge in which he *almost* finds what he is looking for. Here, he refers back to earlier reflections that appeared in *Life Studies*, but he does so more intensely:

I picked up stones, and hoped  
to snatch its crest, the crown, at last, and cross  
the perilous passage, seeing my thoughts  
stream on the water, as if I were cleaning fish.

Lowell creates a more impressionistic perspective and in stepping back finds a violent process: his thoughts strewn across the surface as they emerge from the guts of the living

world. The image also suggests how much exists in the world that his thinking cannot access: his thoughts float on the body of water that runs maddeningly deeper.

In another example of Lowell's increasingly despairing relationship with seeing and the suffering that ensues, he ends "Through the Night" (*For Lizzie and Harriet* 23) with images concerning the tenuous nature of humanity's vision:

A girl straddles a car hood, and snuffs the dust of the headlights:  
"I want to live," she screams, "where I can see."  
The pale green leaf clings white to the lit night  
and shakes a little on its stiff, tense twig.

Again Lowell juxtaposes one person's tormenting desire to "see" against a troubling image of the natural world. The girl, detached from nature and perched on an automobile, breathes in the dry dust. All the while the natural world that Lowell represents in a single leaf is itself barely hanging on. Where the girl might actually "live" and "see" does not seem to be Lowell's primary concern. Such a place is somewhere forever *out* of sight, below the surface and inaccessible, as in the deep, inaccessible waters of "Bird?" Lowell instead emphasizes the impossibility of seeing. It is as if the girl stands in for those who are hopeless, lost, grasping for knowledge that they will never find.

It is not enough for Lowell to provide examples of how his suffering results from what human beings cannot see. *The Dolphin*, for example, begins with the same groping search, but here he adds another aspect of the impossibility of seeing things. At best we can experience merely glimpses that we cannot truly possess, and so these glimpses actually "blind us." Lowell draws attention to how little he comprehends by addressing a

“you,” presumably his wife, whose actions seem as inexplicable as a dolphin catching

fish:

Any clear thing that blinds us with surprise,  
your wandering silences and bright trouvailles,  
dolphin let loose to catch the flashing fish . . .  
saying too little, then too much.

In Lowell’s world, even the fish are difficult to see. They flash by like escaping glimpses of truth and are hidden like treasures. As representations of human interaction, the dolphin and fish swim through the water illuminated by prisms of light from above. The water represents distorted vision, just as it did in *Life Studies* for the young boy in “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow.”

I will continue to pursue Lowell’s pattern of seeing and suffering in this section by exploring poems from across his later career that dramatize his anguished sense that he cannot see things well enough. “Eye and Tooth” in *For the Union Dead* (1964), “We Do What We Are,” a short section of fourteen-liners in *Notebook* that includes “The Nihilist as Hero” and “Reading Myself” (1970), and “Epilogue” from *Day by Day* (1977) all hinge upon Lowell’s sense of suffering as he refuses to shy away from seeing things as they are.

“Eye and Tooth” nearly served as the title for Lowell’s first post-*Life Studies* volume, *For the Union Dead* (1964). Although “For the Union Dead” remains one of his most admired poems, it is not a representative example of the poems in this monograph.

“Eye and Tooth” is more central to the book. In it, Lowell pursues authentic

representation as a visual obsession. The book is filled with references to eyes and sight. Often, eyes draw the reader's attention to the sudden appearance of light. These eyes and light suggest his resultant inner turmoil. "Water" (3), the volume's opening poem, introduces images of water. The water images seem to offer respite from his suffering vision, but they ultimately, and by this point predictably, fail to help. As he says at the poem's conclusion, "In the end / the water was too cold for us" (ll. 31-2).

In "Returning" (34), Lowell states his problem of seeing and suffering in a similar way. Violent images connect his method of confessional poetry with personal pain. The speaker is violently thrown about, rushed off, and exhausted:

Long awash,  
breaking myself against the surf,  
touching bottom, rushed  
by the green go-light  
of those nervous waters, I found  
my exhaustion, the light of the world. (ll. 7-12)

Lowell's suffering ironically ends in "the light of the world." He believes that he must go through a terrible process of self-discovery in order to write good poetry--like Rimbaud's "seer" who must consciously derange his senses to achieve wisdom, or like Rilke's poet in *Sonnets to Orpheus* who believes that he must pour himself out like a stream to be rewarded with knowledge.

This problem that Lowell proposes connects him with other artists. In "Hawthorne" (38), the speaker reflects on Nathaniel Hawthorne's writing method, once

again using the terms of seeing and suffering. Lowell makes the American fiction writer a kindred spirit in his torment. Lowell's Hawthorne broods over a simple, everyday object, only to look up with "disturbed eyes":

Leave him alone for a moment or two,  
and you'll see him with his head  
bent down, brooding, brooding,  
eyes fixed on some chip,  
the commonest thing,  
as if it were a clue.  
The disturbed eyes rise,  
furtive, foiled, dissatisfied  
from the meditation on the true  
and insignificant. (ll. 32-42)

Hawthorne must observe the commonest details even though they are both "true" and "insignificant." Lowell's imagined relationship with his fellow New Englander also functions as commentary on his own method. Like his "outrageous eye" in "Bird?", the "disturbed eyes" in "Hawthorne" suffer from an inability to see what is actual. To emphasize the hopelessness of his pursuit, Lowell gives the disheartening label of "insignificant" to what he also believes to be the impossible-to-see truth.

Lowell emphasizes pain by presenting images and describing settings that place sight and forms of pain or depression in close proximity. A brief catalog of quotations from *For the Union Dead* shows the myriad ways he writes about seeing. In "Myopia: a Night" (31) the title itself makes sight a problem. To see is to see inaccurately. In the poem the speaker explains that "I see / a dull and alien room, / my cell of learning" (ll.



15-17). In “The Drinker” (36), the speaker, drunk and killing time, “looks for his neighbors” whose “names blur in the window.” Then, his “distracted eye sees only a glass sky” (ll. 13-14). Each example of the speaker’s inability to see well enough adds to a greater sense that he sees everything distortedly.

Lowell’s efforts to explain the problems of seeing emerge in different contexts. Often his failed attempts to see lead to rigorous self-analysis that usually ends in self-deprecation. In “Caligula,” Lowell demands, “Tell me what I saw” (l. 2) and then says later, “I see / my lowest depths of possibility” (ll. 7-8). At other times, he is content to point out the impossibility of seeing in ways that suggest an earnest attempt to explain this problem productively for his reader. In “Buenos Aires,” the speaker suggests that, though informed about events, he needs visual actuality to understand adequately:

All day I read about newspaper coups d’état  
of the leaden, internecine generals--  
lumps of dough on the chessboard--and never saw  
their countermarching tanks. (ll. 13-16)

Lowell is desperate to convince his reader that reality must be experienced and seen first-hand even though doing so by reading a poem is impossible.

Lowell’s claim emerges as part of a romanticized, visionary landscape in “July in Washington” (58). Thinking about the failings of political figures, Lowell writes of the circles of unknown knowledge and his poetic wish to know things more specifically:

We cannot know their names, or number their dates--  
circle on circle, like rings on a tree--

but we wish the river had another shore,  
some further range of delectable mountains,

distant hills powdered blue as a girl's eyelid (ll. 14-17)

Here, with an the image of a powdered-blue eyelid, Lowell reveals how his vision of the larger political and social realms are based on highly idiosyncratic, personal images. The purity of the eye's vision, its capacity to lead one toward reality, is masked at its physical outset by a pretty, made-up eyelid. But as Lowell reminds us, accurate vision is only a "wish." The naked eye is often in the dark.

The flaw in the poem "The Flaw" (66), for example, is an "eye-flaw" that represents the separation between two people or two perspectives. As darkness prevails in the poem, Lowell presents an image of struggle in an insignificant hair that the speaker imagines on his eyeball.

All is possible;  
if there's free will, it's something like this hair,  
inside my eye, outside my eye, yet free,  
airless as grace, if the good God . . . I see. (ll. 7-10)

But seeing things in these poems is ironic because Lowell believes that, as far as knowledge is concerned, there is something redemptive about *not* seeing. He explains that, though painful and isolating, a "final gift" comes from this "final flaw" of sight for, in this case, two lovers.

We too lean forward, as the heat waves roll  
over our bodies, grown insensible,  
ready to dwindle off into the soul,  
two motes or eye-flaws, the invisible . . .  
Hope of the hopeless launched and cast adrift  
on the great flaw that gives the final gift.

Dear Figure curving like a question mark,  
how will you hear my answer in the dark? (ll. 25-32)

Lowell's fear of the dark results from this impossibility, producing some peculiar effects in *For the Union Dead*. One poem, for example, includes a strange image that further brings out Lowell's fears. In "The Severed Head" (52), a frightening, Poe-esque figure visits the speaker and creates a sense of chaos for him: "Nothing about him seemed to match, / and yet I saw the bouillon of his eye" (ll. 35-6). "[O]n each lash, / a tear had snowballed" (ll. 39-40). The severed head has boiling eyes that long to be cooled with tears. Lowell thinks of the eyes only as they function to create pain. What is worse, the eyes continue to temporarily convince Lowell that only through them can he make sense of the pain they bring on. For Lowell, this process is a cycle. Vision is both the cause of pain and its salve.

In "Eye and Tooth," the speaker is bed-ridden due to a problem with his eye. The poem contains both quotidian images and details as well as tantalizing metaphors and symbols that suggest greater than normal suffering:

My whole eye was sunset red,  
the old cut cornea throbbled,

I saw things darkly,  
as through an unwashed goldfish globe. (ll. 1-4)

Lowell uses the spectrum of red and orange to present two relatively ordinary images in the red sunset and the “unwashed goldfish globe.” But the speaker’s agony makes the images terrifying. Lowell’s speaker, echoing St. Paul, claims to see “things darkly,” suggesting something different. And as the poem continues, Lowell emphasizes the quotidian over the metaphorical. He states frankly that

I lay all day on my bed.  
I chain-smoked through the night,  
learning to flinch  
at the flash of the matchlight. (ll. 5-8)

Lowell describes an apparently mundane situation because, as he suggests throughout *For the Union Dead*, broad statements about life need a highly specific personal context.

In this way, Lowell works up to the metaphorical and symbolic. The next stanza of “Eye and Tooth” welcomes symbolic readings:

Outside, the summer rain,  
a simmer of rot and renewal,  
fell in pinpricks.  
Even new life is fuel. (ll. 9-12)

The metaphorical “rot and renewal” that “pinpricks” his sore eyes lead him to state philosophically that the “new life is fuel.” Lowell organizes the poem so that the incapacitated speaker is similar to the reader: personal details form the bases of our

abstract beliefs. In this case, the changing seasons provide renewal, but this irritating process comes with the poem's discomfiting "pinpricks." As the poem continues, the speaker's pain lends itself to other difficult memories which return Lowell to his cycle of seeing and suffering:

My eyes throb.  
Nothing can dislodge  
the house with my first tooth  
noosed in a knot to the doorknob. (ll. 13-16)

The speaker's hurt eyes lead to his deeper psychological memory of pain, and the speaker's memory itself suffers because his memory torments him.

In the next two stanzas, Lowell lists details of this painful memory, including the image of a "sharp-skinned hawk" that quotes a well known dictum from the Bible: "*an eye for an eye, / a tooth for a tooth*" (ll. 27-8).<sup>9</sup> The speaker's caustic paranoia triggers the fear that his eye will be taken from him just as his tooth was in the past.

No ease for the boy at the keyhole,  
his telescope,  
when the women's white bodies flashed  
in the bathroom. Young, my eyes began to fail. (ll. 29-32)

The guilty boy who peeped at the naked women stands in as a root cause of the speaker's loss of vision. The poet's irredeemable suffering ends the poem:

Nothing! No oil  
for the eye, nothing to pour

on those waters or flames.

I am tired. Everyone's tired of my turmoil. (ll. 33-36)

To a certain extent, "Eye and Tooth" masquerades as normal or mundane yet intends to upset that masquerade and bring the reader into Lowell's dilemma of seeing accurately and suffering as a result. "Eye and Tooth" is one of Lowell's most successful attempts to explain seeing and suffering because the poem draws the reader into Lowell's personal life, explains suffering in a straightforward manner, but all the while employs various memories and symbols that highlight the impossibility of seeing things for what they are.

In his *Notebook* (1970), Lowell includes a revealing "Afterthought" (262-3) in which he defines a certain aspect of vision in the poet's work. He presents a view of the poet as one who must write down certain things, but who, without a proper sense of "direction," cannot do so. This view of the poet includes the notion that several things conspire to keep the poet from saying what he must:

A poet can be intelligent and on to what he does; yet he walks, half-balmy and over-armed--caught by his amnesia, ignorance and education. For the poet without direction, poetry is a way of not saying what he has to say. (263)

A poet's intelligence allows him to find his way in the "half-balmy" world of his poetic reality. This intelligence helps to give him "direction," and with enough direction, he might write what he is meant to. Lowell's poet carries a sense of individual destiny. He feels as though each poet has something unique about him that he must record. He lists

three things that potentially work against a poet's "saying what he has to say": "amnesia, ignorance and education." Ignorance and education are external factors; his own "amnesia" is the problem because it is internal, one more difficult to work through than external factors of ignorance and education.

Lowell concludes his "Afterthought" to *Notebook* with a reference to the pain of remembering things and writing them down. He does so by focusing on his internal struggle with "amnesia." He correlates the "remembering" and the "amnesia" to the pain that ensues from trying to write things down with accuracy, and he separates the happiness of real life with the inner turmoil of writing about his past experiences: "In truth, I seem to have felt mostly the joys of living; in remembering, in recording, thanks to the gift of the Muse, it is the pain" (263). As in "Eye and Tooth," the act of recording his condition, what he sees, causes pain.

Lowell does not resist this "recording," and, in fact, he increases his pain by rewriting (trying to "remember," trying to combat "amnesia") obsessively. He rewrote his *Notebook* several times, and he explains this unusual situation in a "Note to the New Edition":

I am loathe to display a litter of variants, and hold up a still target for the critic who knows that most second thoughts, when visible, are worse thoughts. I am sorry to ask anyone to buy this poem twice. I couldn't stop writing, and have handled my published book as if it were a manuscript. (264)

Aware that rewriting, which is re-remembering, often harms his poems, he nonetheless persists in doing so because it is possible that some of the second thoughts might be more

accurate. But Lowell does not seem to suggest very strongly that such is often the case. In fact, he seems to give critics all they need to accuse him of rewriting more out of paranoia and obsession than in pursuit of accuracy. Could it be that Lowell purposely exposes the faults of his rewriting/re-remembering process in order to further validate the *impossibility* of ever seeing things for what they really are? He certainly shows signs that he has given himself over to complete hopelessness about this dilemma in his *Notebook*.

In the series “We Do What We Are” (211-13), Lowell includes two poems about himself as a poet that point out the hopelessness of seeing things accurately: “The Nihilist as Hero” and “Reading Myself.” In each poem, Lowell has a specific version of himself in mind. “The Nihilist as Hero” shows that the poet can never reduce himself to believing in anything for certain because nothing is verifiable. “Reading Myself” dramatizes this situation. The two poems bookend the “We Do What We Are” sequence<sup>10</sup> that itself represents Lowell’s wish to write without “amnesia.” As he says in the series, “I wish to live my life back to twenty one” (“Gap” l. 9).

The speaker in “The Nihilist as Hero” is caught between authentically representing reality and recognizing that doing so remains impossible. He thinks that reality is potentially attainable in words, but that our humanity irrevocably limits us.

One wants words meat-hooked from the living steer,  
but the cold flame of tinfoil licks the metal log,  
the beautifully unchanging fire of childhood  
betraying a monotony of vision.  
Life by definition breeds on change,  
each season we scrap new cars and wars and women.  
Sometimes when I am ill or delicate,



the pinched flame of my match turns living green (ll. 8-11)

When the speaker of “The Nihilist as Hero” is “ill or delicate,” poetry might come to life.

This ironic situation becomes the nihilist’s condition:

A nihilist has to live in the world as it is,  
gazing the impossible summit to rubble. (ll. 13-14)

The impossible heights must be sought after. However, the vain pursuit destroys the summit by looking at it too much. The treacherously informed “monotony of vision” is the false promise of artistic wholeness that poems offer Lowell. The actual reality of the past--that it is in ruins--is the only thing he can engage in.

In “Reading Myself,” Lowell begins by explaining that he, along with many others, took pride in bringing on some kind of necessary personal suffering:

Like millions, I took just pride and more than just,  
first striking matches that brought my blood to boiling. (ll. 1-2)

This poem seems exclusively about artists, and Lowell indeed makes clear that it is about poets. Self-deprecatingly, he questions the validity of the art:

I memorized tricks that set the river on fire,  
somehow never wrote something to go back to.  
Even suppose I had finished with wax flowers  
and earned a pass on the minor slopes of Parnassus . . . . (ll. 3-6)

Lowell critiques his artificial, “was flowers” style and the “tricks” that come with it, suggesting once again that poetry and art cannot mask the pain of reality.

But he turns about almost immediately, undercutting his own proposition that art is a dead end. As in “The Nihilist as Hero,” Lowell explains how the artificial possesses life or how it can regain life. In “Nihilist,” the “pinched flame” turns “living green.” Here in the final poem of the “We Do What We Are” sequence, Lowell introduces a living bee behind its wax and honey:

No honeycomb is built without a bee  
adding circle to circle, cell to cell,  
the wax and honey of a mausoleum-- (ll. 7-9)

This image is at once creative and deathly. The death of the bee begs for its “desecration,” something that will prove its artistic worth:

the corpse of such insect lives preserved in honey,  
prays that the perishable work live long  
enough for the sweet-tooth bear to desecrate--  
this open book . . . my open coffin. (ll. 11-14)

The bee, standing in for the poet, is a praying corpse. The “perishable work,” the poem, might exist long enough to be opened, by a sweet-toothed bear, which represents both the reader and Lowell himself as compulsive rewriter. The violence inherent in Lowell’s poetic process is essential. Without the desecration there can be no writing and reading. And without the actual writing, a poem devolves into mere meditation.

Lowell's idea of accurate representation is self-mutilation, or at least self-immolation--of ideas, positions, styles, everything he can think of. The speaker is in the process of devouring himself. As far as seeing and suffering are concerned, the poems that he creates become objects that exacerbate his suffering. As he rewrites poems and reimagines new ones, he seems to be facing a single, horrible sight. His penchant to remain elusive and noncommittal is further evidence that he resides, artistically at least, in a place that causes him constant pain.

In his final book, *Day by Day* (1977), Lowell continues to work on theories of representation that "not only chronicle [his] most recent dramas," as Ian Hamilton suggests, but also "some final settlement with the obsessions of a lifetime" (470). In the book, Lowell continues to emphasize accurate representation in various ways, all of them seemingly painful. Helen Vendler sees *Day by Day* as filled with "suicidal self-canceling structure[s]" in which "the ends of the poems annihilate their beginnings" (26). Lowell includes a homecoming motif built on self-deprecation. The many images of physical and mental deterioration make the volume seem death-haunted. He creates speakers who ask whether or not they speak truthfully. He suggests with near paranoia that he is being annihilated by life and writing. He includes elegies to dead friends and addresses living friends and mentors with confessional intimacy. And he continues to emphasize sight, specifically through various details about lighting, mostly photography and painting. Seeing in the volume is dangerous even when Lowell tries to stop: "When I close my eyes," Lowell writes, "the image is too real" ("Endings" 50). In a broader sense, his lines

on visual representation are complicated with desire. They become “not just lust / but lust of the eye” (“Art of the Possible” 36).

Overall, the speakers of *Day by Day* collapse into a single figure who comes and goes, lost in thought and sad about his life. According to Reena Sastri, the “I” in *Day by Day* “comes into being [...] to bridge gaps” that are filled with “memory and autobiography [...], desire and action” (462). Often, when these speakers express their sadness, they do so nostalgically, and they sometimes comment on older twentieth-century art. One speaker refers to “our unacceptable age” and “our hard age” (“Fetus” 35). Another finds that the modernism of his poetic upbringing has staled: “Dreams, they’ve lost their vogue, / so alike in their modernist invention, / so dangerously distracted by commonplace” (“Square of Black” 32). Lowell’s speakers continue to question the validity of art, especially in terms of its compatibility with reality:

Somewhere your spirit  
led the highest life;  
all places matched  
with that place  
come to nothing. (“In the Ward” 40)

Lowell’s speakers are at their most distraught in *Day by Day*. They work to enhance the poignancy of Lowell’s final poem, “Epilogue” (127), and leave the reader considering accurate description as a creative yet painful imperative throughout the volume.

As is so often the case, the intense suffering that comes with Lowell’s ongoing attempts to see things accurately emerges within the context of his thoughts about the

possibility for art to end the suffering. As “Epilogue” begins, the poet seems profoundly lost in his art and on the verge of losing faith in poetry’s ability to convey its intended message. Lowell conjures those past voices, suggesting that the poet never leaves behind the voice of his poetic education while he also never ceases to question the dogma behind the voices. In the first four lines, Lowell’s desperate speaker critiques his use of learned form, then quotes, in the fourth line, an issue of poetic representation as stated by Randall Jarrell. The lines are informal, suggesting a casual yet somewhat desperate conversation the two poet friends might have had in the years before Jarrell’s death, perhaps on one of Lowell’s trips through Greensboro, North Carolina, where he sometimes visited his friend:

Those blessed structures, plot and rhyme--  
why are they no help to me now  
I want to make  
something imagined, not recalled? (ll. 1-4)<sup>11</sup>

The formal elements of poetry, Lowell believes, offer no real help in his imaginative pursuits. As he made clear throughout his career, he does not actually believe that such purely imaginative pursuits are fundamentally necessary to authentic representation.

Although making something “imagined, not recalled” might be impossible, the speaker of “Epilogue” struggles to establish a distinction between seen, recalled reality and his own higher vision. Lowell dramatizes this distinction as an internal dialogue.

I hear the noise of my own voice:  
*The painter's vision is not a lens,  
it trembles to caress the light.* (ll. 5-7)

Lowell's perspective, that his "own voice" is "noise," calls into question the validity of the voice in his head and its message about reality opposing artistic vision. He defines the artist as a seeing sufferer. An artist's "vision," according to Lowell, will never dispassionately operate as a scientific lens, though Lowell emphasizes "light." As he has done in the past, he focuses on sight, clarifying his use of the term "vision":

But sometimes everything I write  
with the threadbare art of my eye  
seems a snapshot,  
lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,  
heightened from life,  
yet paralyzed by fact. (ll. 8-10)

Lowell once again questions the notion of accurate recording, and like the "turmoil" in "Eye and Tooth," the "gazing the impossible summit to rubble" in "The Nihilist as Hero," and the "open coffin" of "Reading Myself," he pushes forward in the hope of accurate representation even though he knows that the only result will be continued suffering: "All's misalliance" (l. 11)

Yet, in spite of this, to the very end Lowell longs for the "grace" that would come with precise, accurate representation:

Yet why not say what happened?  
Pray for the grace of accuracy

Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination  
stealing like the tide across a map  
to his girl solid with yearning. (ll. 12-16)

All of Lowell's work culminates in this question. The personal poetry of Lowell's career has attempted to answer it. He began pursuing this question wholeheartedly during the 1950s in poetry that culminated with *Life Studies*. He committed himself to autobiography in spite of the pain that "saying what happened" caused him. And his conclusion to "Epilogue"--though he did not know he would die months later--poignantly serves as a conclusion to his work as a whole.

The poet must engage in the act of identifying his unique perspective, he must suffer because he cannot do so well enough to see the reality that he seeks, and, in the end, he does little more than destroy the vision by attempting to describe it:

We are poor passing facts,  
warned by that to give  
each figure in the photograph  
his living name. (ll. 17-20)

Lowell reveals why this impossible poetics must be enacted. No, there is no chance to represent reality accurately because it is so personal, so individual, so colored by individual suffering. But yes, there are "living names" that must be recorded as reality shifts and changes from one inexpressible life to the next.

Lowell built his personal style on ever-increasing inner turmoil. Next, I turn to Allen Ginsberg, who partly inspired Lowell's turn from his early difficult modernist verse

when Lowell visited San Francisco after Ginsberg's *Howl* had broken through and challenged poetic orthodoxy. "At that time," Lowell says, "poetry reading was sublimated by the practice of Allen Ginsberg" (*Collected Prose* 284). In moving to Ginsberg, I reveal a rival aesthetic in personal poetry, one that looks outward in order to attempt ever-widening circles of liberation as opposed to crippling personal suffering. To Robert Lowell's speakers, Allen Ginsberg's world of personal and cultural liberation is foreign territory.



## CHAPTER IV

### “VOW TO MANKIND -- RELEASE OF PARTICULARS”: ALLEN GINSBERG’S POETRY AS LIBERATION

#### **Introduction to Ginsberg as Liberating Beat Poet**

In this chapter, I argue that Ginsberg dramatizes how an individual can overcome suffering at the hands of society and how he does not dwell on personal details in the way that promotes Lowell’s turmoil. As Anne Hartman says, “Ginsberg wrote poems that had affinities with the confessional mode, but which overtly reject the impersonal, solitary form of confession advocated by Lowell” (41). Ginsberg locates himself in his poems as the model for overcoming individual fear and privation in an attempt to liberate others from their own fear and repression. Ultimately, Ginsberg aims in his poetry to further a more just social agenda based on his own personal liberation.

First, I show examples of how Ginsberg established a spiritual context for individual suffering that alleviates pain by creating what Steven Hoffman calls a “paradise state.” In so doing, I lay the foundation for understanding that Ginsberg equates personal freedom with individual transcendence. Ginsberg communicates a notion of poetic prophecy that makes his persona an object of faith in humanity. In doing so, he is able to tap into a larger readership. Second, I examine Ginsberg’s early attempts to, as he says, remove from his poetry the grotesque mask society imposes on everyone. This is Ginsberg’s main reason for writing poetry, and at its root is his homosexuality.

Third, I explain how, early on, Ginsberg wedded his idea of poetry to the belief that art must be “communicative.” This notion of “communicative” art builds upon the previous points of Ginsberg’s wide appeals to personal transcendence in overcoming societal fear. Finally, I explain how, after his breakthrough success of *Howl* and follow-up success of *Kaddish*, Ginsberg adopted a global strategy in which he argued for the end of the Vietnam War, using his poetry for social issues. It is not just that Ginsberg seized upon an opportunity to speak out against the government that was at odds with his own beliefs; it is that he believed that his poems could liberate his readers since he had gone through the process himself. As he aims to launch his poems like rockets for all of humanity to view, Ginsberg’s poetry always begins from his opinions. Thus, I conclude this chapter by looking briefly at a few of his last poems that are concerned with how he manages to explain the everyday details of life in a public way. All in all, my loosely chronological view of Ginsberg’s work demonstrates how he dedicated himself to liberating himself and others, thereby making his poetry an argument for unbridled freedom consistent, as he saw it, with American founding ideals of liberty.

Unlike Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg did not think of the individual as an irredeemable sufferer. Instead, he thought that individual human suffering could be alleviated once the individual found a way to rise above societal fear. Contributing more than anything to this view was Ginsberg’s life as a homosexual. Since he was gay, his obsession with shedding societal fear had personal implications. As he faced immediate social and physical fear, it became of the utmost importance for him to speak out for open

homosexuality and--as an extension of this--open forms and anti-institutional practices in poetry. He felt these to be prerequisite steps to regaining the social and artistic freedom necessary for citizens and artists in America. In Lowell's poetry, the focus on the many personal details surrounding the individual's doomed condition intensifies individual suffering. But Ginsberg lets go of individual turmoil. As he says in *Kaddish*, his poetry represents a "release of particulars." Personal liberation for Ginsberg comes from letting things go, not from figuring things out.

Ginsberg felt strongly that an individual should not accept the opinions of those in positions of power, something he struggled with as a young man. He resented those who, if given the opportunity, would place their own desires or appetites above compassion and empathy. Ginsberg offered the simple alternative of love and empathy for everyone--and for the "beat" in particular. He derived from Jack Kerouac's Catholicism his sense that spiritual rewards would be bestowed upon sufferers of external tribulations.

Ginsberg's worldview can be found in the Beatitudes:

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.  
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.  
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the  
kingdom of heaven.  
(Matthew 5.3-5.11)

A good deal of Ginsberg's subject matter seems to illustrate the beliefs expressed in the Beatitudes. In an early lyric titled "Song," written in 1954 and published in *Howl and Other Poems* (1956), Ginsberg airily reflects on a beat world:

The weight of the world  
is love.  
Under the burden  
of solitude,  
under the burden  
of dissatisfaction

Who can deny?  
In dreams  
it touches  
the body,  
in thought  
constructs  
a miracle,  
in imagination  
anguishes  
til born  
in human-- (ll. 1-6, 10-20)

Ginsberg recognizes that love for oneself and for all are the same. He henceforth promises that liberation will come, yet he cannot promise that it will come without imagination, without individual strength to transcend the lack of righteousness that people face in daily life.

Ginsberg also critiques figures who seem far removed from understanding the Beatitudes by drawing attention to hypocrisy and ignorance. In "Moral Majority" (1985), he responds to an increasingly influential Christian conservative faction that see God's image as comprised only of a version of their own political views and social and moral beliefs:

Something evil about you Mr. Viguerie Mr. Falwell Robertson Swaggert,  
Not evil but ignorance of the delights of the Boy  
The 1920s have passed [...]  
I've seen God as much as any, he doesn't look like you alone  
He looks like me too, all the homosexuals on earth [...]  
Nothing wrong with Family, Mother Father & Buba.  
Nothing wrong with the Babe.  
Nothing wrong with Mr. Falwell except a little mean streak  
that isn't god, just a jerk, talks too big for his britches,  
inexperienced Bible Salesman  
interprets words & letters, not Holy Spirit  
ambitious politically, at the expense of the poor,  
the thwarted, & happy ruddy kids--  
Find out Buddha, enter the great silence  
& pass thru the needle's eye,  
then come back laughing, generous  
big mouth full of good cheer, not money,  
honey. (ll. 1-3, 7-8, 12-24)

These self-righteous conservatives merely reflect contemporary persuasions that, if enlightened by a true understanding of the Bible--particularly the Beatitudes--would change into cheerful, accepting--liberated--views on society. Ginsberg's speakers stand ready to censure the public figures who would limit individual freedom.

Ginsberg's "beats" can be perceived as the oppressed of society who suffer at the hands of the larger, inhumane power. He often found society to blame for not only his, but everyone's personal pain. Those in powerful positions intruded on individual liberty, which, in turn, caused a sense of fear and privation for citizens, who, Ginsberg thinks, are basically good. Throughout his poetry, Ginsberg offers himself as an example of rising above this nearly inevitable situation. According to him, had he not given up his own early, self-destructive societal fear, he never could have written *Howl*, a poem that begins

with a broad critique blaming society for causing the breakdown of individuals: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness.”

Ginsberg cannot properly explore poetry’s wide subject matter if he is socially inhibited. He explains this view in a short poem, “On Burroughs’ Work” (1954):

The method must be purest meat  
and no symbolic dressing,  
  
A naked lunch is natural to us,  
we eat reality sandwiches.  
But allegories are so much lettuce.  
Don’t hide the madness. (*Collected* 122, ll. 1-2. 9-12)

For Ginsberg, the “purest meat” method meant writing poems that raise no distinctions between shockingly personal and accepted literary details. He explains this distinction bluntly:

The problem is, where it gets to literature, is this. We all talk among ourselves and we have common understandings, and we say anything we want to say, and we talk about our assholes, and we talk about our cocks, and we talk about who we fucked last night, or who we’re gonna fuck tomorrow, or what kind of love affair we have, or when we got drunk, or when we stuck a broom in our ass in the Hotel Ambassador in Prague--anybody tells one’s friends about that. So then--what happens if you make a distinction between what you tell your friends and what you tell your Muse? The problem is to break down that distinction: when you approach the Muse to talk as frankly as you would talk with yourself or your friends. (*Paris Review* 21)

Once a poet is honest about this distinction, he or she helps not only himself or herself but others as well. All of society, according to Ginsberg, can be helped by giving up repressed social anxiety because repression is always negative.

Ginsberg had overcome individual suffering in his own life. Consequently, his poems could serve as a model or instruct others about how to unburden themselves. Since his own pre-*Howl* social fear got in the way of his writing good poems, he assumes that fear limits everyone, regardless of his or her pursuits. He therefore creates a freedom-rallying persona akin to Walt Whitman. It is hardly necessary to say that Ginsberg completely opposes the critical dicta about impersonality that were central to the literary discourse in the mid-1950s. For example, critic G.T. Wright's claim that a mask "asserts and concentrates, not hides" (164) not only seemed wrong to Ginsberg, but worse, seemed to hide philosophically conservative agendas that were themselves intellectually (or academically) masked attempts to limit individual freedom.

Not only did Ginsberg's poetics promote a rival aesthetic to Wright and other New Critics, but also he stated his opinions about literature in such a way so as to make reconciliation very difficult. This made his first meeting with Robert Lowell more a butting of heads than a conversation. The beat poet certainly would have disagreed with James Longenbach's assessment that "Ginsberg's poetry is in some ways a logical extension of Eliot's contradictory body of work" (7). Even if Longenbach's claim is that Ginsberg did not purposely use one of Eliot's many sides but did so as an inescapable result of chronological literary influence, Ginsberg dismissed late or high modernism

with such antagonism that even an unconscious influence is difficult to establish. When Ginsberg wrote “T.S. Eliot Entered My Dreams” in the 1970s, his fictional conversation with Eliot in the poem wildly accuses Eliot of being a C.I.A. conspirator. Studies of Allen Ginsberg must therefore take into account the various contexts in which his great feeling of liberation occurred and grew. Because he came to the fore during a literary period that was moving away from a classical, conservative, and sometimes apolitical expressionist modern era, and because at the same time he emerged during a historical period that saw political unrest on the rise until the end of the Vietnam war in the early 70s, he came to equate conservative poetics with American politics and increasingly powerful corporate culture.

So, in addition to his literary context, Ginsberg must be read in relation to broader social issues. Eventually, Ginsberg adjusted his persona and style to the social complexities of late-1960s America. Ginsberg’s poetry grew to cult-like status because it spoke to people who sought a radical alternative to liberals, who were seen as pandering to an outdated threat of being soft on communism, and conservatives who, even worse, clung to an anti-intellectual cold war politics. Ginsberg helped to fill in what Cold War historians refer to as the “credibility gap” of the 1950s and 1960s (Gaddis 169). Facing the tear gas and brutality of the Chicago riots in 1968, to take one example, Ginsberg chanted holy “oms” for hippies who crossed the line between protest and civil disobedience, and the poet did so without making major political claims beside the fact that individual American liberty was at stake.



Ginsberg wrote poems designed to combat the rising trend of government secrecy, most obviously “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” without engaging in political theory and while managing to continue his wide appeal for common sense in the face of negative politicking. For example, after Lyndon Johnson deployed U.S. Marines to Vietnam in 1965, many readers could turn to Ginsberg for a countercultural critique of U.S. policy, a critique that committed itself to peace while nonetheless speaking out courageously against the war policies it despised. But of course Ginsberg did not originally conceive of these political dimensions when he wrote *Howl* in 1955. Rather, the younger Ginsberg began writing poems that expressed his own personal liberation from suffering, citing the Beatitudes and declaring that “the absolute heart of the poem of life” had to be “butchered” out of one’s own body (*Howl* l. 77).

Before proceeding to my analysis of suffering, freedom, and spirituality in Ginsberg’s poetry, I want to make a few comments on him and Robert Lowell. Ginsberg shares with Lowell not only a break from their immediate predecessors, but also a sense that a poem’s everyday details are dangerous. But Ginsberg, somewhat unlike Lowell, suffered from no maddening pursuit of everyday reality that led to its own state of turmoil. In fact, his ability to look away from the Lowellian “impossible summit” saved him the personal suffering that arguably became the nihilistic endpoint of all of Lowell’s thinking about personal poetry.

Ginsberg was able to let go of Lowell’s pathological search for life’s overwhelming quotidian reality because he believed that anyone who claimed to

understand the impossibly complex details of daily life hid a private agenda against personal freedom. For example, Ginsberg dramatizes his return to the United States, after touring the globe and writing the poems that comprise *Planet News* (1968), in a sequence titled “Zigzag Back Thru These States, 1966-1967” in *The Fall of America* (1972). In “Wings Lifted Over the Black Pit,” Ginsberg catalogs images and details of the American landscape as his “jet plane glides toward Chicago” (l. 8). As he thinks about how his poetry will somehow bring “peace” (ll. 19-21), his antagonist, Chicago’s notorious Mayor Daley, pops into his mind. Ginsberg exclaims, “Impossible to be Mayor! know all details!?” (l. 35) In Ginsberg’s poetry, politicians limit personal freedom; one of the ways they do so is by pretending as if they understand the lives of individual citizens.

Ginsberg does not claim to comprehend the vast world of private experience. Instead he often uses spirituality as a strategy to rise above empirical details. As he writes in the 1966 poem, “Wings Lifted Over the Black Pit,”

Alleyed with light,  
    lampless yards  
        blazing compounds factoried cube-like,  
            prisons shining brilliant! (ll. 36-9)

Ginsberg includes seemingly random details of everyday experience in his poems modified by general adverbs and adjectives that make ordinary things abstract loci of spirituality (“prisons shining brilliant”). In this case, the “prisons” trap working class America. As Hoffman points out in his essay on Ginsberg and his contemporaries, Ginsberg avoids the impossible situation of knowing all the facts by instead cataloging

details with some kind of wide transcendent eye. He understands human thought to be comprised of empirically grounded experiences yet, at the same time, set free by large abstract notions about how potentially beautiful the world is.

Critics often point out this strategy in Ginsberg. As Craig Svonkin remarks in his recent article “Manishevitz and Sake, the Kaddish and Sutras: Allen Ginsberg’s Spiritual Self-Othering,” “I read Allen Ginsberg as a profoundly transnational and spiritually syncretistic poet” (166). He has in mind poems like “Stotras to Kali the Destroyer of Illusions” (1968), in which Ginsberg praises the Hindu goddess of time, change, and destruction in an attempt to reconcile contradictory beliefs by way of a spiritual image. Syncretism is therefore a method to create a liberating sense of freedom. Ginsberg imagines that the “black” goddess, Kali, embodies all the different elements of society:

O Freedom with gaping mouth full of Cops whose throat is  
adorned with skulls of Rosenbergs  
whose breasts spurt Jazz into the robot faces of thy worshippers  
grant that recitation  
of this Hymn will bring them abiding protection money & dance  
in White House  
even a dope sees Eternity who meditates on thee raimented  
with space crosseyed  
creatrix of Modernity whose waist is beauteous with a belt of  
numberless Indian scalps  
mixed with negro teeth Who on the breast of James Dean in the  
vast bedroom of Forest Lawn  
Cemetery enjoyest the great Passion of Jesus Christ or seated on the  
boneyard ground  
strewn with the flesh of Lumumba haunted by the female shoes of  
Kruschev (*sic*) & Stevenson’s long red tongue  
enjoyest the worship of spies & endless devotions intoned by mustached  
radio announcers (ll. 30-38)

Ginsberg lets images speak for the democratic and spiritual elements of society--as opposed to its classical and reasonable ones. The claims are not as audacious as they seem, for in this way Ginsberg presents his countercultural opinions that give his poems such poignancy.

Looking down through the excerpt, the reader views Ginsberg's totem pole of American culture: police officers dangling out of Kali's mouth, her breasts releasing distinctly American music, and so on. Haidee Kruger argues that beat poetry such as this challenges the reader to resist thinking of daily reality and the self as primarily reasonable. She believes that

The traditional concept of the self is denied [and] instead, Ginsberg's Beat poetry plays with the notion of self, arguing that transitory physical and emotional experience, together with mystical and visionary states, might constitute an alternative locus for the self. (4)

The "alternative" place of the self goes part and parcel with the "paradisaal state" and the "profound spirituality" pointed out by Hoffman and Svonkin. But Ginsberg's strategy is also quite simple: he forces his audience to think about the various elements of contemporary society on the body, and at the mercy of, a mythical deity. Ginsberg creates this effect of combining the real and the imaginative, often by suggesting spiritual contexts, throughout *Howl* as well.

## **Ginsberg's Liberation from Social Fear: *Howl*, Spirituality, Prophecy, and**

### **“Communicative” Art in Perilous Social and Artistic Times**

In *Howl*, Ginsberg often begins a line with tangible images and then ends the line with surreal, transcendent ones that often allude to spirituality.

who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating  
Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war,  
who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing obscene  
odes on the windows of the skull,  
who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their money in  
wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through the wall,  
who got busted in their pubic beards returning through Laredo with a belt  
of marijuana for New York,  
who ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise Alley, death, or  
purgatoried their torsos night after night (ll. 6-10)

Ginsberg reveals personal matters of all kinds, but he does not scrupulously investigate these details of private life in order to discover, like Lowell, that he can never truly record reality. Instead of dwelling on personal turmoil, Ginsberg writes poems that look beyond individual problems toward a universality in the hope of gaining more freedom for more people. He attempts to transform personal issues into something spiritual so as to achieve this universality, and he locates that spirituality in the body. He laces his poems with spiritually suggestive diction such as, in the excerpt above, “radiant,” “Paradise Alley,” and “purgatoried.” To drive his point home, he ecstatically writes in “Footnote to *Howl*,” “The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! The nose is holy! The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy!” (*Howl* 27, l. 2).

Ginsberg's inclusion of spirituality relates to his notion that poetic forms are similar to social masks. His poems describe how humans achieve spirituality through ordinary things. In "Sunflower Sutra," (1955), for example, Ginsberg finds a "gray Sunflower" that is "crackly bleak and dusty with the smut and smog and smoke of olden locomotives in its eye" (l. 7). Ginsberg ends the poem with a "sermon" about the sunflower's spirituality:

So I grabbed up the skeleton thick sunflower and stuck it at my side like a  
scepter,  
and deliver my sermon to my soul, and Jack's soul too, and anyone who'll listen,  
--We're not our skin of grime, we're not our dread bleak dusty imageless  
locomotive, we're all golden sunflowers inside, blessed by our own seed  
& hairy naked accomplishment-bodies growing into mad black formal  
sunflowers in the sunset, spied on by our eyes under the shadow of the  
mad locomotive riverbank sunset Frisco hilly tincan evening sitdown  
vision. (ll. 20-2)

He characterizes the barely intelligible but somehow universally prophetic composition process that leads to poems like "Sunflower Sutra" as prophetic.

Usually during the composition, step by step, word by word and adjective by adjective, if it's at all spontaneous, I don't know whether it even makes any sense sometimes. Sometimes I know it makes complete sense, and I start crying. Because I realize I'm hitting some area which is absolutely true. And in that sense applicable universally, or understandable universally. In that sense, able to survive through time--in that sense to be read by somebody and wept to, maybe centuries later. In that sense prophecy, because it touches a common key. What prophecy is, it's that you know and feel something which somebody knows and feels in a hundred years. And maybe articulate it in a hint--concrete way that they can pick up on in a hundred years. (*Spontaneous* 26)

If a writer discusses his private thoughts with the muse, and if that writer trusts whatever comes of it, then, according to Ginsberg, the act results in prophecy. This is why great art must take up the personal and private details of life but also transcend them. In drawing attention to the goings on of private life, the poet opposes anyone or anything that censors any part of that life. As Ginsberg explains, poets try to create something spiritual out of physical reality by consciously recording private thoughts. By entering this state of mind, Ginsberg believes that he can eliminate all social and formal problems for himself and break down the barriers between public and private life.

In an address called “Public Solitude,” Ginsberg equates social restriction with poetic forms that are too rigid:

Anyone who looks in his heart and speaks frankly can claim to prophecy. And what is prophecy? I can not propose right and wrong, or objective future events such as purple balloons on Jupiter in 1984: but I can have the confidence to trust my own fantasy and express my own private thought. All have this gift of prophecy; who dare assume it though? (*Deliberate* 125-6)

He begins by stating that anyone can remove his protective mask and become prophetic, if only the person would take the risk. As Justin Quinn says, “this prophetic mode was the only proper mode for poetry and [Ginsberg] scorned the mainstream poetry” (195). To Ginsberg, writing in strict adherence to form is a result of social repression.

Ginsberg believes that poetic prophecy “provides the direction for our imagination to manifest itself in the material world” (*Deliberate* 127). But since fear tends to keep our masks in place, he believes that “the present [1966] condition for [the]

American person is one of deathly public solitude” (127). He maintains that a vast network of negativity somehow retards our social development. As he says, what surrounds us “reinforces our mental slavery to the material universe we’ve invested in” (127). If we are slaves to the material world, Ginsberg implies, then we are also spiritually inadequate.

In a wider sense, Ginsberg believes that most people settle for inauthentic, socially imposed masks that inhibit not only free expression but also freedom at large. From the beginning, he equates all social masks with counter-productive role-playing that emerges from an individual’s fear of exposure. In his first journals, Ginsberg sees his family wearing masks and acting roles. His brother “assumes an air” of superiority and then changes roles to kiss his aunts. His father’s dual role as parent and teacher both seem staged. But the young Ginsberg casts himself in a more positive light. As his brother and father carry on with their societal roles, Allen stays home caring for his mentally ill mother. Such early, intimate thoughts about humanity form the basis of Ginsberg’s later beliefs about public life (*Martydom* 4-10). Even in his earliest writings, Ginsberg seeks to break down distinctions between public and private spheres, distinctions that perpetuate masks and thus impede his idealized vision of total and conscious communication.<sup>12</sup>

Ginsberg writes about social roles in his earliest poems.<sup>13</sup> And though the early poems lack the eloquence of *Howl*, their importance lies in how often they reveal his problematic role as a closeted homosexual. His first collected poem, “In Society” (1947), recalls a Manhattan apartment dream encounter with “queers” and a “fluffy female”



society lady (*Empty Mirror* 14). The speaker walks into a cocktail party and “tried to be friendly but heard / myself talking to one in hiptalk” (ll. 4-5). He makes remarks that are “under- / stood but not appreciated” (ll. 13-14). And when he “accepts refreshments,” he discovers “a sandwich of pure meat; an / enormous sandwich of human flesh” that also “included a dirty asshole” (ll. 15-19). When the “fluffy female who looked like a princess” arrives, she immediately “glares” at Ginsberg and says, “I don’t like you,” turning away and “refus[ing] / to be introduced” (ll. 21-24).

I said, “What!”  
in outrage. “Why you shit-faced fool!”  
This got everybody’s attention.  
“Why you narcissistic bitch! How  
can you decide when you don’t even  
know me,” I continued in a violent  
and messianic voice, inspired at  
last, dominating the whole room. (ll. 25-32)

This speaker is one of the earliest examples of the persona in *Howl* who confidently opposes social norms. The speaker also exemplifies how Ginsberg, from his earliest writings, draws his audience’s attention to social masks.<sup>14</sup>

Ginsberg the poet ultimately equates his opinions concerning social fear with his opinions on literary form. No matter how Ginsberg orients his assertions about society and their resultant socially inhibiting masks, he moves toward literary judgments because, for him, all literary problems evaporate once we overcome societal fear and literary posturing. But while Ginsberg believes that social masks must be removed for the

sake of good art, he recognizes that doing so is difficult. At times, he even admits that writing confessional poetry might be too much: “It seemed like it would be too terrible if we communicated to each other on a level of total consciousness and awareness” (*Spontaneous* 42). There are times when Ginsberg’s poems dramatize a weariness that has taken its toll on him as a result of exposing his private life. See, in particular, “Black Shroud” (*White Shroud* 69-70) where he ends the poem with a lament: “too late to undo confession and truth.”

In his interviews and public addresses, Ginsberg casts “formal literature” as the antagonist to good poetry, and he equates literary forms with social impositions.<sup>15</sup> He is part of a literary movement that brings private details about life to the public:

As Charles Olson formulated it, revision of standards of public behavior to include indications of private manners heretofore excluded from public consciousness endorse publicly the private desire and knowledge of mankind in America, so to inspire the young. (*Deliberate* 128-9,132)

The hypocrisy of literature has been [that] there’s supposed to be formal literature, which is supposed to be different from ... in subject, in diction, and even in organization, from our quotidian inspired lives. (*Paris Review* 21)

Ginsberg “lambaste[s] anything which sounds at all like they’re writing ‘literature,’” he says. Instead, he wants poets to “actually express secret life in whatever form it comes out” (Schumacher 227). As his comments about literature make clear, poetry is a social act.

However, since Ginsberg knows how difficult it can be to communicate beyond social constructs, he thus empathizes with those whom he imagines to be stuck behind social masks. This is because his personal history has shown him the difficulties of repression. As a young closeted homosexual, his own inner turmoil manifested itself on the faces of others:

They all looked like horrible grotesque masks, grotesque because *hiding* the knowledge from each other. Having a habitual conduct and forms to prescribe, forms to fulfill. Roles to play. But the main insight I had at that time was that everybody knew. Knew completely everything in the terms I was talking about. (*Paris Review* 43)

In the years prior to writing *Howl*, when his homosexuality caused him to live in fear, he “began questioning my own reality versus the social sense that was being imposed on me” (*Spontaneous* 65). He went through a period of self-rejection:

When I started acting it [self-rejection] out I found it necessary to reject everything I held dear, reject my own homosexual feelings, reject the compassion I might have felt toward my friends. The position itself [was] like a total self-rejection, a rejection of the universe, an acceptance of some formulation laid down as being the safest way to handle the outer world. Lip service, really, to supposedly acceptable social patterns. (*Spontaneous* 65)

Ginsberg learned through experience that overcoming society’s fear of homosexuality and his own fear of being homosexual requires courage. As he says, “it’s fearsome to make private reality public” (*Spontaneous* 173). This was particularly true during the late 40s and 50s in which Ginsberg came of age. As Anne Hartman explains, “the era of fear

in the 1950s brought increased repression to homosexuals” (47). Not until he took his psychiatrist’s advice to live with his lover and devote himself to poetry (*Spontaneous* 65) did Ginsberg become the poet who “projects my own actual unconscious feelings, of which I don’t have shame, which I feel are basically charming” (*Chicago Trial* 71). He needed a socially free space where he was at liberty to live openly gay and to write what he wanted. He found that space while writing *Howl*, which, ironically, he never intended to publish.

Ginsberg’s interviews and essays narrate his story of overcoming social fear; his poems communicate the same struggle. In “America” (1955), he “puts his queer shoulder to the wheel” (*Howl* 43),<sup>16</sup> and, in “Television Was a Baby Crawling Toward That Deathchamber” (1961), he “vomits the paranoia” of American media (*Planet News* 24). In “Memory Gardens” (1969) he defines his “work” as “eas[ing] the pain of the living” and states that all else is merely “drunken dumbshow” ( ll. 63-5 *Fall of America* 135). His performative personal mask-removal dramatizes an idealistic hope in personal liberation. His idealism translates directly into his literary opinions on open poetics. These opinions are as straightforward as his social beliefs about people’s ability to express themselves outside of social norms. He does everything for the sake of greater personal freedom.

In this regard, Ginsberg’s poems bear a strong connection to the work of William Carlos Williams--and therefore are part of the line deriving from Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>17</sup> Williams states in *Paterson* that “we know nothing, pure / and simple, beyond / our own complexities” (3). Ginsberg latches onto Williams’ idea that only by

adhering to one's complicated vision of the world can a person understand the world in a simple, communicable way. This left-political dimension is also a strong part of Ginsberg's democratic vision and as a young man he was already on the political left, devoting himself to the socialist and communist "history" of his mother's 1930s--as Ben Lee shows in "'Howl' and Other Poems: Is There Old Left in These New Beats?" Whitman, Williams, and Ginsberg all believe that the right kind of poetry can change society. Their poems expose the poets to the criticism that they are naive and idealistic. In this way, Whitman, Williams, and Ginsberg join in the larger debate that began during America's founding generation: social change through accessible political poetry gives credence to the radical egalitarian vision still celebrated *and* critiqued in America based on such "American Scripture" as Thomas Jefferson's revolutionary "Declaration of Independence" that "binds one generation after another in a continuing act of national self-definition" (Maier 208).

Because his aims are so ambitious, his persona so big, his intentions so grandiose, Ginsberg needs to think of his poetry as "communicative"--that is, not literary, academic, or institutional--since he must, after all, get his message across to everyone. His seven pocket-sized *City Lights* publications speak to his desire to reach "regular people" rather than university professors. William Carlos Williams helps to prop up this notion that Ginsberg is able to communicate to a wide audience. He introduces Ginsberg's early poems along these lines, making the young poet seem as though he can speak to the masses:

And when the poet in his writing would scream of the crowd, like Jeremiah, that their life is beset, what can he do, in the end, but speak to them in their own language, that of the daily press? (“Introduction” to *Empty Mirror* 6)

Ginsberg finds a way to speak for many others who share his social concerns. So much of his success seems to come from the fact that he creates a speaker, standing in for himself, who keeps the rest of the beat cast of poetic characters and their various settings together--and speaks for them to alleviate their suffering.

Justin Quinn examines Ginsberg’s method in this regard as part of what he labels Ginsberg’s “new sublime.” He writes that Ginsberg “turns from the naiveté of Emerson, and comprehends how the filaments of personality, geography, and political guilt are interwoven in an ecstatic survey of his historical moment” (203). In *Howl*, Ginsberg writes about the personal, geographical, and political almost simultaneously:

incomparable blind streets of shuddering cloud and lightning in the mind leaping  
toward poles of Canada & Paterson, illuminating all the motionless world  
of Time between (l. 12)

who sank all night in submarine light of Bickford’s floated out and sat through the  
stale beer afternoon in desolate Fugazzi’s, listening to the crack of doom  
on the hydrogen jukebox (l. 15)

who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze of  
Capitalism (l. 31)

who howled on their knees in the subway and were dragged off the roof waving  
genitals and manuscripts (l. 35)

The persona in *Howl* is a stable point that helps to organize the poem. The persona has access to beat slang and therefore the striking and shocking images that are unique to this group. Not only does the speaker list such places as Bickford's and Fugazzi's, he also includes keywords and phrases such as "blind streets," "submarine light," "lost battalion," and "platonic conversationalists" that recognize, even if ambiguously, an actual language register shared by his beat ensemble.

In *Howl*, Ginsberg includes dream-like details and real-life facts in his attempt to speak for both himself and others. As Robert Genter says, "his breakthrough in 'Howl' was to connect his understanding of pure immediacy to a visionary experience" (44). Ginsberg's visionary dreams and immediate reportage often work together in *Howl*. He presents many characters in tableaux that reflect both real and dream states. Sometimes Ginsberg's settings are indefinite:

angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry  
dynamo in the machinery of the night (l. 3)

who threw their watches off the roof to cast their ballot for Eternity outside of  
Time, & alarm clocks fell on their heads every day for the next decade  
(l. 53)

At other times, he includes specific places so that the characters move in and around iconic New York City locales, such as parks, boroughs, and buildings:

who chained themselves to subways for the endless ride from Battery to holy  
Bronx on benzedrine until the noise of the wheels and children brought

them down shuddering mouth-wracked and battered bleak of brain all  
drained of brilliance in the drear light of Zoo (l. 14)

a lost battalion of platonic conversationalists jumping down the stoops off fire  
escapes off windowsills off Empire State out of the moon (l. 17)

Ultimately, the characters become artists who embody Ginsberg's way of looking at  
things. In the following lines, Ginsberg shows how their dreams create new relationships  
between society and and their own individual pursuits in writing and spirituality:

who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images  
juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the soul between 2 visual images  
and joined the elemental verbs and set the noun and dash of consciousness  
together jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus  
to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human prose and stand before  
you speechless and intelligent and shaking with shame, rejected yet  
confessing out the soul to conform to the rhythm of thought in his naked  
and endless head (ll. 74-5)

Ginsberg, finally, calls these writers to stand as one, as if they comprise a single,  
fixed point of view within the surreality of the poem. They are to be spokesmen for both  
American culture and their own form of beat prophecy:

the madman bum and angel beat in Time, unknown, yet putting down here  
what might be left to say in time come after death  
and rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz in the goldhorn shadow of the  
band and blew the suffering of American's naked mind for love into eli  
eli lamma lamma sabacthani saxophone cry that shivered the cities down  
to the last radio  
with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good  
to eat a thousand years (ll. 75-7)



At the end of *Howl*, all is “holy” because, as dreams and reality commingle, social liberation and transcendence are possible: “Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the soul!” (l. 126). Ginsberg’s dream reality in *Howl* is a vision of his ideal state.

Ginsberg is passionate about *Howl*’s potential to be liberating. He conflates the success of *Howl* with his experience of the poem’s censorship in order to emphasize how his own shedding of social fear saved him from the wider social sickness. With *Howl* in mind he claims that “poetry is hated” even though “poetry is the record of individual insights into the secret soul” (*Howl on Trial* 209). He attempts to diagnose the culture that would seize his work in terms that suggest how something is seriously wrong:

America is having a nervous breakdown. San Francisco is one of many places where a few individuals, poets, have had the luck and courage and fate to glimpse something new through the crack in mass consciousness; they have been exposed to some insight into their own nature, the nature of governments, and the nature of God. (*Howl on Trial* 210)

Ginsberg believes strongly in his capacity to diagnose and overcome certain destructive forces in American culture. He relies on an all-inclusive spirituality and believes that art must speak to wide audiences. Not surprisingly, he calls attention to the government seizure of *Howl* in 1956. In a “Note Written on Finally Recording *Howl*,” Ginsberg also attacks anyone who questions his process in writing the poem.

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 buggered them in broad daylight.  
(“Notes” 135, *Deliberate* 232)

The arts and artists came under widespread attack during the 1950s. Ginsberg was an obvious target his criticism of American society includes explicit sexual references. Worst of all, most of these references are to homosexuality.

As Nancy J. Peters says in “Milestones of Literary Censorship,” “during the century prior to the *Howl* decision in 1957, freedom of expression in America, with few exceptions, did not extend to any writing that contained overtly sexual references” (*Howl on Trial* 5). Ginsberg had a “vision” that began *Howl* in 1954. He finished the poem in August of 1955 and read it at the Six Gallery on October 7, 1955. City Lights published the book in 1956, officially on November 1 (though some advanced copies appeared that August). On March 25, 1957, the book was seized by Customs. The poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, City Lights owner and publisher, was arrested in June and a jury trial was scheduled. On October 3, Ferlinghetti was found not guilty on the grounds that *Howl and Other Poems* was not without “redeeming social importance” (*Howl on Trial* 1-3).

In *The Culture of the Cold War* (1996), Stephen J. Whitfield explains that the culture of 1940s and 1950s America came to resemble the anti-individual society with which it sought to be contrasted, even to the point of limiting its ability to be seen as an “attractive society” because “the confusion of the public and private” was based on a near-paranoia that aligned individuality with communism (10-11). In *The Cold War and*

*the New Imperialism* (2006), Henry Heller lists three things that were “stifled” in “ordinary citizens” during the postwar years: “the political voice, the intellectual potential, and the social autonomy.” “Increasingly,” Heller says, “ordinary citizens became spectators rather than participants in political life” (39). George Kennan, the diplomat who developed the postwar strategy of “containment” during those Cold War years, attacked egotism as a crime associated with political leftism that “someday must be punished as all ignorant presumption and egotism must be punished” (qtd in Whitfield 33).

Kennan, of course, typified the early postwar belief that no middle ground was possible. According to *The Cold War: A History* by Martin Walker (1995), such figures resided in the bipolar world of democracy and communism (32). Richard Hofstadter, in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963), associates this thinking with a type that he labels “one-hundred percenters,” a group that emerged embittered by New Deal policies, sought traditional religion, and clung to isolationist forms of nationalism (134). Clearly, Ginsberg opposed this mentality. What’s more, he believed his desire to express himself freely was less of an oddity than a representative desire for all. Because of this, he believed that his poetry represented ideas that everyone around him already was thinking, even though some might be suppressing such potentially liberating thoughts.

Ginsberg believes that he is able to transform cultural awareness, thereby making his poems examples of personal and public freedom. Anne Hartman qualifies the way that Ginsberg rejects the impersonal and solitary by suggesting that he creates socially aware

“counter-publics” (41). According to Hartman, Ginsberg resists the naiveté of asocial literary confessionalism because he writes with a clear social intention.

The distinction to be made is between a naive view that takes confession on its own terms, and one that recognizes confession as a cultural form that takes part in producing the categories in which it is implicated, such as those of authenticity, privacy, and publicity. (Hartman 43)

Hartman suggests that it is naive for poets to write or for critics to define personal, autobiographical, or confessional poetry formally. She privileges Ginsberg’s “allege[d] authenticity” over that of other mid-century poets because she finds an anti-modern cultural element in Ginsberg’s poems that is too dim in the poetry of Sylvia Plath or Robert Lowell, who merely create a “dramatic premise” for “removing the mask” (43). Hartman cites the publication of *Howl* and its ensuing censorship trial to explain her points about culturally mediated poetic form.

Ginsberg’s performance of opening secrecy was enabled through an appeal to the confessional mode, whose tendency to expose and transform the constitutive binaries of self/other, private/public, and concealment/disclosure can also be detected in the outcome of the trial, despite its original intent of censorship. What Ginsberg’s poem and the subsequent trial make clear is that secrecy and silence have their own truth, and that the notion of sincere expression as both the precondition for and the effect of confession is culturally mediated. (53)

Ginsberg engages in performative spectacles that expose certain binaries. He admits that he “didn’t expect to publish *Howl*” because he was concerned with “my father seeing all that about cocksucking” (*Spontaneous* 55). Had he repressed the homosexual images and

diction in *Howl*, he would have played into the hands of a collective action aimed, in his view, either to keep him quiet or to force him into acceptable, “literary” writing.

Buried deep in an early journal entry, on June 2, 1944, Ginsberg defines art as “conscious selective creative self expression, which is therefore potentially communicative” (*Martyrdom* 38):

It is wasteful for an artist to create uncommunicative art. It is creative for him to communicate, creative because of the physical fact that more people are enriched by communicative than uncommunicative art. The uncommunicative artist’s value is lost to all but himself. (38)<sup>18</sup>

He explains that while art cannot help but communicate something, an artist who intentionally tries to communicate effectively with his audience is better than an artist for whom art is self-expression. All art that does not attempt to clearly communicate its meaning is, for Ginsberg, a waste of time.

Much later, in a note he wrote toward the end of his career, Ginsberg recalls that “at this time, my own poetry [and that of other beat writers] was subject to amazing attack--not just openly critical denunciation by younger friends and older writers but also legal attack”<sup>19</sup> (*Deliberate* 253). He passionately defends himself and his fellow beats. A lot is at stake when it comes to artistic and social communication:

I felt at the time the poetics would be triumphant, the texts permanent, my complaints exemplary--to set example to future generations what depression and inertia and hostility we had had to plough thru instruct, cajole, admonish, plead with for possession of America’s heart. Why? So as to leave a record of combat against native fascist militarization of U.S. soul. It seemed to me that the poetic

critics, in so disavowing the new open poetics and the freedom of mind, desire, imagination, were setting the mental stage for repression of political liberty in the long run--a political liberty that could only be defended by undaunted, free, bold humorous imagination, open field mentality, open field poetics, open field democracy. The closed forms of the older poetry, it seemed to me, were ostrich-head-in-the-sand-like. It seemed to me the breakthroughs of new poetry were social breakthroughs, that is, political in the long run. (*Deliberate* 253)

Ginsberg pursues open communication and open form so vigorously and defines human interaction so idealistically that, while we hesitate to think of social and formal boundaries as walls we might cross over, we nonetheless ponder, with Ginsberg, the artistic power that comes from such a firm belief in individual agency. Part of the appeal of Ginsberg's persona is that he articulates his faith in an essential, spiritual truth that emerges totally from each individual. Perhaps it would be enough to state that his poetics maintain this devotion to open communication for the sake of personal and societal liberation. But as Ginsberg moves into his major works of the 1960s, nowhere does he illustrate the impossible goal of overcoming limitations on individual freedom through poetry and language than when he announces the end of the Vietnam War in "Wichita Vortex Sutra"--six years before the war actually ended. He will muster everything he has learned from his own personal liberation in his attempt to influence American political opinion about the escalating war in Vietnam.

### **Bringing His View of the Vietnam War Back Home**

As a book of poetry, *Planet News* (1968) offers an alternative to mass-produced social lies. In it, Ginsberg adopts a global strategy to critique America. Poems critique American abundance, seeing the American way of life as an unsustainable system of capitalist markets, as in “Television was a Baby Crawling Toward that Deathchamber.” They are located in settings around the world, as in “Last Night in Calcutta” and “Cafe in Warsaw.” They also draw on mythologies foreign to an American audience. In this regard, Ginsberg primarily makes use of Indian mythology, as in “Kali Destroyer of Illusions.” But he sometimes stays closer to English literary traditions in poems such as “Wales Visitation.” Several poems, such as “Pentagon Exorcism,” not only critique American foreign policy but also aim to be useful to a growing body of American dissent against the Vietnam War. Eric Mottram argues that Ginsberg, at this time, “became a world-traveller through his desire [to explore] the ancient possible tradition of unity between men and their universe” (20).

To write and organize *Planet News* Ginsberg simply took off on a world tour in an attempt to gain a greater first-hand knowledge about the state of the world, and he wrote about what he saw along the way. During this time period Ginsberg committed to a chronological, documentary, journalistic style of writing. (As Robert Lowell moved into his “Notebook” phase of the late 1960s and early 70s, he attempted something similar.) Most of Ginsberg’s poems from this point on reference specific times and places and are dated. This chronological approach naturally furthers his use of a fixed poetic identity.

Ginsberg's strategy in writing *Planet News* from a global perspective reveals his sense that his own culture's insular nature, the very nature against which he had to push in order to pursue his own authenticity, could be better explained with a knowledge of global social conditions.

In *Planet News*, Ginsberg continues to write confidently in accord with his belief that good writing rises above repressed social fear. He brings more and more private or repressed information to the public, as he did in *Howl*. He had long opposed the 1950s typical American stance that "accepted the governing rationale that there were things one should know and things best kept secret" (Halberstam 373). As Alex Houen concludes in "Back! Back! Back! Central Mind-Machine Pentagon...": Allen Ginsberg and the Vietnam War," Ginsberg "showed that individuals could develop alternative possibilities of community and voice *within* the very culture they were protesting against" (371). *Planet News* embodies this development.

As he makes a transition from writing about those who are "beat" in America to those who are "beat" around the world, Ginsberg begins to critique governments outside the United States, who, in his opinion, thrive on the repression of the individual. Just as the prosecutors in the *Howl* trial of 1957 created greater fame for Ginsberg, the poet's audience continued to increase as several communist regimes deported him during his world tour. The most striking example came after Ginsberg was deported from Cuba. He arrived in Czechoslovakia and was elected the May King by thousands of students in Prague, was literally carried around the streets, and then deported to England by the



communist government soon thereafter. Ginsberg capitalizes on this sensational string of events in “Kral Majales” (1965).

In “Kral Majales,” Ginsberg places himself as the mediator between the two bipolarizing forces that define his age, capitalism and communism. Ginsberg now writes poems with first-hand knowledge of each system’s limiting power:

And the communists have nothing to offer but fat cheeks and eyeglasses and lying  
policemen  
and the capitalists proffer Napalm and money in green suitcases to the Naked,  
and the communists create heavy industry but the heart is also heavy  
and the beautiful engineers are all dead, the secret technicians conspire for  
their own glamor  
in the future, in the future, but now drink vodka and lament the Security Forces,  
and the capitalists drink gin and whisky on airplanes but let Indian brown  
millions starve  
and when communist and capitalists assholes tangle the Just man is  
arrested or robbed or had his head cut off (*Planet News* 89)

Ginsberg places himself in the center of the the bipolar world of Cold War political regimes. The “lying policemen” in Prague are no better than those who, in America, fill orders from government contracts to “proffer Napalm.” The “Just man” stands in for Ginsberg himself, who was literally “robbed” of his journals while in Prague. *Planet News*, in a way, documents how Ginsberg gains the necessary information to establish himself as an authentic voice that refuses to submit to the fear of a world in which neutrality is not acceptable. But Ginsberg’s main focus in *Planet News* remained on the United States.

Ginsberg now made his way into middle America. Equipped with a voice-recording device (bought for him by Bob Dylan) and with Peter Orlovsky at the wheel, Ginsberg composed “Wichita Vortex Sutra” en route to the middle of middle America, Kansas. The poem, written in two sections, begins with an invocation in the first section and moves on to a critique of American policy in Vietnam based on the lack of authentic language used by the government in explaining the war in the second section. One of Ginsberg’s contentions is that those in positions of power have used language improperly in order to explain the American war effort. As he says, “almost all our language has been taxed by war” (*Planet News* 126).

“Wichita Vortex Sutra” is a sprawling poem, even by Ginsberg’s standards. The poem has no set line lengths, making it more erratic than *Howl* or *Kaddish*. Transitional lines of a word or two are situated next to multi-line paragraphs that embed news stories, and in between are lines of varying length, sometimes punctuated loudly with exclamation marks, sometimes italicized, sometimes capitalized. The poem is also highly allusive, written for a contemporary reader familiar with popular cultural references to “Face the Nation” and Bob Dylan, political references from Robert MacNamara to General Maxwell Taylor, mythical (and Kansas) references such as El Dorado, and Hindu references to Khaki Baba and Kali Pada Guha Roy embedded with references to William Blake, Christ, Allah, and Jaweh. “Wichita Vortex Sutra” certainly can be a confusing, but Ginsberg’s identifiable speaker, always employed to hold down the center as in *Howl*, keeps the poem together.

Ginsberg is concerned with several things in his invocation: he must dramatize his arrival in Kansas and provide his reasons for being there; he must pass some kind of judgment on Kansas to justify his choice of locale; and he must bring together as many elements as possible to whirl about his ego, his speaker, in order to make Kansas appear like the vortex he declares it to be. On the first page he tries to accomplish these three things simultaneously:

Kansas ! Kansas ! Shuddering at last !  
                    PERSON appearing in Kansas !  
            angry telephone calls to the University  
            Police dumbfounded leaning on  
                    their radio carhoods  
            While poets chant to Allah in the roadhouse Showboat !  
(*Planet News* 110)

The speaker exclaims “Kansas” as part of his dramatic arrival in his “roadhouse Showboat” (which is actually a Volkswagon Bus). Kansas is isolated and its police “dumbfounded.” He also brings together several elements: he himself brings chants and an audacious vehicle; the police have “radio carhoods”; and the “University” has been contacted. This creates the sense of a whirling vortex. But everything also whirls about him as the speaker of the poem.

Ginsberg’s sense of his audience is somewhat overreaching, but it is consistent with his belief that his poetry can help everybody overcome fear. He connects with his audience and appeals to common loneliness:

Thy sins are forgiven, Wichita !  
Thy lonesomeness annulled, O Kansas dear !  
as the western Twang prophesied

I'm a lonely Dog, O Mother !  
Come, Nebraska, sing & dance with me -- (*Planet News* 111)  
Ginsberg associates middle American's isolated geography with loneliness. The poem attempts, in the lines above, to awaken Americans from an isolationist stupor. Ginsberg shifts to the evocation of sex, shocking his audience by encouraging frank sexual discourse:

So, tender lipped adolescent girl, pale youth,  
give back my soft kiss  
Hold me in your innocent arms,  
accept my tears as yours to harvest  
equal in nature to the Wheat  
that made your bodies' muscular bones  
broad shouldered, boy bicept --  
from leaning on cows & drinking Milk  
in Midwest Solitude --  
No more fear of tenderness, much delight in weeping ecstasy  
in singing, laughter rises that confounds  
staring Idiot mayors  
and stony politicians eyeing  
Thy Breast,  
O Man of America, be born !  
Truth breaks through ! (*Planet News* 111-12)

The poem turns bawdy as he calls out prominent figures who hide, in Ginsberg's view, behind a veiled privacy.

Truth breaks through !  
How big is the prick of the President?  
How big is Cardinal Viet-Nam?

How little the prince of the F.B.I., unmarried all these years !  
How big are all the Public Figures?  
What kind of flesh hangs, hidden behind their Images?  
(*Planet News* 112)

The lines are humorous, but more importantly Ginsberg takes the public discourse of the Vietnam War to its most intimate level. Ultimately, the private discourse of penises leads Ginsberg to one of his main concerns, that things are “hidden behind their Images.”

In the second part of “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” Ginsberg focuses on the government’s misleading reports about Vietnam. He specifically draws attention to Robert MacNamara’s avowal that he made a “bad guess” when initially estimating that only 8,000 service members would be necessary to win the war. Ginsberg uses the word “guess” to critique governmental communication and also to organize his lines as they sprawl down the page:

MacNamara made a “ bad guess ”  
“ Bad Guess ” chorused the reporters?  
Yes, no more than a Bad Guess, in 1962  
“ 8000 American Troops handle the  
Situation ”  
Bad Guess  
in 1956, 80% of the  
Vietnamese people would’ve voted for Ho Chi Minh  
wrote Ike years later *Mandate for Change*  
A bad guess in the Pentagon  
And the Hawks were guessing all along  
Bomb China’s 200,000,000  
cried Stennis from Mississippi  
I guess it was 3 weeks ago  
Holmes Alexander in Albuquerque Journal  
Provincial newsman

said I guess we better begin to do that Now.  
(*Planet News* 115-16)

Here Ginsberg attempts to mimic the way language, in this case the phrase “bad guess,” moves from person to person. Such a phrase, like a mask, hides reality. All of Ginsberg’s allusions create the whirling effect, also evident in the sprawling lines, that a citizen faces in trying to figure out what is happening in Vietnam.

After proceeding in this manner, Ginsberg declares the end to the Vietnam war. His declaration aims to reveal the power of a single individual over a collective mass:

Come to my lone presence  
into this Vortex named Kansas

I lift my voice aloud,  
make Mantra of American language now,  
I here declare the end of the War !

(*Planet News* 127)

As I have emphasized, the power to “end the war” is available to everyone--once they rise above social fear. Discussing “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” Ginsberg explains that his declaration “simply sets up an example that other people recognize in their own feeling, and brings that latent feeling up to the surface consciously” (qtd in Houen 360).

But the poem does not end with this declaration. Instead, Ginsberg combines his visit to the vortex with the rekindled memory of his mother. He thereby demonstrates that his own personal sense of liberation is connected to society. In the final lines of “Wichita

Vortex Sutra,” Ginsberg combines the Vietnam War with his mother’s insanity, directly blaming America for her death.

Here fifty years ago, by her violence  
began a vortex of hatred that defoliated the Mekong Delta --  
Proud Wichita ! vain Wichita  
cast the first stone ! --  
That murdered my mother  
who died of the communist anticommunist psychosis  
in the madhouse one decade long ago  
complaining about wires of masscommunication in her head  
and phantom political voices in the air  
besmirching her girlish character.  
Many another has suffered death and madness  
in the Vortex from Hydraulic  
to the end of 17th -- enough !  
The war is over now --  
Except for the souls  
held prisoner in Niggertown  
still pining for love of your tender white bodies O children of Wichita !  
(*Planet News* 132)

Justin Quinn states that “the poem is of no real value for the way it explains historical events, rather it is an exploration of the ways in which the U.S. imaginary is produced” (201). To close, Ginsberg indicts Wichita on grounds that its complicity in both the Vietnam War and the versions of mass-media communication that Ginsberg loathes are part of the same brutally destructive, repressive society.

### **Final Poems, Final Thoughts on Personal Poetry**

In the final months of his life, Ginsberg reflected on the problems of reconciling private and social life. In *Death & Fame* (1999), he suggests that an individual needs to focus on himself, recognize that life's experiences are our only true evidence, and therefore understand life as a private journey toward self-knowledge. In "Objective Subject" (*Death & Fame* 75), Ginsberg nods to Thoreau as he considers how private life meshes with public statements.

It's true I write about myself  
Who else do I know so well?  
Where else gather blood red roses & kitchen garbage  
What else has my thick heart, hepatitis or hemorrhoids--  
Who else lived my seventy years, my old Naomi?  
and if by chance I scribe U.S. politics, Wisdom  
meditation, theories of art  
it's because I read a newspaper loved  
teachers skimmed books or visited a museum (ll. 1-9)

The personal details of his kitchen and his body, the public statements about government policies, the experiences of reading and viewing art: these are the markings of individuality. The tension between internal and external life never ceases. In the midst of this tension, Ginsberg warns his readers not to wear masks as they navigate through the world. The "I" who learns from his surroundings dedicates itself to the private life even as it attempts to make itself public.<sup>20</sup>

In his final volume, Ginsberg attends to problems created by separating the private and public spheres. In "Sexual Abuse" (*Death & Fame* 71), he documents a



*Boston Herald* headline, “Sexual Abuse Law Targets Clergy” (l. 4) and highlights the difference between a moralizing, public reaction and the reality of sexual abuse in order to demonstrate the unnecessary separation between public moralizing and private reality. For Ginsberg, the separation between public and private spheres masks this terrible difference.

Priests should turn each other in, fink--  
So, say it in the confessional box, not  
over sherry at intimate dinner. (ll 7-8)

The role of priest offers Ginsberg another way to critique the problems of inauthenticity associated with separating the public from the private. As a figure of authority, the priest buries his identity within the institutional confessional. Ginsberg would have the priest discuss sexual desire openly because, in his mind, such frankness would put an end to the problem.

However, in “Butterfly Mind” (*Death & Fame* 72), he metaphorically depicts the mind’s flight and its whimsical attractions as a part of a natural process.

The mind is like a butterfly  
That lights upon a rose  
or flutters to a stinky feces pile  
swoops into smoky bus exhaust  
or rests upon porch chair, a flower breathing  
open & closed balancing a Tennessee breeze--  
Flies to Texas for a convention  
spring weeds in fields of oil rigs  
Some say these rainbow wings have soul  
Some say empty brain  
tiny automatic large-eyed wings

that settle on the page. (ll. 1-12)

The butterfly functions as a metaphor to explain the way the mind accumulates and transfers information. As in “Objective Subject,” Ginsberg explains how a subject must learn to accumulate and process the external world without unnecessarily contradicting private reality.

As Ginsberg’s body of work shows, his guiding poetic concern was often not poetic at all, but instead social and political. From his point of view, society both granted access to and stood in the way of true art; individuals were liberated or repressed. His spirituality, his techniques for removing false societal masks, and his “communicative” writing for a wide audience all reveal a poet who relies on an intensely personal perspective without becoming overwhelmed or disheartened by subjective reality. By making a “vow to mankind” and “releasing the particulars,” Ginsberg embarked on a project that was designed to liberate others but that, at heart, narrates his own personal story of liberating thought like other American authors radically devoted to certain inalienable rights.

CHAPTER V  
CRITIQUE OF AMERICA:  
LOWELL AND GINSBERG IN THE LATE 60S

**Lowell and Ginsberg March into the Late 60s**

In their poetry in the 1950s, Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg seemed to be presenting verifiable versions of themselves--in the process they spoke directly to readers about American life. In the politically charged late 1960s, the two poets could therefore see through the haze of political confusion confronting the general American populace just as they had, to many readers, seen through the haze of their complicated personal lives. They had, after all, established the confessional and beat modes. Now in what seemed the logical extension of their 1950s and earlier 1960s work, they engaged in public protests against the Vietnam War, appeared at some of the same locations to do so, and wrote poems that explained these shared experiences.<sup>21</sup>

As I examine the poems that Lowell and Ginsberg wrote about Vietnam, I place their efforts in a few important contexts. The first context is the major theme about their poetry that I carry throughout this dissertation: Lowell and Ginsberg's highly personal bodies of work differ in their attempts to explain the individual condition. Therefore, in the poems about events of the late 60s, Lowell's speakers suffer from a tremendous amount of personal anxiety whereas Ginsberg's seems liberated from fear and privation.

The second context I explain is, of course, the much broader social and historical one, based on prevailing cultural and historical perspectives about the time period. This chapter, then, continues to reveal how their differing perspectives inform their poetry, and in particular, the way they write about cultural events--in this case, two major Vietnam protests that occurred in 1967 and 1968.

They write about events in the late 60s differently and in doing so reveal how personal poetry is at the heart of their political poems. Lowell anguishes over social and political uncertainties, placing the inability to provide effective conclusions squarely on himself as an individual who cannot know the actual reality of political maneuvering. As the sufferer, he brings a broad cultural malaise to the surface and creates speakers who have more questions than answers. Ginsberg confidently basks in social and political solutions that explain social problems associated with American governmental and corporate culture as he critiques these vast entities through the continual use himself as the model for liberation. Though both poets agree that social and political issues are complicated, Ginsberg rises above seemingly insurmountable social and political problems because his speakers have great agency, implementing a simple, somewhat ideal, tactic that, at least from Ginsberg's perspective, should help Americans move beyond the troubling social conditions they associate with the Vietnam War.

Comparing two of their poems, written within a month of each other in 1968, shows how differently they were thinking about the social and political events of the time. In "For Eugene McCarthy" (*History* 175) Lowell expresses the kind of malaise and

complex feelings with which he tends to view social and historical events. He tries to convince himself that McCarthy could have helped citizens had he won the 1968 election, yet Lowell undercuts his own thinking almost immediately and, instead, dwells on the impossibility of an individual's ability to effect change:

I love you so. . . . Gone? Who will swear you wouldn't  
have done good to the country, that fulfillment wouldn't  
have done good to you--the father, as Freud says:  
you? We've so little faith that anyone  
ever makes anything better . . . the same and less--  
ambition only makes the ambitious great.  
The state lifts us, we cannot raise the state. . . . (ll. 1-7)

Lowell equates personal agency with ambition and seems to believe that each person requires a governing body as they are part of a self-serving mass. He laces the language with which he presents his feelings about the governed individual with ellipses and dashes, includes questions instead of statements, and generally shapes syntax and punctuation to increase the effect of his own hopelessness.

Ginsberg creates a different context for himself and the politics of the late 60s. In "A Prophecy" (*The Fall of America* 87), he calls out to other poets and intellectuals to rise above not just the immediate problems of the 1968 election and the Vietnam War, but, by extension, all that hinders society:

O Future bards  
chant from skull to heart to ass  
as long as language lasts  
Vocalize all chords

zap all consciousness  
I sing out of mind jail  
in New York State  
without electricity  
rain on the mountain  
thought fills cities  
I'll leave my body  
in a thin motel  
my self escapes  
through unborn ears  
Not my language  
but a voice  
chanting in patterns  
survives on earth  
not history's bones  
but vocal tones  
Dear breaths and eyes  
shine in the skies  
where rockets rise  
to take me home (ll. 1-24)

Ginsberg has a clear opponent: those who are victims of social and cultural lies, those who live in a "mind jail." He represents someone who has the ability to creatively and courageously speak his mind against an oppressive government. His speaker is clearly above--ethically, morally, spiritually--those who antagonize society by seeking govern or imprison the individual mind. In this way, Ginsberg counterbalances Lowell's hopelessness. Ginsberg's speaker does not spend much time in the troubling place or state of mind that troubles Lowell's speaker. Ginsberg's speaker is aware that his "language," presumably his syntactical structure and specific word choice, will be forgotten long before his general message, what he calls his "voice / chanting in patterns." Ginsberg releases himself ("my self escapes") whereas Lowell traps himself ("the state lifts us, we

cannot raise the state”). Ginsberg’s world adds liberating individual transcendence beyond political systems; Lowell’s world is political and cold, filled with individual ambition.

Though they both opposed the war, they had contrasting views on the role of the poet in society, leading them to situate their cultural critiques differently. Lowell comments on social protest only hesitantly because he is unsure that the poet should be overtly political. In contrast, Ginsberg, who believes that poetry is importantly political, regularly engages with politics. Lowell even wonders whether politically charged poetry panders to the misguided demands of society. In a 1971 interview, he responds to Ian Hamilton’s inquiry about his becoming more involved with public events by questioning the compatibility of social protest and poetry:

You say I have become more overtly concerned with public events, but true public poetry must come as an inevitable accident. I grew up in anti-artist-sage days, when Eliot and Picasso worked in one surprising style for some years, then surprised with another--maturing without becoming public voices or portents. Who wants to be on call to society? (*Collected Prose* 269)

Although Lowell chose not to write a lot about politics, he strongly opposed the Vietnam war, stating that over the years his “position” on senseless violence had never wavered. “I pray that I’d take the position of the draft evader,” he says, “not leave the country but go to jail” (*Collected Prose* 280).

But even given his opposition to Vietnam, ambiguities associated with the war left Lowell confused and without the certainty that could make poems surer gestures of social protest:

I don't know what the split between the President and the intellectuals *means*. Something very horrifying about our country has been brought home to us. I don't know how profound this is, or how much it is a passing twinge of remorse, how much is due to Johnson and how much was almost inevitable with almost any president. We've swallowed worse things than Vietnam, yet it's hopeful that we are now appalled. We may be going through a deep change of heart as to what can be allowed to nation-states, or maybe our present mood is only a sort of temporary, superficial and hangover "profundity." (*Collected Prose* 270)

He is uncertain about the inevitability of war as well as the authenticity of the "deep change of heart" felt by Americans opposed to the war. Faced with such doubt, Lowell retreated to a more basic belief about society: human nature accounts for social problems and there is little we can do to alter it. He also writes off earlier attempts at political change as ineffectual. Lowell thought of his time spent with Presidential candidate Eugene McCarthy as an odd experience in which he did not really know what he was doing. In hindsight, it reminded him of his dislocation when he went "to Italy for the first time" (*Collected Prose* 281-2).

Lowell's political attitude is consistent across his career--though he began writing more overtly political poems during the late 60s. Lowell and his opposition to the Vietnam War reveal a man at odds with something greater than Vietnam. Adam Beardsworth observes that Lowell's protest represents a "charged reaction against the conformity of Cold War ideology" (114); Wai Chee Dimock labels his opposition to



Vietnam “not national but planetary in scope” (924); and Selim Sarwar contends that he never renounced “the apocalyptic” (116). In general, Lowell’s protest about the inhumanity of the Vietnam War connects with what he wrote about World War II in his 1943 letter to President Roosevelt:

With the greatest reluctance, with every wish that I may be proved in error, and after long deliberation on my responsibilities to myself, my country, and my ancestors who played responsible parts in its making, I have come to the conclusion that I cannot honorably participate in a war whose prosecution, as far as I can judge, constitutes a betrayal of my country. (*Collected Prose* 370)

In his refusing military service, Lowell nonetheless makes a concession based on his limited ability to figure out this grave matter for himself. His response, which expresses a strong ethos while indicating some self-doubt (“as far as I can judge”), marks Lowell’s political poetry just as an inability to see things accurately assails his personal poems.

Ginsberg, on the other hand, is sure of the rightness of his protests because the Vietnam War was an unmistakable case of cruel, misguided policy. His diction is accusatory and his tone fiery. In his speech accepting the National Book Award for *The Fall of America* in 1974, he made his opinion of American governmental policies clear:

Book here honored with public prize, best proclaim further prophetic foreboding that our United States is now the fabled “damned of nations” foretold by Walt Whitman a hundred years ago. The materialist brutality we have forced on ourselves and world is irrevocably visible [and has] imposed military tyranny both openly and secretly in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand. (*Deliberate* 19)

His protest is figured around a simple opposition: the American government oppresses people, both at home and abroad. For Ginsberg, poetry maintains the moral high ground against the “brutality” of government policies and speaks for those who are oppressed as Jesus himself was:

A staggering realization [is] forced on all of us by images of our own unconscious rising from the streets of Chicago, where city teargas was dumped on Christ’s very Cross in Lincoln Park. (*Deliberate* 111)

But despite the gargantuan size and power of Ginsberg’s governmental antagonists, there is always hope. When interviewed about current events in 1969, he expressed his belief that liberation was on the way. He believed in something unconquerable in humanity that “everybody wants”:

I think many of the younger children have already liberated themselves from grasping after the things of this world and have begun to grasp for wisdom: eventually they may even liberate themselves from grasping after wisdom. Everybody wants, needs, deserves and will have this free kingdom, which the police state, whether it triumphs or not, can never touch. (*Spontaneous* 189)

Ginsberg’s perspective on Vietnam is therefore very different from Lowell’s--even though both poets opposed the war. Just as Ginsberg’s poetry is based on the individual, so too his ideas on political change hinge upon individual agency. As Alex Houen asserts, “the strength of Ginsberg’s word lies in the way it turns poetic potential into an affective, aesthetic power” (360). The situation is different for Lowell since he is not sure that an individual can know enough to make the correct moral judgment. As Katherine

Wallingford concludes in *Robert Lowell's Language of the Self*, Lowell found “no absolutes or certainty, but tentative, day-by-day answers to the questions of our common existence” (141).

In discussing the broader social history of the late 1960s, I begin by contextualizing my claim that Ginsberg and Lowell wrote about the Vietnam protests that culminated during 1967 and 1968, the march on the Pentagon and the events at the Democratic National Convention, as poets uniquely positioned to do so due to their careers as personal poets. As I pointed out above, their differing views on the individual in society reveal key differences in how they critique American culture. After I introduce some important historical information, I discuss several poems in which each poet defines and explains his views on contemporary culture. Then I explore the poems they wrote regarding these specific events--in Washington, D.C. and Chicago. Though they did so with distinct perspectives, Lowell and Ginsberg presented their late 60s audiences with points of view that built upon their earlier highly personal poetics and, therefore, offered their audiences well articulated opinions opposing Vietnam.

Both poets emphasize that historical events should be seen as being part of a kind of perpetual flux. Their definitions of history in fact reveal this belief, and further reveal their differing individual perspectives. For Lowell, “history has to live with what is here” (“History” l. 1). For Ginsberg, the past is “all memory at once present time returning” (“Beginning” l. 39). Similar as these definitions might seem to be, Lowell’s suggests a terrible determinism whereas Ginsberg’s evokes possibilities of transcendence.

Their perspectives similarly recognize the importance of a long view of the past, so both poets resist parties or factions that cling to simplistic views of American politics specific to the late 60s. They are more interested in the personal effects of history on the individual than they are in social and cultural problems along partisan lines--though Lowell tends to see the individual as powerless while Ginsberg tends to see him as powerful. Neither really advocates political involvement along party lines. Rather, they advocate a rational view that might allow individuals to comprehend the challenges of social life with greater consciousness--though always as empiricists who must earn any available certainty by examining the random details of everyday life.

Norman Mailer took part in and wrote about the cultural events of the late 60s. He wrote about both the march on the Pentagon in 1967 and the Democratic National Convention in 1968. Like the poets, Mailer struggled to reconcile his individual experience with his larger need to articulate opposition to the Vietnam War for a wider audience. The subtitle of his nonfiction account of the 1967 Pentagon march, *The Armies of the Night*, is revealing. Mailer calls it "history as novel, the novel as history." As he says, it was as if "two very different rivers, one external, one subjective, had come together" (*Armies* 51). His view of the events suggests that an individual was both under tremendous pressure from external forces, but at the same time himself had the power to resist on his own. Mailer's view is somewhere in the middle of Lowell and Ginsberg's.

According to Mailer, the average American of the time was caught in a schizophrenic state heightened by government policy of the late 1960s. In his account of

the protests at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, Mailer explains that contemporary culture is psychologically sick:

If civilization has made modern man a natural schizophrenic (since he does not know at the very center of his deliberations where to trust his machines or the imperfect impressions still afforded by his distorted senses and the more or less tortured messages passed along by polluted water, overfertilized ground, poisonously irritating air) the average man is a suicide in relation to his schizophrenia. He will suppress his impulses and die eventually of cancer, overt madness, nicotine poisoning, heart attack, or the complications of a chest cold. (*Siege* 174).

Mailer suggests that people will not be able to adapt physically to the late 1960s dystopia that he describes. The suppression that Mailer cites as its cause is similar to the root causes for Ginsberg and Lowell's deeply personal poetry. Ginsberg, back in the late 40s and early 50s, had to shed the grotesque masks he saw everyone wearing as a result of repression; Lowell changed his course and wrote autobiographical poems, beginning in the mid-50s, in order to satisfy his need for honest personal confession.

Their major works of the 1950s, *Howl* and *Life Studies*, gave Ginsberg and Lowell the reputation of successfully expressing themselves in personal ways that also included cultural critiques. They set themselves apart during a time when, as Nick Halpern says, "poets, especially in the fifties, did not generally start their careers speaking at top volume" (53). They could be seen, in other words, as heroes since a certain way of reading their poems seemed to advocate the same personal liberty that many of those who

opposed the Vietnam War hoped to claim for themselves, as poems such as Ginsberg's "America" and Lowell's "Memories of West Street and Lepke" clearly show:

America I've given you all and now I'm nothing.  
America two dollars and twentyseven cents January 17, 1956.  
I can't stand my own mind.  
America when will we end the human war?  
Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.  
I don't feel good don't bother me.  
I won't write my poem till I'm in my right mind.  
America when will you be angelic? ("America" ll. 1-8)

These are the tranquilized *Fifties*,  
and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seedtime?  
I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,  
and made my manic statement,  
telling off the state and president, and then  
sat waiting sentence in the bull pen  
beside a Negro boy with curlicues  
of marijuana in his hair. ("Memories" ll. 12-19)

In these representative examples, the poets use a similar tactic. They both create somewhat dejected speakers who challenge the idea of American war policy. As is almost always the case, Ginsberg does so in a more inflammatory style and in a way that makes the challenge come from him specifically and undeniably. In contrast, Lowell's challenge is shifty, and he objectifies his experience by listing what he sees around him without further indicting himself.

Ginsberg writes a lot about how an individual must overcome social fear. He objects to fear and repression so often throughout his career that his objection to what Mailer describes as an individual's sick condition in contemporary society is relatively

easy to see. Lowell does not so clearly seem to overcome Mailer's dystopian view, at least not in the same straightforward way. While Lowell's poems are about his private life like Ginsberg, he, as the sufferer, never gets over the turmoil that these confessions cause him.

But Lowell responds directly to Mailer in a poem in *History* titled "Norman Mailer," making clear how well he understands the process of overcoming social schizophrenia and fear:

--he [Mailer] wears  
a wardrobe of two identical straight blue suits  
and two blue vests . . . to prove monotony,  
escape the many false faces I see as one. (ll. 11-14)

Lowell, short of declaring liberation in the face of social and cultural challenges of the time, views himself as outside of them. This opinion contradicts the one in "For Eugene McCarthy" ("The state lifts us, we cannot raise the state"). Lowell is confused about society and struggles with the problem of individual agency. His speakers are credible because of the ambiguity they express and because their vulnerability to confusion seems so authentic. Ginsberg loses credibility because he is so sure that he, and everyone else, can rise above social and political problems of the day in order to live more meaningfully. These two political stances are consistent with their earlier work.

## Lowell and Ginsberg's Place In and Influence On the Late 60s

Lowell and Ginsberg became involved in politics beyond merely writing poems. Together their poems and actions made one thing clear: they did not like politicians in general because they felt that politicians limit individual liberties. Lowell and Ginsberg were sometimes courted by political groups in the late 60s. Although it's easy to make the poets seem members of the American New Left, neither really fits. In 1968, Lowell came to see his friend, Eugene McCarthy, as unfit for political life ("I doubt if McCarthy was exactly politics," Lowell reflected in 1971, "it was his profession but he was a lost-cause man" [*Collected Prose* 282]), and he viewed Robert Kennedy as little more than a political shapeshifter. Ginsberg would give John F. Kennedy his vote only out of fear that Richard Nixon might win by one. Nor does either poet subscribe to a detached, conservative view that looks to the solid ground of law and order. Lowell gave up his early flirtation with philosophical conservatism when he left his New Critical elders behind, and Ginsberg did all he could to return to a tradition of Whitman before him and connect poetry with emerging, energetic youth movements. In fact Ginsberg represented part of growing countercultural movement against late 1960s American policy, making him a prime example of how the Cold War led individual Americans to speak out during this point in American history.

Allen Ginsberg influenced the cultural trends of the late 1960s from his early days as a beat poet. *Howl* connected the 1950s to the 1960s. Many scholars, historians, journalists, and cultural commentators of all kinds connect the beat poets with the cultural



movements of the 1960s. “They were the first to protest what they considered to be the blandness, conformity, and lack of serious social and cultural purpose in middle-class life in America,” writes David Halberstam (*Fifties* 295). Todd Gitlin, a major voice of the 1960s student-based protest movements, claims that when Ginsberg read “Howl” “for the first time in the American twentieth century, poetry read aloud became a public act that changed lives” (45). In “Youth Culture and Social Crises,” George Lipsitz states that “for many young people, the policeman on the corner was less a barrier to social change than the policeman inside their heads” (218). Having based his poetry on the removal of social barriers that cause fear and repression, it is no wonder that Ginsberg achieved prophetic status within the late 1960s cultural movements whose leaders came from the same Cold War mentality wherein “American common sense had been subverted and hollowed out by the radical political, cultural, and economic changes of the postwar era” (Farber 4).<sup>22</sup>

Others cite Ginsberg’s influence. Writing about the commune movement, which reached its height in the late-1960s, Timothy Miller says that the movement’s rapid growth showed the “gut reaction of a generation” (1) and believes that “the most important harbinger of what was to come was the emergence of the beat generation as the 1950s incarnation of the long Western tradition of bohemianism” (3). Robert M. Collins establishes a similar line of influence in terms of American material culture: “There has been a long line of antimaterialist thought in the United States, running from the Puritans through the transcendentalists to the beats of the 1950s and the counterculture hippies of the sixties” (25).

Lowell's place and influence are both less pervasive and less clear. He came on to the literary scene as an important figure in the 1940s, reinvented himself in the 1950s and then emerged as an important figure of the late 60s, but his influence is more strictly literary than Ginsberg's. Lowell momentarily seemed a public spokesman in the early 60s, when he achieved success with his poem "For the Union Dead" (1964). While Lowell's public persona is somewhat misleading since he actually deepened his intensely personal pursuits, critics often point to this moment in Lowell's career as evidence of his growing stature as a public poet. As Richard Poirier declared,

More than any contemporary writer, poet or novelist, Lowell has created the language, cool and violent all at once, of contemporary introspection. He is our truest historian. (11)

While Lowell occupies far less of the spotlight, so to speak, than Ginsberg, his place in American culture is based as much on what he did as part of social protests as on what he wrote in poems; he is similar to Ginsberg in this way. In 1945 Lowell wrote a letter to President Roosevelt refusing to serve in World War II, an act of protest for which he served time in a federal prison. (He writes about this experience in "Memories of West Street and Lepke.") As Steven Gould Axelrod says, "we know Lowell as a pacifist poet" (339). Lowell, encamped in a harrowing image of the past, and Ginsberg, spiritedly racing through his contemporary American "States," came together to critique American life, even in the same place, in the pressing political years of 1967-68.

## **Politics and Culture in Lowell: The Past as It Is and the Poet Mixed Up in Politics**

In 1972, Lowell wrote to Peter Taylor about *History*: “I expect it to be a school text--an entirely old-fashioned history only considering Wars, Heroes, women, and myself” (*Letters* 588-9). He must have been joking about the book as “school-text,” for he actually filtered the past through his own personal perspective. *History* (1973) includes a definition of history--in a lengthy book of hundreds of fourteen-liners--titled “History.” This poem frames his entire ambitious book, one that he had been revising--and publishing--over the past six years.<sup>23</sup> Lowell writes that “history has to live with what was here.” This definition is in line with his belief that individuals are products of their surroundings and can effect little change. He complicates this definition of history throughout the poem: he alludes to Genesis, he introduces a skeptic, then dismisses a “skeptic’s” view by implementing an audacious conceit that thereby reasserts and reemphasizes the Bible as key to our understanding of culture. He concludes the entire poem by making of himself a gruesome image of personified history.<sup>24</sup>

Lowell offers a definition of history in the first line of the poem but his definition quickly becomes about writing:

History has to live with what was here,  
clutching and close to fumbling all we had--  
it is so dull and gruesome how we die,  
unlike writing, life never finishes. (ll. 1-4)

The past is a frustrating subject for Lowell. Though he can only grapple with history in a “clutching” and “fumbling” way, this is his only choice outside of avoiding it.

Unfortunately, according to Lowell's definition, an individual's actual death ironically perpetuates the "dull" death and prolongs or even eternalizes an incomplete act that refuses closure, much like the way he sees his body of work as an "open coffin" in "Reading Myself" (*History* 184). This reveals, especially when he writes about contemporary events, his opinion that an individual's actions lack meaning.

Lowell emphasizes that an individual cannot really enact social change. As Lowell's "History" continues, he focuses on death and further ruminates upon life's meaninglessness by alluding to Abel's death in Genesis. The story of Abel demonstrates that the possibility of murder is always present and often misunderstood. This leads Lowell to introduce and criticize the "skeptic." This representative skeptic insufficiently understands Abel because he thinks him somehow exceptional whereas Lowell has just explained how ordinary the biblical figure is because death is so near:

Abel was finished; death is not remote,  
a flash-in-the-pan electrifies the skeptic,  
his cows crowding like skulls against high-voltage wire,  
his baby crying all night like a new machine. (ll. 5-8)

Lowell opposes his own reading of Genesis to the skeptic's. By defining the past as "living with what was here" and individual death as "dull and gruesome" he lays claim to a world in which life and death do not seem important events. This is to be expected of Lowell, whose torment lies in the random details of everyday experience.

Since "Abel was finished," Lowell says that "death is not remote"; Lowell forces the reader to wonder whether, on one hand, he advocates suffering at the hands of

something beyond the individual or, on the other, he is confessing his own private suffering. Lowell recognizes the seeming paradox that Abel represents as a completed act of life because his existence is literary, part of the mythology of Genesis. From Lowell's perspective, Abel provides an allegory of death that suggests one of life's basic patterns (jealousy and revenge) and thereby carries the benefit of finality.

Paul Mariani calls *History* Lowell's "epic poem about evil in the modern world" (296). The skeptic in "History" is shocked by what he sees of Abel's "flash-in-the-pan" death. Behind the skeptic are "cows" who, "like skulls," crowd and push onto an electric fence; also behind the skeptic is the baby crying mechanically all night. Either dumbed down or lacking humanity, the skeptic's view represents a shocked perspective based on a few vivid examples, portrayed in a literary fashion. The skeptic does not understand Lowell's view of history as living with "what was here" and instead perceives history as an external act to be engaged as entertainment.

Lowell's belief about the past is that in order to understand history it must not merely be watched but must be lived.<sup>25</sup> This seems easy enough, but everyday experience, as I argued in Chapter 2, overwhelms Lowell. He does not "release the particulars," so to speak, as Ginsberg does. The skeptic, then, who looks at history as literature, has the effect of making somewhat of a hero out of Lowell's speaker. This is because Lowell, who conflates the details of his past perspectives with a pervasive sense of irredeemable suffering, must stand alone at the end of the poem to discover true meaning on his own:

As in our Bibles, white-faced, predatory,  
the beautiful, mist-drunken hunter's moon ascends--  
a child would give it a face: two holes, two holes,  
my eyes, my mouth, between them a skull's no-nose--  
O there's a terrifying innocence in my face  
drenched with the silver salvage of the mornfrost. (ll. 9-14)

Lowell's descriptive, romantic scene from the past makes him seem, for a moment, to be in naive pursuit of the past. Lowell interjects a child's view of the Bible's ominous moon, and he does so in order to give himself, as the speaker of the poem, a "terrifying innocence." The "mist-drunken hunter's moon" reinforces Lowell's earlier claim that "death is not remote."<sup>26</sup>

This is how Lowell conjures a hero to end "History" that is partly himself and partly the kind of literary hero found in "finished" books. He becomes a figure of "terrifying innocence" whose face is "drenched with the silver salvage of the mornfrost." Lowell, who must live history--who must, in other words, include himself in all of history--creates another tormenting impossibility for himself. This is what he was thinking about culture and the past as he critiqued late 60s American culture. The reader of "History" is left with the sense that although Lowell does not believe events can ever truly be relayed, the past nonetheless remains alive and shapes the present in identifiable ways.

Many of Lowell's speakers are convinced that politics is nearly incomprehensible and that thinking about it takes its toll on the individual. In "Election Night" (*History* 178), this speaker represents another confused version of how Lowell's tragic and

hopeless persona relates to politics. First, his manner of dress, which is meant to signify despair, goes unappreciated:

today I wore my blue knitted tie to class.  
No one understood that blue meant black. . . . (ll. 3-4)

Then, his daughter calls him, annoyed by his decision not to vote in the 1968 Presidential election:

My daughter telephones me from New York,  
she talks *New Statesman*, "Then you are a cop-out. Isn't  
not voting Humphrey a vote for Nixon and Wallace?"  
And I, "Not voting Nixon is my vote for Humphrey." (ll. 5-8)

Lowell momentarily shrugs off the whole thing: "It's funny-awkward; I don't come off too well," he writes. But he is not really taking the events lightly, and he concludes with a powerful statement about the politically defeated in America:

"You mustn't tease me, they clubbed McCarthy's pressroom."  
*We must rouse our broken forces and save the country:*  
I even said this in public. The beaten player  
opens his wounds and hungers for the blood-feud  
hidden like contraband and loved like whiskey. (ll. 10-14)

Lowell distances himself from the "beaten player," speaking about him in the third person. But in such a personal context--the private conversation with his daughter, the behind-the-scenes detail of the "pressroom"--the "beaten player" reveals how much Lowell both empathizes with and represents the growing cultural malaise of the late 60s.

In the case of the “beaten player,” Lowell rationalizes violence as a disturbing repercussion of American democracy.

In “After the Election: From Frank Parker’s Loft” (*History* 179), Lowell reflects on his hometown, Boston, then lets his thoughts drift across the entire nation and concludes with a devastating thought that further expresses how disconnected he believes American politicians have become from ordinary citizens:

We remember watching old Marshal Joffre or Foche  
chauffeured in Roman triumph, though French, through Boston--  
the same small, pawky streets, the Back Bay station,  
though most of Boston’s now a builders’ dream,  
white, unspoiled and blank. Here nothing has slid  
since 1925. The Prudential Building  
that saved so many incomes, here saves nothing.  
From your window we see the *Thread and Needle Shoppe*,  
where we stole a bad fifteen-dollar microscope,  
and failed to make them pay back fifteen dollars. . . .  
On the starry thruways headlights twinkle  
from Portland, Maine to Portland, Oregon.  
Nobody has won, nobody has lost;  
will the election-winners ever pay us back?

The election is bogus, citizens remain separated from their government, and power situated at the top of a hierarchical system inevitably rules the people. Similar to his rationalization of violence that concludes “Election Night,” Lowell distinctly separates the populace from the governing elite.

But Lowell also counterpoises these harsh conclusions. In “Ocean” (*History* 176), he explains that politicians have as little sense about what to do as everyone else and



therefore deserve no disproportionate censure. Lowell therefore humanizes the stark portrayals of politicians found in other poems. "Ocean" is a reflection on the awesome power of water and the distinct similarities between water and humanity--specifically the ocean and marriage. The ocean's color "must adulterate, / sway, swelter" (ll. 1-2) because the "earth stands firm and not the sea" (l. 2).

We cannot stay alive without the ocean;  
I think all marriages are like the ocean:  
one part oxygen mates two parts hydrogen,  
as if the formula existed everywhere  
in us, as in the numinous Parnassus of chemistry. (ll. 6-10)

After his breezy and humorous lines about marriage, Lowell inserts a politician. As Lowell concludes "Ocean," the politician, the speaker, and the reader join in their need for forgiveness:

The statesman mutters, "The problems of politics  
are nothing. . . ." He was thinking of his marriage--  
uncontrollable, law-ravaged like the ocean . . . God is  
H<sub>2</sub>O Who must forgive us for having lived. (ll. 11-14)

How are we to make judgments, Lowell forces the reader to ask, when doing so requires knowledge that mankind cannot access? But even with his inability to make sense of politics, Lowell finds himself in the middle of a major political protest.

In 1967, Robert Lowell joined a group of prominent intellectuals for a march on the Pentagon to protest the Vietnam War. The group would back up a pledge to aid youths

who resisted the draft. Lowell joined Norman Mailer, Dwight Macdonald, Paul Goodman, Noam Chomsky, and Dr. Spock in October, 1967 (Mariani 353). (Allen Ginsberg was in Europe at the time, but his poetry played a role in the Pentagon march.<sup>27</sup>)

Lowell's defiant act expressed his disillusionment with President Lyndon Johnson and his administration's war policies. In 1965, Lowell had written a letter to Johnson declining an invitation to be part of a gathering of artists at the White House. In the letter, published in the *New York Times* on June 3, Lowell conceded that he was "very enthusiastic" about LBJ's "domestic legislation and intentions." However, he "could only follow our present foreign policy with the greatest dismay and distrust." Other potential problems with governmental policy contributed to Lowell's decision:

We are in danger of imperceptibly becoming an explosive and suddenly chauvinistic nation, and may even be drifting on our way to the last nuclear ruin. I know it is hard for the responsible man to act; it is also painful for the private and irresolute man to dare criticism. At this anguished, delicate and perhaps determining moment, I feel I am serving you and our country best by not taking part in the White House Festival of the Arts. (*Collected Prose* 371)

Lowell's call to action, heightened by his sense that America was at a critical juncture, led him to the Pentagon march in 1967. There he could, as Paul Mariani has said, capture a "palimpsest of American history" (354).

By 1967, "the real issue for Lowell was Vietnam" (Hamilton 362). But Lowell was a poet, not a revolutionary, and, for the most part, he limits the degree to which he comments on Vietnam by writing about it in relation to his personal life. His poems about

the 1967 march on the Pentagon come across as deeply intimate portraits of the “irresolute man” who “dares criticism” at this “perhaps defining moment,” to use the language from his letter to LBJ in 1965. They are also personal poems about events that take on mythic importance, as in “History.” Lowell wrote two poems included in *History* about the Pentagon march, “The March 1” and “The March 2.” In his first and second “March” poems, Lowell presents both a wide panorama as well as an intimate view of the march on the Pentagon. In this personal, intimate view, Lowell diminishes the heroism of the protesters, including himself, who ultimately “flees” at the end of the “March” sequence.

When Lowell writes about meeting the opposing force of the U.S. Military, which he refers to as the “other army,” he equates the marching protesters with the new Union troops at the first battle of Bull Run. As the first major battle of the Civil War, Bull Run was a rout that ended in a Union retreat all the way to Washington (where Lowell himself would “flee” to end the “March” poems.) The “green army” and the “other army” with their “green new steel helmets” fight over something that Lowell has a difficult time defining.<sup>28</sup>

Lowell begins “The March 1” with a panoramic view. His speaker appears in a drastic situation, feeling overwhelmed even before the march has begun. He invokes images of national pride and displays them under an ominous, sentimental description that establishes the mood of the speaker, and the mood of many protesters and U.S. military alike, where the monuments, and by extension American history, seem “too

white,” “too tall,” and “too long.” The sky is “withering” amidst the emotional political speeches:

Under the too white marmoreal Lincoln Memorial,  
the too tall marmoreal Washington Obelisk,  
gazing into the too long reflecting pool  
the reddish trees, the withering autumn sky,  
the remorseless, amplified harangues for peace-- (ll. 1-5)

Lincoln and Washington, the two great patriotic icons, stand side-by-side above a citizen, the speaker of the poem, who attempts to bring together the ideas of original American independence and freedom with the Civil War’s bloody battle over the Confederacy’s secession. In this confusing situation, the protests seem mere “remorseless, amplified harangues” in an autumn suggestive of the apocalypse with its reddish trees and withering sky.

After labeling the protesters as “remorseless,” Lowell introduces his wearied self.

As the poet and intellectual, he is pathetic and out of place:

the remorseless, amplified harangues for peace--  
lovely to lock arms, to march absurdly locked  
(unlocking to keep my wet glasses from slipping)  
to see the cigarette match quaking in my fingers,  
then to step off like green army recruits (ll. 5-9)

Lowell’s self-doubt and cynicism mark the occasion. It is “lovely to lock arms” in a march of solidarity against the Vietnam War draft, but the march is also “absurd.”

Lowell’s speaker is an ineffectual soldier in this green army (soft and unready for battle,

just like the 18-19 year olds whose conscription Lowell is there to protest). He is both physically and mentally unfit.

No matter, Lowell shows, for the march continues even though its soldiers are not prepared to meet the “other army” waiting for them. According to Lowell, they are like the first Union soldiers of the Civil War:

like green Union Army recruits  
for the first Bull Run, sped by photographers,  
the notables, the girls . . . fear, glory, chaos, rout . . . (ll. 9-11)

In these lines, Lowell establishes a difference between this protest march and the Civil War. He mixes politics and war with the popular media. The protesters are “sped by photographers / the notables, the girls.” The girls will become one of the most harrowing facts of the march to come in the dark night of the protest--they will be beaten disproportionately to the men.

Lowell summarizes the event from the perspective of the marchers as “fear, glory, chaos, rout” as the poem moves toward closure and leaves the reader to face the U.S. military, waiting nervously just like the marchers:

our green army staggered out on the miles-long green fields,  
met by the other army, the Martian, the ape, the hero,  
his new-fangled rifle, his green new steel helmet. (ll. 12-14)

In an attempt to define his place in the march, Lowell brings the reader along with him to the moment of confrontation, when the limited violence will begin. “The March 1” ends

dramatically with Lowell face-to-face with the U.S. military outside of the Pentagon. The real violence would occur far from Lowell and some time later at the Pentagon itself: members of youth protest groups tried to invade the Pentagon when they found an unguarded entrance and were repelled, some beaten badly. After dark, when the protest permits expired, small pockets of violence arose throughout the night when protesters refused to move or taunted policemen.

Instead of offering polarizing opinions about the right and the left, the hawks and the peaceniks, Lowell's poem requires a stunned presence, waiting for events to unfold at a moment of historical flux. In one way, the poem seems a formal trick: create a labyrinth out of interesting language and fascinating details and drop the reader off in its bewildering position. In another way, since its very form leaves some intellectual elbow room for the reader, it seems a valuable commentary on the ambivalent state of national politics.

Regardless, "The March 2" picks up at this dramatic moment. As the two armies meet, Lowell describes his small band of older men protesting together with other "sadly / unfit" marchers:

Where two or three were flung together, or fifty,  
mostly white-haired, or bald, or women . . . sadly  
unfit to follow their dream (ll. 1-3)

The old men, Lowell and the other "notables," find themselves in the ranks with women. But what, really, is the dream that they could have followed further if they had greater

strength? Lowell continues to waffle and waver in this odd world of protest as he emphasizes the powerlessness of words:

I sat in the sunset  
shade of our Bastille, the Pentagon,  
nursing leg- and arch-cramps, my cowardly,  
foolhardy heart; and heard, alas, more speeches,  
though the words took heart now to show how weak  
we were, and right. An MP sergeant kept  
repeating, "March slowly through them. Don't even brush  
anyone sitting down." (ll. 3-10)

Lowell portrays himself non-heroically in the poem. Now, sitting and "nursing" his sore legs and feet, the pathetic speaker wants no more speeches. Even though the words being spoken are "right," they are also "weak." So, after the sergeant instructs his men to avoid contact, what really happens is different, according to Lowell. The other army, with their "green steel heads," ultimately tramples the seated protesters:

They tiptoed through us  
in single file, and then their second wave  
trampled us flat and back. (ll. 10-12)

The transition from weak words to military violence happens so quickly that Lowell does not even break the two events into separate lines or sentences. As the rout ensues (he defined the sequence of events in "The March 1" as "fear, glory, chaos, rout"), Lowell ends the poem with a toast to both sides, with a final salute reserved for the soldier who helped him get up and escape:

Health to those who held,  
health to the green steel head . . . to your kind hands  
that helped me stagger to my feet, and flee. (ll. 12-14)

The “March” poems end ambiguously. Lowell’s salute goes out to both green armies, the new soldiers who are like the first Union recruits of the Civil War and the green helmets. Most importantly, his thanks go out to an anonymous soldier who helps him “flee.” As he “flees”--presumably back into the “writing” that is so different from real “life” (as defined by his poem “History”)--he is like the Union soldiers routed at the beginning of the Civil War.

Back in 1945, Randall Jarrell had written that Lowell had the ability to use ambiguity better than anyone, arguing that “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket” was “the best poem Lowell had ever written, the ending so subtle and right it beat even William Empson at his own game of complex ambiguities” (Mariani 123). The ambiguous ending of “The March 2” demonstrates two things: 1) Lowell committed himself to formal ambiguity early on, and 2) he believes that a state of ambiguity most aptly reflects what was happening between two opposing forces--neither of which he completely understood--during the late 60s. What he creates unambiguously between the two, though, is a pathetic portrait of himself, the absurd poet-hero both in and out of place in the politics of his time.



## Politics and Culture in Ginsberg: The Past as “All Memory at Once” and the Poet

### Who Helps Society

Ginsberg’s *Fall of America* starts with “Beginning of a Poem of These States.” The poem is subtitled, “Memento.” He connects *Fall of America* to his previous book, *Planet News*, as part of a larger work, “Poems of These States.”<sup>29</sup> His view of the past resists the nihilism that torments Lowell into thinking that his actions in the late 60s are politically ineffectual. Ginsberg above all values the individual, and as a result, he regards the past as memory to be controlled and tempered through human agency.

In “Beginning of a Poem of These States,” he writes “All memory at once present time returning,” then packs the rest of the line with images from present day-America:

All memory at once present time returning, vast dry forests afire in California, U.S. paratroopers attacking guerillas in Vietnam mountains, over porcelain-white road hump the tranquil azure of a vast lake. (l. 38)

While Ginsberg conjures the immediate present in a style that mimics the speed in which the details surround him, he attempts something even more drastic in another poem: he tries to validate his understanding of the past as memory by writing with the necessary pace to actually *be* history.<sup>30</sup> In other words, Ginsberg writes with the pace as to recreate the way he perceives that human beings process information.

Ginsberg attempts to present the past, “History,” concretely in “Returning North of the Vortex.” In the following stanza, he provides no connections between the poem’s various images and details:

This is History: Iowa's Finest Comics:  
Sunday, Rex Morgan M.D. in snowstorm,  
Mustachio'd villain cruel eyed  
with long European hair  
doubletalking the Doc  
*"Meanwhile, under the influence of LSD  
Veronica races through the fields  
in an acute panic" --*  
Author Dal Curtis

In a violet box her big tits fall on snowy ground.  
Grey ice floating down Missouri, sunset into Omaha  
Bishop Buffets, German Chocolate, wall to wall carpet  
Om A Hah, Om Ah Hum  
*"The land summoned them and they loved it"* cut in granite  
Post Office Intel, Walt Disney  
playing at State week after his death.  
Table service, fireplace, armchairs,  
homeostasis in Omaha. (ll. 46-63)

Here Ginsberg rather confusingly presents various images and quotations simultaneously.

This stanza can be seen as an example of history, one manufactured by Ginsberg to show the limits of writing about history for an audience. A stanza like this, at this pace, gets at the reality of history by showing how rapidly the past takes shape in an individual's consciousness, but *The Fall of America* as a whole does not settle for such an idiosyncratic view of events. As he joins the protests of the late 60s, then writes about them, he finds himself once again creating a persona liberated from social problems.

In "A Vow," written in 1966 (*The Fall of America* 46), Ginsberg reminds his readers about his commitment to liberating America from governmental oppression. He begins with his vow, "I will haunt these States [...] with the Green Light of common

law” (ll. 1, 9), suggesting the wide appeal of his “Common Sense, Common Law, common tenderness / & common tranquility” (ll. 10-11). Ginsberg engages his reader as potential participant in this vow: he understands how all might overcome governmental and corporate problems that limit individual freedom. His “common tranquility” is

our means in America to control the money munching  
war machine, bright lit industry  
everywhere digesting forests & excreting soft pyramids  
of newsprint, Redwood and Ponderosa patriarchs  
silent in Meditation murdered & regurgitated as smoke,  
sawdust, screaming ceilings of Soap Opera  
thick dead Lifes, slick Advertisements  
for Gubernatorial big guns  
burping Napalm on palm rice tropic greenery. (ll. 11-19)

Ginsberg portrays himself as someone who can help citizens who want to get back the freedom that has been taken away:

I’ll haunt these States all year  
gazing bleakly out train windows, blue airfield  
red TV network on evening plains,  
decoding radar Provincial editorial paper message,  
deciphering Iron Pipe laborers’ curses as  
clanging hammers they raise steamshovel claws  
over Puerto Rican agony lawyers’ screams in slums. (ll. 31-37)

Another aspect of Ginsberg’s liberating persona in *The Fall of America* is his confidence in indicting governments and corporations. In “War Profit Litany” (72), he claims that his book of poems serves as a record of “companies that have made money from the war” (l. 1).

These are the Corporations who have profited by merchandising skinburning  
phosphorus or shells fragmented to thousands of fleshpiercing needles  
and here listed money millions gained by each combine for manufacture  
and here are gains numbered, index'd swelling a decade, set in order,  
here named Fathers in office in these industries, telephones directing  
finance,  
names of directors, makers of fates, and the names of the stockholders of these  
destined Aggregates (ll. 3-7)

All of these “names,” listed throughout his volume, “further this poem of these States” (l. 17). In *The Fall of America*, Ginsberg’s appeal remains the desire for liberation. He offers it in the late 60s and early 70s not only through his own story of overcoming social fear associated with his homosexuality, but also by articulating his outraged point of view on American politics. Understanding the reality of the Vietnam War effort--particularly as it relates to the capitalistic organization of American society--is essential. Embracing and communicating this near-prophetic persona, Ginsberg arrived at a massive and highly anticipated Vietnam War protest.

In 1968, Allen Ginsberg tentatively decided to stick to a commitment he made to several prominent figures of the Vietnam protest movement. In his recent history of the beat generation, Bill Morgan explains that

Ginsberg, who had just turned forty in 1966, became a leader of nearly every cause associated with the youth movement. Political issues dominated much of his time, time that he had previously devoted to poetry. The more prominent he became as a social activist, the less time he had for literary creativity.  
(*Typewriter* 218)

Morgan correctly points to Ginsberg's near-prophetic status for the youth movement, but his explanation of Ginsberg during this time is misleading. Indeed, for Ginsberg, the writing of poetry and the writing of political history were often one.

Ginsberg felt compelled to combine literature and politics--increasingly so in the tumultuous year of 1968. A letter to Gary Snyder on July 8, 1968, and a poem written about three weeks before on June 19, 1968, called "Crossing Nation" (*Fall of America* 90) show just how much contemporary culture was becoming part of contemporary poetry. Ginsberg's letter describes his feelings about American society in the context of his tentative affiliation with Jerry Rubin, Abbey Hoffman, and the Youth International Party, the "Yippies," that would culminate with the protests and violence at the Democratic National Convention:

Local (U.S.A.) sociopolitics confusing. This yippie hippie be-in shot in Chicago has been a big drag since undercurrents of violence everywhere (state and street Black Mask etc.) make peaceful gestures seem silly. Yippie organization's in wrong hands sort of. Would like to get out or redirect it to some kind of propositional new nation confabulation, but I don't have time. (*Letters* 344)

Ginsberg was dismayed with politics, but his tone fails to give a true notion of his importance to the youth movement. Ginsberg wanted to fuse poetry with politics. For him, politics offered an opportunity to extend his beliefs about overcoming social impediments to individual freedom. A few weeks before writing his letter to Snyder, Ginsberg wrote a poem about driving across the country called "Crossing Nation." The poem addresses the theme of America's supposed "fall." "Crossing Nation" moves

quickly down the page, and more than in “Beginning of a Poem of These States,” in which he defines history and describes Northwest America, “Crossing Nation” shows how steeped in political turmoil Ginsberg’s poems have become:

Under silver wing  
San Francisco’s towers sprouting  
thru thin gas clouds (ll. 1-3)

The clouds are gas, the buildings sprout, and, as the poem proceeds, Ginsberg lists several countercultural figures who have recently been arrested or subjected to violence: Timothy Leary, Jerry Rubin, Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), Dr. Spock, and Eldridge Cleaver.

Jerry Rubin arrested! Beaten, jailed,  
coccyx broken --  
Leary out of action -- “a public menace . . .  
persons of tender years . . . immature  
judgment . . . psychiatric examination . . .”  
i.e. Shut up or Else Loonybin or Slam

Leroi on bum gun rap, \$7,000  
lawyer fees, years’ negotiations --  
SPOCK GUILTY headlined temporary, Joan Baez’  
paramour husband Dave Harris to Gaol  
Dylan silent on politics, & safe --  
having a baby, a man --  
Cleaver shot at, jail’d, maddened, parole revoked,  
Vietnam War flesh-heap grows higher  
blood splashing down the mountains of bodies  
on to Cholon’s sidewalks -- (ll. 15-30)

Ginsberg draws attention to the government's tactics in singling out these countercultural figures in order to show the overriding problem: the Vietnam War. He returns to his belief that American governmental policy stands in the way of individual happiness--and all, during the late 60s, because of the war.

Ginsberg went to the Democratic convention in 1968 and wrote about the experience in *The Fall of America* in two poems titled "Going to Chicago" and "Grant Park: August 28, 1968." Ginsberg's Chicago poems dramatize the poet's meditative arrival and emphasize spiritual alternatives to the two opposing sides, both encamped in fear, that confront each other, violently. Ginsberg offers an angelic or edenic aspect of humanity as a possible alternative, a strategy aiming to indict Humphrey, Johnson's Vice President. Since in an edenic world rulers are not necessary, Ginsberg suggests that politicians and the government create a police state.<sup>31</sup>

In "Going to Chicago," Ginsberg introduces himself as the speaker on his way to Chicago, flying high above the city before the protests will begin. Up in the air, he reflects on death and wonders if his own will come violently or naturally. He tries to overcome his fears by transcending the historical moment:

22,000 feet over Hazed square Vegetable planet Floor  
Approaching Chicago to Die or flying over Earth another 40 years  
to die--Indifferent, and Afraid, that the bone-shattering bullet  
be the same as the vast evaporation-of-phenomena Cancer  
Come true in an old man's bed. Or Historic  
Fire-Heaven Descending 22,000 years End th' Atomic Aeon (ll. 1-6)

The speaker of "Going to Chicago" feels afraid. Ginsberg attempts to remain indifferent to his own time of death. But fear of the "bullet," a legitimate fear in 1968 with the recent assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy as well as the shooting of Andy Warhol, momentarily overpowers Ginsberg.<sup>32</sup>

As "Going to Chicago" continues, Ginsberg reflects on the situation with a new fear, that the angelic side of humanity, located in his "heart," might be tainted. But the voice of an "Angel King" assuages his fear, and as the poet quotes this angelic voice he is able to overcome his sense of foreboding:

The Lake's blue again, Sky's the same baby, tho' papers & Noses  
rumor tar spread through the Natural Universe'll make Angel's feet sticky.  
I heard the Angel King's voice, a bodiless tuneful teenager  
Eternal in my own heart saying "Trust the Purest Joy --  
Democratic Anger is an Illusion, Democratic Joy is God  
Our Father is baby blue, the original face you see Sees You --" (ll. 7-12)

As is often the case with Ginsberg, something "original" can be found behind the world of appearances. Here, the Angel King explains the illusory nature of anger, appearing in a youthful form like Lao Tsu's child-like sage. Since a truer voice emerges from inside of Ginsberg, the poet has no need to justify it; instead, the voice transcends the two poles of violence--protesters and police--whose violent energy is about to be released in Chicago:

How, thru Conventional Police & Revolutionary Fury  
Remember the Helpless order the Police Armed to protect,  
The Helpless Freedom the Revolutionary Conspired to honor --  
I am the Angel King sang the Angel King  
as mobs in Amphitheaters, Streets, Colosseums Parks and offices



Scream in despair over Meat and Metal Microphone (ll. 13-18)

Ginsberg reduces both sides to “mobs” who, without the spiritual energy that the poet invokes, merely “scream in despair.” Behind both groups, the police and the revolutionaries, lies a “helpless” group that has been forgotten.

“Grant Park: August 28, 1968” concerns the protests at the Democratic convention. Ginsberg was tear-gassed several times and spent the weekend worried about his physical safety, roaming around, surfacing to lead peaceful demonstrations meant to de-escalate violence. In “Grant Park,” he describes two groups of people present in Chicago: vibrant young people and soldiers. In the first stanza, each group quietly appears:

Green air, children sat under trees with the old,  
bodies bare, eyes open to eyes under the hotel wall,  
the ring of Brown-clothed bodies armed  
but silent at ease leaned on their rifles -- (ll. 1-4)

The earth seems calm and the participants exhausted. But the second stanza explodes with the sounds that surround these oppositional groups: “Harsh sound of mikrophones, helicopter roar --” (l. 5) No longer is there “green air”; now the people experience the “late sunlight” (l. 9). Ginsberg’s speaker begins the final stanza by calling the whole thing a “miserable picnic.” He seems so worn down that he is uncertain how to gauge the protest. It is, on one hand, the “Garden of Eden,” peaceful as his first stanza. On the other, it is a “Police State,” raucous with the images of the second stanza. As he ponders

the situation, he begins to focus on the looming hotel where the Democratic politicians are staying:

Miserable picnic, Police State or Garden of Eden?  
In the building walled against the sky  
magicians exchange images, Money vote  
and handshakes -- (ll. 9-12)

And as he thinks of the crooked “money vote / and handshakes,” he turns his attention to the newly nominated Democratic candidate, Hubert Humphrey. To end the poem, Ginsberg concocts an invented scenario in which the Vice President is seen privately in his hotel room and, as Ginsberg returns to his question of Police State or Garden of Eden, decides that the Edenic vision is not possible in a world of such leaders:

The teargas drifted up to the Vice  
President naked in the bathroom  
--naked on the toilet taking a shit weeping?  
Who wants to be President of the  
Garden of Eden? (ll. 13-17)

Ginsberg’s conclusion about the late 60s is riddled with idealistic possibilities and imaginative solutions, but, like Lowell, he relates a simple political message throughout, the same one that has had to be told time and time again since the revolutionary generation itself: under the dark charade of politics lies real history. Told from a momentary, individual perspective, the actual truth might exist, but it can never be verified except on the personal level to which these poets have committed themselves.

They engage in larger social questions by way of a set of quasi-certainties that suggest the possibility of a rational politics in line with the narratives they relate about their own freedom--whether tortured or liberating. Their poems about Vietnam in the late 60s and early 70s express a part of the saga in the American search for a true, usable past that is both personally verifiable and socially enlightened. They made their lives the source of their poetry. The scouring of the self that signifies their artistic process can be seen as part of their social critique.

## CHAPTER VI

EPILOGUE -- “AN IMPOSSIBLE LOVE”: FEBRUARY 23, 1977



Allen Ginsberg and Robert Lowell at St. Mark's Church, New York City, February 23, 1977--their only shared reading. Photo by Martin Werchselblatt. Permission granted by Peter Hale, Allen Ginsberg Estate.

Robert Lowell and Allen Ginsberg, the two dominant figures of postwar American poetry, finally shared the stage, on February 23, 1977, in New York City. Ginsberg was “pleased” to give the joint reading at St. Mark’s. He had long thought of Lowell as his leading rival in American poetry, and this reading gave him a “means of bridging the gap between the academics and the open-form poets” (Schumacher 618). Ginsberg felt that “to read with one of America’s literary legends was another high point [...] as he had respected Lowell’s work for decades” (Morgan 523). He explained how the reading worked for him:

What this means is that people won’t be able to attack me so easy anymore because I’m, in a sense, protected by his regard. If he’s willing to read on the same platform with me and say I wrote a masterpiece, it means I can’t be considered a barbarian jerk. Which is what I’ve been having to listen to year after year. (qtd in Schumacher 618)

Lowell followed suit when he took the stage with a prepared comment: a recent *New York Times* article claimed that he and Ginsberg were “opposite ends of the spectrum,” and Lowell quipped that the two poets actually represented “opposite ends of William Carlos Williams” (qtd in Axelrod 4).

Regardless of the promise this moment held for American literary history, Lowell and Ginsberg gave a tame, even subdued reading. Neither poet was well. Ginsberg, who had come down with the flu, “didn’t read his best” (Morgan 523). Lowell, also sick and recently out of the hospital, confided to the audience that he suffered from “water in the lungs” (Hamilton 459). The reading may have disappointed the audience, turning out to

be little more than the exhausted, formal end to a productive rivalry. As Ian Hamilton wrote, “all and all the evening sealed an amiable truce between the Palefaces and the Redskins, the cooked and the raw” (460). But even the intrigue of a “truce” may have been overstated, for as Michael Schumacher suggests, Ginsberg “did not need an association with Robert Lowell to legitimize or protect him” (618). Then again, Bill Morgan states that in 1977 Lowell’s opinion of Ginsberg and the beat poets had not changed much from his initial 1950s impression and therefore claims that the beat poet’s reading with Lowell was truly important for him (523).

This evening would have passed without mention in literary history--except for, I would assume, an occasional note about how ordinary and disappointing the whole thing was--and would serve as no more than a footnote to my own work on Lowell and Ginsberg. But a third party made the night truly memorable, causing enough sensation to make the papers and raising questions that entered the scholarship. Looming in the audience, with his wife and child, was Gregory Corso, the *enfant terrible* of the postwar generation. He lived up to his reputation by interrupting the reading with plenty of decorum-breaking static. “Corso was there to liven things up, and he heckled Lowell unmercifully until he was silenced by the other members of the audience. Allen, who saw that Gregory was drunk again as usual, suggested he leave” (Morgan 523).

Gregory Corso shouted out, “What are you doing Allen? Lowell is the murderer of poetry!” (Powers 1). Next, Corso, who knew Lowell’s poetry well, interrupted Lowell

as he finished reading one of his poems. Corso raised his voice to point out an omission on Lowell's part: "Robert, you left out that great line about paranoid!"

"Point taken," Lowell answered. He continued talking about "Ulysses and Circe": "It's wonderful to write about a myth especially if what you write isn't wholly about yourself."

"You're treating us like a classroom," the young man [Corso] now called.

"That's nice," said Lowell, "because I am a teacher." He continued reading, but not for long.

"Please don't talk to me while I'm trying to read," Lowell begged, peering over his glasses at the young man.

"Near the end of 'Ulysses and Circe' I believe when the old hero and Penelope were sitting down naked at table . . ." "I'll applaud that," the young hero shouted, shuttling his baby to his wife.

Several called shut up.

"Don't tell me to shut up," the young man said.

"Lord, this is not good," Lowell muttered, and the mike caught mild consternation in his voice.

Looking like an extremely good-natured if brown-bearded Santa Claus, Allen Ginsberg said, "Perhaps we should all tell him to shut up."

The crowd yelled: "Shut up."

The baby cried.

"It was quiet," the father said. "It *woke* the baby."

Lowell said, "We're having a happening."

The baby cried, but not very hard.

"My son is happy, my son is laughing," the father said. Someone persuaded the little family to leave. First Dad held his boots up to an amused and friendly crowd. He needed time to put them back on.

(*Soho Weekly News* qtd in Hamilton 459-60)

As irritating as Corso's behavior was, he nevertheless felt that something serious was at stake during this meeting of the two poets. Known for his outbursts and for his "trickster" role as a poet, he took it upon himself to disrupt the congenial narrative that this reading offered. Boots off and ever the vagabond, he made certain that poetry should never be

reduced to such an easy-going affair. Lowell, pontificating about the lines between the personal and the impersonal, drew scorn from Corso, whose poetic method included the suppression of rationality. For Corso, poetry meant living poetically, perhaps wildly, and certainly not staging the truce he felt he was witnessing. He created tension between them because that very tension better reflected the complicated nature of American poetry. Corso could not ruin the evening, though. As the *Soho Weekly* reported, “when Lowell finished ‘Ulysses and Circe’ he was given a long standing ovation.” “Afterwards scores of young people crowded round him and Allen Ginsberg.”

Corso’s outburst, as ill-mannered as it was, somehow makes sense. The only joint reading between Lowell and Ginsberg should have been rife with the problems that characterized their initial meeting in 1959. Coincidentally, Corso was there with Ginsberg to meet Lowell back then. What’s more, he was actually the first person to comment on the two poets in tandem: years ago, before his famous outburst and before he met Lowell with Ginsberg, Corso had written about this potential meeting between Lowell and Ginsberg. In a letter in 1958, he blames the world for the distance they put between these two poets who, Corso claims, connected with and communicated the most important human feelings, i.e., had “that soul”:

I hope this doesn’t sound bitter, it isn’t meant to. Nor have I anything against tradition; if there is one poet I love writing today it’s Robert Lowell; but the way the world goes and its cattiness of who to love and who not to love, will make impossible, let’s say, a meeting and a love between he (*sic*) and Ginsberg; whereas both have that SOUL. (*Accidental* 133)



Corso noted in 1958 that this is just “the way the world goes,” weighing in at a time when more was at stake for American literary history than he could have known. In the late 50s, as Ginsberg grew to fame with *Howl* and Lowell permanently repositioned himself with *Life Studies*, American poetry did more than refashion itself as personal. As a result of Lowell and Ginsberg’s differing perspectives on the individual in society, American poetry henceforth encamped in different locations. A sufferer and a liberator now bivouacked in these two new fields. Separate but of a similar source, they equally explored the impossible--Lowell “gazed” at an “impossible summit” and Ginsberg “vowed” to transcend all worldly “particulars”--as if the idea of impossibility itself was a key component to their poems.

Clearly, Lowell and Ginsberg come together at certain points. Their concomitant undertaking of autobiographical poetry connects them *a priori* not just in this study but in American literature. The way they committed to autobiographical poetry links them as well: they both scoured their private lives for decades. However, the manner in which they treated the individual subject, one they usually assumed to be themselves, led to their own particular explorations of pain and liberation. These authors’ dedication to personal poetry asks that we constantly reconsider how suffering and liberation can play vital roles as we negotiate identity and move between private and public selves to broaden the scope of literary discourses--regardless of what impossibilities define the role of the individual in literature.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Mariani (273-74) and Morgan (321).

<sup>2</sup> See Mariani (274-75) for a brief summary of Lowell's initially harsh comments on Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, Gregory Corso, William S. Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac's limited literary merits.

<sup>3</sup> Though David Perkins says that this literary history extends "a plain line of succession from the high modernism of the 1920s to the new poetry of the 1950s and 1960s" (212), Lowell and Ginsberg embody biographical but not necessarily formal influences from their immediate modern predecessors.

<sup>4</sup> Wimsatt, W.K. Jr. and M[onroe]. C. Beardsley. "The Intentional Fallacy." *Sewanee Review* 54.3 (Summer 1946): 468-88.

<sup>5</sup> Axelrod's piece is actually recent (2007), so his notion of Lowell and Ginsberg as deviants is surprising. Such is the stuff of Ginsberg as hippie head-in-the-clouds and Lowell as Hamiltonian madman. (Ian Hamilton was Lowell's first biographer, notorious for romanticizing Lowell's bipolarity.) "What the precise etiology of the phenomenon, Lowell, Bishop, and Ginsberg all wrote under the sign of anguish. Their interior pain yielded moments of self-awareness" (11). This "phenomenon" remains the condition of many poets, including the modern poets whom Axelrod sees somehow in a different light.

<sup>6</sup> Rosenbaum argues that such commercial exchanges show that postmodernism is not a culture of loss but that it repeats and reinforces certain modern, Eliotic anxieties about the "impossibility of a sincere ideal" (23).

<sup>7</sup> Williamson wants Lowell's *FTUD* to be "little less than the forging of a new public conscience" (Williamson 90). But Williamson's chapter on *For the Union Dead*, which discusses Lowell's "mature politics," breezes through the volume as a whole and mostly engages with the title poem itself (106-11).

<sup>8</sup> Lowell may have attempted something less personal in his *Imitations* (1961). However, as the introduction to the book states, Lowell looked at translation as a highly personal endeavor and his translations tend to be idiosyncratic poems that take great liberties with the original texts.

<sup>9</sup> This phrase is well known in several parts of the bible. It is controversial in the Old Testament, appearing first in Exodus 21:24, as a possible critique of the vengeful nature of justice in the Hebrew bible. In the New Testament, the phrase appears in Matthew 5:38 when Jesus preaches against revenge and instructs his followers to “turn the other cheek.”

<sup>10</sup> “1. The Nihilist as Hero,” “2. Grave Guild,” “3. Gap,” “4. In the Back Stacks,” and “5. Reading Myself.”

<sup>11</sup> Lowell’s poem remembers W. B. Yeats’ “Circus Animals Dissertation” in which the aging the Irish poet ruminates on his ability to engage with grand themes and ends by admitting that he “must lie down where all the ladders start / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.”

<sup>12</sup> Reflecting on fellow writers later in life, Ginsberg makes clear that Jack Kerouac’s inability to break down the borders of private and public life left him isolated as an artist.

One problem [that Kerouac had] was that since he was so dependent on his mother and drinking, and his mother was so much against his friends and anti-Jewish, he wasn’t allowed to bring me home. So that immediately limited him socially, so he couldn’t do anything out front in public that his mother would disapprove of, exactly. Or even write anything that his mother might read, like getting his cock sucked by me or something like that, so he wouldn’t put that in. So that limited what he could say, though in private, he was much more open. (*Spontaneous* 544)

As is typical, his artistic reality includes certain prerequisites in social life, in this case exposing one’s private views publicly.

<sup>13</sup> *Empty Mirror* is the title of the volume that includes Ginsberg’s earliest published poems. He wrote these poems in the late 1940s and early 1950s but did not publish them until 1961. I believe that Ginsberg likened himself to the title *Empty Mirror* after his major success in the 1950s. Ginsberg found a successful persona in *Howl*, one with which he could express, ironically as a persona, his identity as a free individual. Therefore, looking back on his early poems, he found an “empty mirror.” Before creating the persona of *Howl*, he lived in a world in which he had not yet found himself.

<sup>14</sup> This early response takes the form of a wish. He wishes that he might gain the confidence to speak out against inauthenticity publicly, as he will do later in life, once he creates the right persona.

<sup>15</sup> Ginsberg considers interviews socially important because he feels that they represent a process of spiritual teaching. His connects the interviewing process to removing an inauthentic mask (in this case, removing a non-Buddha mask):

A long time ago I figured out that the interview and the media was a way of teaching. If you talk to people as if they were future Buddhas, or present Buddhas, that any bad karma coming out of it will be their problem rather than yours, so you can say anything you want, and you talk on about the highest level possible. (*Spontaneous v*)

<sup>16</sup> “Lay your shoulders to the wheel,” Thomas Paine wrote in *The American Crisis*.

<sup>17</sup> All three poets are from the same region, and Williams and Ginsberg are both from Paterson, New Jersey.

<sup>18</sup> Ginsberg records several conversations with Lucian Carr in which Carr criticizes Ginsberg for contending that art must remain communicative. (*Martyrdom* 38-43) This belief separates Ginsberg himself from several of his beat contemporaries including William S. Burroughs, who thought that “art is just a four letter word” (*Martyrdom* 38) and Jack Kerouac who felt that Ginsberg simply stopped writing poetry once he began expressing overt political views in the 1960s.

<sup>19</sup> Ginsberg is commenting on “When the Mode of the Music Changes, the Walls of the City Shake,” originally published in *Second Coming Magazine* 1.2 (July 1961): 40-2. He has in mind “various censorships of Corso Kerouac Burroughs and myself and our works in *Chicago Review* and *Big Table*, as well as *Howl* and *Naked Lunch* trials, and New Directions’ fear of publishing complete text of Kerouac’s *Visions of Cody*” (*Deliberate* 253).

<sup>20</sup> See my remark on Sharon Cameron’s *Impersonality* in Chapter 1, page 23.

<sup>21</sup> Though they did not meet at these events, each played a significant, even iconic, role there as a poet. Ginsberg was not present at the March (he was in Europe), but his poetry was read there. Lowell was not in Grant Park, Chicago, with Ginsberg (who was tear-gassed and harassed) but was staying with Democratic peace candidate Eugene McCarthy in a hotel nearby.

<sup>22</sup> Ben Lee in “*Howl and Other Poems: Is There an Old Left in These New Beats?*” argues compellingly that Ginsberg’s poems are not only “prophecies of emergent movements” to come in the 1960s, but also that his poems are “elegies” for certain 1930s history that historians had shoved to the side.

<sup>23</sup> Lowell published *Notebook 1967-68* first, then *Notebook*. In *History*, Lowell ended up treating these previous publications as drafts. The *History* poems are “new,” according to Lowell, because the old poems were “jumbled.” “I hope this jumble or jungle is cleared-- that I have cut the waste marble from the figure.” The poems not included in *History* that were part of *Notebook* became *The Dolphin* and *For Lizzie and Harriet*, both published in 1973.

<sup>24</sup> Several critics explain Lowell’s sense of history as his attempt to upset chronological time. In his note on *History*, Frank Bidart equates Lowell’s sense of history with Foucault’s sense of “genealogy”: “a critical examination of patterns of descent and emergence” wherein the poet-figure, Lowell, has “powerful vision” and thereby is capable of tracing history with some authority. Bidart also explains the ways in which Lowell’s sense of history is Emersonian, namely in that Emerson, in his essay “History,” contends that “man is explicable by nothing less than all his history,” a maxim that is similar to Lowell’s definition that “history has to live with what was here” (Bidart 1074-5).

Making a more scientific case for the ways in which Lowell upsets chronological time, Wai Chee Dimock explains Lowell’s grappling with time in “Non-Newtonian Time: Robert Lowell, Roman History, Vietnam War.” Dimock’s essay at times speaks to the ways in which Lowell saw writing as a historical translation:

For Lowell, translation means not a rendition of the past in its pastness but the recasting of past words into “alive English,” words that are kicking and screaming right at this moment. Bringing the original texts “up to date” and shooting for contemporary sound, translation is above all a temporal exercise that plays fast and loose with duration, compressing the numerical chronology into a newly scripted shape. (922)

Dimock correctly assesses Lowell’s intention to emphasize history’s momentary quality.

<sup>25</sup> Lowell emphasizes this in *For the Union Dead* in terms of seeing and suffering, as I explained in Chapter 2.

<sup>26</sup> Lowell’s hero here owes something to Arthur Rimbaud, who claimed in *Une Saison en Enfer* to be without knowledge of proper religion and customs.

<sup>27</sup> Although Ginsberg had been in Europe during the October 21, 1967, March on Washington [...] Allen’s spirit and words were present. Poet and activist Ed Sanders led some of the one hundred thousand protesters in an exorcism of the Pentagon and read Ginsberg’s “No Taxation Without Representation” to the crowd that assembled hoping to levitate the building into space (Morgan *History* 221).

<sup>28</sup> Lowell rarely passes judgment along national lines. In the years prior to the Pentagon march, Lowell wrote his prize-winning series of plays *The Old Glory*. The second, “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” ends with the recognition that American liberty represents nothing more than what those in positions of power dictate.

<sup>29</sup> In his *Collected Poems*, Ginsberg combined certain parts of *Planet News* and *The Fall of America* in a section called “Poems of These States.” By doing so, he organizes his work chronologically and emphasizes one of his main goals: documenting American contemporary history.

<sup>30</sup> Unlike Lowell, whose speaker in “History” transforms into a hunter whose “terrible innocence” faces the dawn, Ginsberg speeds away, to end the poem, enrapt with his whirling images and planning on resolving its problems: “gliding down freeway ramp to City Lights, Peter’s face and television, money and new wanderings to come” (l. 52).

<sup>31</sup> Allen Grossman explains Ginsberg’s sense of politics in terms of the poet’s Jewishness. He believes that Ginsberg, in the “Angel King,” and “Garden of Eden,” attempts to substitute something “beyond history”:

In his poetry Ginsberg attempts simultaneously to document the death of history itself, of which the Jewish people personified by his mother Naomi is the symbol, and to erect a new ground of being beyond history of which his own poetry is the type and of which the symbol is the mother, or Israel, transformed as Muse. (106)

<sup>32</sup> King was assassinated on April 4, Kennedy on June 6, and two days later Warhol barely survived after being shot in New York on June 8. The year was personally death-haunted for Ginsberg since Neal Cassady died mysteriously in Mexico on February 4.