

Ode to Allen

June 3, 2018

Today would have been Allen Ginsberg's 92nd Birthday!
Happy Birthday, o Spirit of a Great Bard, Great Researcher,
Great Sleuth of the Human Moil!

I often tell audiences that if I hadn't purchased the City Lights
edition of Howl at the University of Missouri bookstore in 1957
that I would now be a retired Eskimo Pie distributor
in Kansas City.

In Russia there was the Revolution of 1905
when the Tzar's soldiers opened fire
on 300,000 marchers petitioning for
the 8-hour workday, more money, the
right to vote & a parliament
& 100 protesters,
some praying and carrying ikons
fell dead in the snow
by the Winter Palace
after which
there were massive strikes in cities
all over Russia,
and then massive repression
including ghastly pogroms
in the Northern Pale

This was the year that
Naomi, age 10, & her mother and sisters
escaped to New York
to Orchard Street

& her father Morris opened a candy store
in the Lower East Side

Then the family moved to Newark
Naomi went to Barringer High
in 1912
where, both age 17, she met Louis Ginsberg
(whose father had fled oppression of Jews
in the Pale of Settlement
and fled to the USA in 1880s. Louis was born in 1895)

One Socialist, One Communist

Allen's mother was a communist

Louis was a socialist like his parents

& thus was established a
classic pull-&-shove
in the family
'tween the two sets of politics

Louis was an English teacher
at Central High in Paterson

He was a well known poet
with three volumes published during his lifetime

Birth

The bard named Irwin Allen Ginsberg
was born at 2 a.m. on June 3, 1926
in Newark, NJ

They named him after
his great-grandfather
S'rul Avrum Ginsberg

Allen as Researcher

“He was an early ‘Jack the Clipper’
an attribute that remained
throughout his life

as he amassed many many many news clippings
on Hitler and Mussolini, and the Spanish Civil War
in the late '30s into 1940”

{During the 1960s and 1970s
Ginsberg would now and then send me collections
of his clippings on the legalization of pot;
or on the activities of the CIA, for example,
in the heroin trade &
against the underground press and the counterculture.

Beacons for my later work in Investigative Poetry
Always carry around specific Question Lists, or “Q-Lists”}

1943, The Vow to Help the Working Class

The slender & nervous sixteen year old
took the ferry from Hoboken to Manhattan
on the way to the university entrance examination
and made a solemn vow
that if he got into Columbia
he would devote his life
to helping the working class

Writing "Howl" in 1955

On February 3 Allen
moved to 1010 Montgomery St. in S. F.

(Allen always kept his many pads fairly orderly
so a photo of the room where he typed "Howl"
was spiffily neat.

Then 8 days later
P.O. moved in also

A.G. was reading many books
but writing little

He was interested in experimenting in W.C. Williams'
triadic line
or indented tercets
combined with Jack Kerouac's long-breathed lines--
when he turned 29 on June 3

One day in early August
He began typing
on a used typewriter
on scratch paper
with nothing to gain
nothing to lose

the first 12 pages of "Howl"

(He had a line from
an earlier notebook

"I saw the best mind angel-headed hipster damned"

which was transubstantiated into
"I saw the best minds of my generation starving hysterical naked...")

—I saw an early version of "Howl" at the
Whitney Beat show in '95
which had indented lines
similar to W.C. Williams tercets

I remarked to Allen about the indentations
and he told me he had indeed been
imitating Williams—

Allen mailed out typed copies to many friends for their comments
and began revising revising revising.

He was early a member of the Mimeograph Revolution
because the first edition of "Howl"
was printed on mimeograph
whose stencils were at least partly typed

by Robert Creeley
on a typewriter borrowed from
Martha Rexroth.

(wish you had a copy of the mimeo'd Howl?)

Allen Ginsberg asked hundreds of thousands of questions!

His very early poems
contain few, if any
bardic questions:
but when he gets to his
“Vision” poem,
“On Reading William Blake’s ‘The sick Rose,’”
written in East Harlem in 1948, when
he heard a voice intoning Blake’s “Ahh Sunflower,”
“The Sick Rose,” and “Little Girl Lost,”
in that poem there are three sentences ending in question
marks.

So many questions
high and low
have n’er been asked by a bard.

There are 47 question marks in Allen’s *Collected Poems*
in the poems BEFORE he wrote “Howl” in 1955

“Howl” has no question marks
because it’s the long declarative
throb-answer to
hundreds of questions he had already asked.

Two poems after “Howl,” however, the questions
pick up: eight q’s in “A Supermarket in California,”
that fine poem calling out to Walt Whitman.

And three question marks in the famous “Sunflower Sutra.”

And on and on and on
through his books,

Kaddish, Reality Sandwiches, Planet News,
Mind Breaths, The Fall of America, Iron Horse,
Plutonian Ode, White Shroud, Cosmopolitan Greetings,
and other books:

Helping his Friends Get Their Books Published

A.G. always helped his friends
get their books published
This is not so common
among literati

It was the Best Minds factor
Ginsberg promoting his friends
Kerouac, Corso, Burroughs, Snyder, Whalen, &
even Levertov, Niedecker, Oppenheimer, et al.

Fall o' '56
Ginsberg
met Denise Levertov
in Guadalajara
& added her
manuscript o' poems to
his collection
to show editors

Returning to NYC the same fall
A.G. had manuscripts by Snyder, Whalen, Duncan, Dorn,
Creeley, Lamantia, Levertov, McClure, and evn
a manuscript of Charles Olson

He surged into The New York Times offices
on West 43rd
and requested a review of *Howl*

(Don't you wish you had the guts
to do that for YOUR book of verse?)

(just as later in 1965
when he was notified he'd won a Guggenheim Fellowship
Allen went directly to the Guggenheim offices
on Park Avenue South
surging in Gugg Joy
and wanting for his check right away!

Most of us who are honored
with Guggenheim Fellowships in verse
wait patiently
for the check
but not A.G.

who performed a dance of Nike! Victory! Triumph!
and Joy of Cash!
through the hallways and offices.

The Guggenheim gave him the largess
for one of his most important poetic ventures—
He purchased a VW camper

& outfitted it with a desk, bed & icebox
so that he could drive around the nation
while composing a series of travel poems
including the fine “Wichita Vortex Sutra” of ’66

A year later Allen
helped persuade Don Allen
to do the famous San Francisco Scene
issue of
Evergreen Review (#2)

(which I purchased at the University of Missouri bookstore that fall
and it changed my life)

Benefits & Helping Good Causes

Allen’s personal generosity was vast.
I once read a list compiled of all the benefits
A.G. performed at—
it was literally 100’s upon 100’s of benefits!

Finally, one great lesson from Allen Ginsberg
is never allow yourself to be boxed in—
never allow yourself to be marginalized
no matter how controversial your stances, songs, or writings

Use all your energy, good will, friendships, & creativity
to forge your path.

And so we celebrate
the 92nd birthday
of this great Bard of the world.

I’ll perform my “Song for Allen”
which I began in Florence in April of 1997
when Allen passed away
and within an hour or so a crowd of about 1,000 mourners
filled the street in front
of the City Lights Italia Bookstore.

Song for Allen

He was one of my heroes
Where the river of freedom flows
and the blossom of peace grows
Allen Allen Allen has fallen

What a huge and giant brain!
with its hundreds of Blake lines memorized
10,000 vowels of Yeats,

a Catullus or two, 50 pages of Whitman
Milton's "Lycidas," samples of
Sapphic stanzas, vast memories
of his youth & family, gigabytes
upon infinitudinabytes of naked truth
 above the burning fields of the earth

Ah Allen
your skyrocket mind
up there w/ Sappho & Keats
exploding
 with such a wide, wild corona
out o'er our Little Part of the Milky Way

He was one of my heroes
Where the river of freedom flows
and the blossom of peace grows
Allen Allen Allen has fallen

Well, while I'm here I'll
 do the work--
and what's the Work?
 To ease the pain of living.
Everything else, drunken
 dumbshow
 (from "Memory Gardens" Oct. 22-29, 1969)

He was one of my heroes
Where the river of freedom flows
and the blossom of peace grows
Allen Allen Allen has fallen

No time to recycle
No time to read the mail
No time to look at the comet
No time to go to the meeting
No time for fabulous images
No time to think
No time to study Egyptian
No time to listen to Berg
No time to go to the rock shop
No time to relive that moment
No time to sort-out cosmology
No time to buy a new oar
No time to decipher the glyphs
No time to sort the papers
No time to measure the moonlight
No time to grow the peppers
No time to argue for freedom
No time to dismantle the fear
No time to savor the visions
No time no time no time no time

He was one of my heroes
Where the river of freedom flows
and the blossom of peace grows
Allen Allen Allen has fallen

—Song: Woodstock-Venice-Florence-Rome
1997-1998