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New Topics, New Powers, and New Spirit: Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg and the Power of the Poet

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Abstract

Walt Whitman was an enormous influence on Allen Ginsberg, which Lawrence Ferlinghetti recognized at the first public reading of "Howl" in 1955. *Leaves of Grass*, first published in 1855, featured untitled twelve poems without rhyme, meter, or traditional line breaks. However, acknowledging a single influential figure for a countercultural writer is a somewhat uncommon phenomenon. Countercultural movements and countercultural artists tend to define themselves by standing against the dominant culture, an understandable instinct that yields important insights. Still the link between Ginsberg and Whitman is unmistakable. By analyzing the complex ties between an example of Whitman's and Ginsberg's major work and by exploring the personal intricacy of both men's lives within their own cultural periods, I will reveal how each poet absorbed his country only to be sorely disappointed. Using Whitman's "Song of Myself" and Ginsberg's "Howl," I will compare the startlingly modern use of free verse, poetic convention, and thematic unity in each poem. In addition, an analysis of each poet's lived experience will provide insight into how these men, who lived a century apart, recognized the artistic value of their time in American history and utilized this cultural awareness to fuel their unique contributions to American poetry. Both men grappled with their sexuality, which made them outcasts; they both had strong feelings about the politics of their times; they both sought the companionship of unsavory people; and they both yearned to speak directly about American life. Whitman and Ginsburg cut against the grain of their respective literary and cultural backdrops, and my investigation of their similarities will reveal how their willingness to pursue what Ralph Waldo Emerson called "new topics, new powers, and a new spirit" challenged what their dominate cultures called poetry.

Keywords

Ginsberg, Whitman, poetry

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Comments

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New Topics, New Powers, and New Spirit: Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsburg and the Power of the Poet.

by Peter Rosenberger

NCUR 2015

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I.

Walt Whitman was an enormous influence on Allen Ginsberg, which Lawrence Ferlinghetti recognized at the first public reading of “Howl” in 1955. The next day, he wired Ginsberg, saying “I greet you at the beginning of a great literary career,” echoing Ralph Waldo Emerson’s words to Walt Whitman. Both Whitman and Ginsburg cut against the grain of their respective literary and cultural norms, and my investigation of their similarities will reveal how their willingness to pursue what Ralph Waldo Emerson called “new topics, new powers, and a new spirit” challenged what their dominate cultures called poetry. Whitman’s “Song of Myself” and Ginsberg’s “Howl” serve as the main texts in this paper, but I will refer to other works occasionally. This essay will pick out passages from the work of these two writers to illuminate both their formal and thematic similarities.

II.

Both poets utilize a number of somewhat unconventional devices. They both write in free verse and use long lines that reveal an organic approach in their writing. They both frequently use lists, which function like bursts of thought. Their poetic rhythms are successful and are often founded on length of breath instead of syllabic counts. They both frequently utilize specific word repetition and general parallel structure between lines. “Howl,” specifically, contains of great deal of rhetoric that strongly evokes Whitman. For example, the following two passages, the first from “Song of Myself” (lines 936-938) and the second from “Howl” illustrate their similarities:

What stills the traveler come to the vault at Mount Vernon,
What sobers the Brooklyn boy as he looks down the shores of the Wallabout and
remembers the prison ships,
What burnt the gums of the redcoat at Saratoga when he surrendered his brigades
(Whitman 30)

who studied Plotinus Poe St. John of the Cross telepathy and bop kabbalah
because the cosmos instinctively vibrated at their feet in Kansas,
who loned it through the streets of Idaho seeking visionary indian angels who
were visionary indian angels,
who thought they were only mad when Baltimore gleamed in supernatural
ecstasy,
who jumped in limousines with the Chinaman of Oklahoma on the impulse of
winter midnight streetlight smalltown rain,
who lounged hungry and lonesome through Houston seeking jazz or sex or soup,
and followed the brilliant Spaniard to converse about America and
Eternity, a hopeless task, and so took ship to Africa (Ginsberg 12)

These two passages could have come from the same poem. They share parallel structure and a hanging indent, and they both rely heavily on allusions. Each long line, which is part of an American place list, is anchored by a pronoun followed by an active verb. This construction functions as the foundation for the elements contained in the individual line and the accumulated list. The efforts the Beat writers made to create bop-like, jazz-inspired literature came from their desire to have the power to freely make associations and paint sonic pictures. The process was about raw recollection and outpourings of language. The “bop prosody” influence is clear in the passage from “Howl.” Without the pronoun and the verb at the beginning of each line, the passage becomes a machine gun blast of jumbled thoughts fired off immediately as they come to the speaker. This style in Ginsberg is greatly influenced by the rhetoric of Whitman.

Similarly to in “Howl,” if the opening pronoun and verb are removed from the lines picked out from “Song of Myself,” what is left is a collection of rapidly fired off statements. Ginsberg might not have actively employed this strategy, but he soaked up the rhetoric of Whitman and it became the perfect complement to the Beat ideal of bop prosody. These styles in the two writers subverted the norms of the dominant literary aesthetic.

In Thomas F. Merrill’s 1969 book on Ginsberg, Merrill discusses Whitman’s influence on Ginsberg and the subversive quality of the similarities shown in the above passages. Both

prose and traditional verse utilize sentences as the main meaning-carriers; in prose, it is sentences combined into paragraphs, and in traditional verse, it is lines combined into stanzas. This somewhat obvious characterization of prose and traditional verse is the norm that Whitman and Ginsberg subvert in their poetry. Ginsberg desired “density” in his poetry, which was characterized by the “richness of imagery packed into a given line” (Merrill 94). Whitman often achieved the density that Ginsberg sought. The grammatical continuity that characterizes prose and traditional verse is sacrificed so that imagery, the new primary vehicle for meaning, can flourish. Whitman’s innovative style acts as the poetic precedent for Ginsberg and his Beat obsession with spontaneity and organicity. It gives literariness to Ginsberg’s subversive, countercultural style, and it lays the groundwork for the rest of the similarities that will be addressed in the sections to come.

III.

The similarities between Ginsberg and Whitman extend into some specific personal, cultural details that manifested themselves in the poetry of the two poets. Both Ginsberg and Whitman were gay, and their homosexuality influenced their poetry differently, in accordance with their cultural moment’s tolerance for homosexuality. Consider the following two passages; again, the first is from “Song of Myself” (lines 193-194 and 204-206), and the second is from “Howl”:

Twenty-eight young men bathe by the shore,
Twenty-eight young men, and all so friendly (Whitman 7)

The beards of the young men glistened with wet, it ran from their long hair,
Little streams passed all over their bodies.

An unseen hand also passes over their bodies,
It descended tremblingly from their temples and ribs (Whitman 7)

who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly/motorcyclists, and screamed
with joy,
who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of
Atlantic and Caribbean love,
who balled in the morning in the evenings in rosegardens and the grass of public
parks and cemeteries scattering their semen freely to whomever come who
may (Ginsberg 13)

The same formal elements fleshed out in the previous section can be seen in these two passages, but this time, the thematic content of the excerpts furthers the comparison of Ginsberg and Whitman.

The scene from “Song of Myself” depicts a group of men on a beach. In the passage, the onlooker describing the scene is female, but the speaker throughout the poem is almost directly channeling Whitman, so the vivid, sensual description of the men can still be seen as coming from Whitman and the male speaker in the poem. The Whitman passages seem tame compared to the passages from Ginsberg, but an American man describing other men in this fashion in the 1850s is undeniably noteworthy.

Ginsberg leaves less to the imagination. The blunt language seen in the selected passage was not uncommon in the work of the Beat writers, but blunt homoerotic language was extremely uncommon. Even when it came to a topic that was seen as entirely taboo, Ginsberg was unrelenting in the strong, raw expression that characterized the Beat aesthetic. The passages might not seem comparable because of the stark difference in how directly they address homosexuality, but they would have been equally shocking in their cultural moments. Here it becomes clear how important Whitman was for Ginsberg not just in the appropriation of a formal poetic identity.

Literature that touched on homosexual acts existed, but not much literature touched on *homosexuality*. This is to say, some writers wrote about same-sex intimacy, and some even

wrote about their specific experiences, but Whitman can be viewed as the first American poet to overtly address *being* a homosexual. It is one thing to talk about homosexual sex, but it is another to grapple with identity and confront the reality of *loving* men (Tayson 2). Whitman is one of the most influential American poets, and the fact that he wrestled with his homosexuality was immensely important for Ginsberg and the other gay, American poets that wrote after him. This influence can also be seen outside of “Song of Myself” and “Howl.”

Ginsberg wrote a poem called “Many Loves,” which appeared in *Collected Poems: 1947-1980*, and Whitman wrote a poem called “Live-Oak With Moss,” which appeared as “Calamus” in the 1860 publication of *Leaves of Grass*. “Many Loves” was not published until long after it was written, and “Live Oak” didn’t appear in its original form until 1953. These poems are the homosexual high points for Ginsberg and Whitman respectively. “Many Loves” is a provocative, explicit account of one specific sexual encounter between Ginsberg and fellow Beat Neal Cassady. “Live Oak” is an overtly homosexual, frustrated love poem about a man waiting to bed his lover (Tayson 3). These two poems illuminate the interesting contrast in how Ginsberg and Whitman approached their homosexuality.

It is a difference that is clear in lines chosen from “Song of Myself” and “Howl.” Ginsberg used strong, unyielding descriptions to depict the raw physicality of his sexuality, while Whitman painted romantic, wistful pictures. Although both men sought homosexual relationships in their lives, their homosexuality manifested itself differently in their poetry. In the same way that Whitman’s rhetoric set the precedent for Ginsberg’s unique, Beat-influenced style, Whitman’s willingness to interface with his homosexuality set the precedent for Ginsberg to write about his homosexuality in his own raw—again Beat-influenced—manner.

IV.

The final comparison I'll make between Ginsberg and Whitman connects them in a powerful way but also leads to a profound difference between them. They shared a picture of the universe that cast humanity as a unified entity. Take the following passages from "Song of Myself" (lines 1-3 and 117-121) and "Footnote to Howl" respectively:

I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you (Whitman 1)

Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity!
Everyman's an angel! (Ginsberg 27)

Here the formal similarities are less clear, but both passages put forward a holistic oneness of the universe. "Song of Myself" comes from a collection called *Leaves of Grass*. The title of the collection is a metaphor for this way of understanding the world. The individual blade of grass is only a part of the whole field. The leaf is only one of many in a tree's swirling collection of matter. In a similar way, an individual person is only a part of the whole of humanity. In the passage from "Footnote to Howl," Ginsberg portrays every person, place, and time as individual parts belonging to one unified, divine whole. Although this is something that the poets had in common, it created a problem for Ginsberg because of how Whitman extended the idea to characterize death.

The oneness of humanity that Whitman puts forth in *Leaves of Grass* reduces the severity and tragedy of death ("Song of Myself," lines 117-121):

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,
And ceased the moment life appeared.

All goes onward and outward . . . and nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier (Whitman 5).

This might not have been a problem for Ginsberg on its own, but one of the biggest differences between Ginsberg and Whitman made it a problem. A glorified picture of war combined with a philosophy that portrayed death as just a part of the oneness of human existence in a way that greatly perturbed Ginsberg. Ginsberg and Whitman were both political poets, and they both lived during times of war, but Whitman's philosophy provided a justification for those dying in war, while Ginsberg's philosophy was powerfully opposed to war in general.

Whitman is chiefly identified as a war poet, and he painted a picture of war that was vivid and horrifying but also glorified and transcendent in its connection to his philosophy of oneness. Death becomes a privileged part of the universal organism, and Ginsberg would have railed against Whitman's application of this idea in war (Dandelees 3). Ginsberg's "America" and Whitman's "Eighteen Sixty-One" illuminate their war philosophies. "Eighteen Sixty-One" is a portrayal of a year in a soldier's life, and it is filled with allusions to the individual-in-a-larger-mechanism piece of Whitman's philosophy. "America," on the other hand, is a loud condemnation of war, but it also shows the tension in Ginsberg's relationship with war:

America when I was seven momma took me to Communist Cell meetings they sold us garbanzos a handful per ticket a ticket costs a nickel and the speeches were free everybody was angelic and sentimental about the workers it was all so sincere you have no idea what a good thing the party was in 1835 Scott Nearing was a grand old man a real mensch Mother Bloor made me cry I once saw Israel Amter plain. Everybody must have been a spy (Ginsberg 42)

In "The Laurel Tree Cudgel," Gregory M. Dandelees uses this passage to illuminate the problematic mental gymnastics going on in Ginsberg's head:

The ironic ending to this line, that all the "angelic" and "sentimental" communists he was surrounded by in his youth, including his own mother, must have been spies, is the only way Ginsberg can seem to make the leaves of grass metaphor work in this desperate attempt to speak for all Americans when the status quo is in such disagreement with his own identity (6).

Ginsberg actively studied Whitman when he was writing "Howl" and "America," and while the

connection to Whitman aided in the stylistic and thematic development of Ginsberg's poetry, as shown in the sections focusing on rhetoric and sexuality, it created a powerful angst in Ginsberg when it came to war. The countercultural model that Whitman was for Ginsberg failed here because Whitman set the tone for an entire genre of patriotic war poetry that Ginsberg tried to break away from. Ginsberg actively aligned with Whitman in so many ways, but when it came to war, that alignment fractured Ginsberg's poetic identity in a way that led Ginsberg to condemn war while seeing his condemnation as fruitless. When it came to politics, Whitman's influence created a dissonance in Ginsberg that manifested itself in Ginsberg's uncertain, self-defeating condemnation of war.

V.

Ginsberg and Whitman weren't perfectly compatible, as the third section shows, but Whitman stood out from the poets of his era, and he quickly became canon in American literature. The specifics of his style, specifics that broke away from the dominant poetic forms of the time, allowed for new ways of creating and packaging poetry. One hundred years later, his aesthetic would help Ginsberg, entrenched in Beat culture, break away from his literary moment as well. It's a direct influence that isn't always so clear in literature, and even when Ginsberg's philosophy differed from Whitman's, it still manifested itself on Whitman's terms. The stylistic, thematic, and political power fueling Ginsberg's poetry was new and fresh, and it was energized by Whitman's influence. It was there with Whitman in the middle of the 19th century; it was there with Ginsberg in the middle of the 20th century, and we're left now with the exciting task of trying to find where it will come from next. The search is always on for the next, new, tradition-shattering, powerful American poet.

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