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Anthony Hosey  
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City College of New York

Sing Me a Song of Sorrow:

Analyzing the Internal Dynamics of *Howl* and its Place as a Modern Epic

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Thesis – MA Literature

Felicia Bonaparte (Advisor)

5/1/15

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts of the City

College of the City University of New York

Table of Contents

I.	The Separation of an Epic’s Form and an Epic’s Identity.....	3
II.	Lukacs, Tennyson and The Necessary Disconnect.....	9
III.	The Internal Dynamics of <i>Howl</i> .....	17
	A) The Necessary Disconnect of the Modern Paradigm.....	17
	B) Visions of Blake and ‘Our’ Spiritual Blindness.....	31
IV.	The Reclamation of ‘Our’ Humanity Through Jazz.....	41
	A) The Musical Nature of The Epic.....	41
	B) The Influence of Bebop Jazz on the Physical and Inherent Identity of <i>Howl</i> .....	44
	C) Reclaiming ‘Our’ Humanity Through the Connected Nature of Jazz.....	50

Sing Me a Song of Sorrow:  
Analyzing the Internal Dynamics of *Howl* and its Place as a Modern Epic

I. The Separation of an Epic's Form and an Epic's Identity

From a modernist perspective, the epic is a genre which seems to have relegated itself into a stagnant state of literary obscurity. Despite the enormous impact that such works have had on humanity's cultural evolution (the Institution for the Study of Western Civilization declares Homer's transcriptions of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* to be a watershed moment in the progression from oral to written storytelling ("Homer" par. 1)), whatever relevance that we, as scholars, assign to these texts, mostly emanates from a sense of nostalgia, a solemn remembrance of a world and a time that once was but is no longer. Even the very terms which are used to define the qualities of an epic are antiquated by their inapplicability to the logical nature of the present paradigm: "An epic is a long, narrative poem, on a grand scale, about the deeds of warriors and heroes...incorporating myth, legend, folk tale and history." (Cuddon 264). This disconnect is acutely apparent when juxtaposing the ancient cultures from which such works were born with the magnification of rationalist thinking that emerged in the post-Enlightenment West. It is far too tempting for the modern reader to separate his or herself from a source material whose comprehension of the natural world rests in mysticism and supernatural beliefs, precisely because such beliefs have come to be accepted as myths...*there*, there be dragons; *here*, there be I.

Therefore, to the external observer, it would be counterintuitive to equate a 20<sup>th</sup>-Century poem such as *Howl* as being synonymous with the great works of epic literature. Indeed, on a tangible and aesthetic level there exists very little evidence that can justify such an assertion. The urban purgatory and existential introspection of Allen Ginsberg's America presents a diametrically opposite point of view from the overt characterizations of heroism and uniformity of the ancient cultures written about in the Western classics. Likewise, the brevity of the poem in question poses an apparently impenetrable roadblock to any epic interpretation. When we, the modern reader, hear the word 'epic,' we involuntarily conjure up images pertaining to stories which encapsulate expansive stretches of time and space: a decade of attrition at Troy, Odysseus's twenty-year journey to Ithaca, the rise of an empire in Rome, Dante's descent into Hell and back, these are the prototypical tales which have become emblematic of the epic experience. No, from an external perspective it is impossible to proclaim *Howl* an epic; and yet, with each successive reading, I am all the more convinced that it is one.

Granting this seemingly implausible interpretation to be accurate, the most obvious, yet important, questions which would confront the modern scholar can best be deconstructed into a single word...how? How can such a relationship exist? How can a poem which differs so completely from the prototype of a highly specific genre, be simultaneously representative of that very genre? Or what's more, how would such representation affect our preconceived belief in a formal structure of identity? In other words, if *Howl* could conceivably be interpreted as an epic, then wouldn't that render our past understanding of epic literature flawed? The answer is of course, yes (how could it not?). However, the gap which separates this mistaken perception from a more cohesive definition is not as hard to bridge as one might think, for it is in highlighting this literary disparity that one can see that the inherent qualities which comprise the

DNA of the ancient epics are just as prevalent in Ginsberg's work and beyond. In order to accomplish this feat it is imperative that the modern reader disassociates herself from her aforementioned connotations of the epic genre, for the key to understanding the epical dynamic of *Howl* requires an intense shift in focus, one that moves the reader from an external mindset to that of an internal one.

A classic illustration of this new perspective is evident in the metaphor of fraternal twins and their relationship with one another. While either sibling may appear to be the physical opposite of the other (curly, brown hair vs. straight, blonde hair, blue eyes vs. green eyes, right-hand dominance vs. left-hand dominance), do we subsequently write off these persons as unrelated? Of course not, for we understand that a hereditary bond extends far deeper than similarity in manner or appearance, and resultantly, that those siblings are exponentially more connected with each other than any individual who may match their respective physical characteristics. This case becomes even more compelling when we take into account mixed gender twins whose identities differ not only in external appearances but by their anatomical and physical structures as well, for again, such differences do not prevent the outside observer from recognizing the unique relationship that these siblings possess.

When applying this metaphor to modern perceptions of epic literature, what such an interpretation is really saying is that the epic cannot be a genre classified via external measures alone. While there exists a definite need to establish some basis of parameters with which to effectively judge the epical qualities of any observed work, especially given the hyper-subjective nature of art and its influences on the potential observer, it is imperative that those parameters must not be set upon the foundation of external or structural observations alone, for as it has already been established, the external observer's assessment of the situation can be inadequate at

best and severely prejudiced at worst. Moreover, it is precisely because of this external vantage point, this inherent flaw in our conception of the genre, that modern readership has enabled these aforementioned antiquated notions of the epic to flourish into the accepted norm. Much like the hypothetical case of fraternal siblings, it is entirely possible for two works of literature from seemingly disparate genres to possess an infinitely stronger interior bond than other texts which bear similarities only in form and structure. However, because the epical works we *choose* to study have come to represent the physical legacy of a now defunct form of storytelling, we believe that the genre of the epic itself is incapable of resurrection.

It is for this reason that literary critic John Sutherland bluntly states in his assessment of the genre, "...epics are the dinosaurs of literature. They once dominated, by virtue of sheer largeness, but now they are in the museum of literature, not the workshop." ("How" 35). Indeed, the modern reader is about as likely to encounter a contemporary narrative poem composed in the style of the ancient epics as she would discover a stash of prehistoric bones in her own backyard. Yet, the veritable hazards of statements such as Sutherland's rests in their overt and unimaginative simplicity, for it is with the absolute dismissal of resurrection that there must exist an equally undeniable admission of death, an admission which, upon deeper contemplation, cannot be unilaterally declared.

It is an outright fallacy to conclude that the epic is dead simply because we no longer produce the archetypical works that led to the creation of the term. The outward character and style of rock and roll music has evolved dramatically since the mid-1950's, when Chuck Berry's Gibson guitar began shredding American airwaves, however we do not claim that such alterations represent a discord from the genre. On the contrary, it is a culture that has become so embedded within the greater musical subconscious that its unquestioned immortality is part of its

unique identity; or, as controversial rock pioneer Larry Williams is attributed as saying, “rock and roll has no beginning and no end for it is the very pulse of life itself.” For reasons which will momentarily become evident, this is the same mentality we must utilize in our analysis of epic literature, a perspective not rooted in any linear understanding of time but a circular one. The epic is not dead because there is no such thing as ‘life’ or ‘death’ with regards to epic storytelling, rather the style by which it chooses to communicate with its readers has transformed throughout history. In essence, if Rock and Roll is the omnipresent and infinitely powerful heartbeat that sustains the body of life than the epic is the everburning soul which provides life with an infinitely worthwhile harmony.

This co-dependent relationship between music and epic literature is integrally critical to comprehending *Howl's* classification as a modern epic, and as such is a dynamic that will be expounded on in greater detail in a separate section of this paper. But for the present moment, when examining the nature of said relationship as it pertains solely to the plausibility of the epic's continued existence as a genre, it should be considered highly applicable, not only given the aforementioned shift in sound with regards to rock-and-roll, but precisely because so much ambiguity and confusion exists in regards to genre classification as *whole*. As an exemplar, when folk musician Josh Ritter is asked in a 2010 interview with bigthink.com to give his thoughts upon the evolution of folk music and its progression from the 1960's to the present, he seems to initially struggle at crafting a definitive answer before finally arriving at the personal epiphany that: “I always thought that what I was doing was rock n' roll...because I get the feeling when I'm playing that I'm not a part of any sort—I feel like what I'm playing is rock n' roll...I don't know why...I feel that the quietest music can be rock n' roll—Beethoven was rock and roll.”

Obviously, no person could justify such a claim as Ritter's based upon a stylistic



comparison of the genres themselves. The structural compositions between the works of Beethoven and the sound that has come to be defined as traditional 'rock-and-roll' are so vastly different from one another that any serious attempt at connecting two pieces of music in this way would border on hilarious. And yet, in the mind and soul of a musician such as Ritter, he genuinely and innately believes there to be an intangible bond that connects these two musical elements, elements which have been separated by nearly two hundred years of time and space, and fuses them into a cohesive union of identity.

It is upon these same principles of the inexplicable and the unexplainable where one must recognize that there exists a reasonable basis with which to substantiate a literary claim of epicness between an ancient text and a 20<sup>th</sup>-Century poem. Much like Ritter's association with Beethoven, I desperately believe there to be a pertinent epic seething from the lines of Ginsberg's poem though I cannot definitively state why. That in his violent cries against the war-like horrors of modern-day America there exists an Achillean rage in Ginsberg's voice which harkens back to the most primal concepts of Homer. That in the three, distinct sections which comprise the structure of *Howl* there is an unspoken but undeniable link with Dante's existential search for connection and meaning. That the 'sea-journey across America' is in effect the tragic portrayal of an odyssey with no end, and it is in that journey where we, the reader/listener, are placed into the perspective of an epic hero who is incapable of returning to the home he once knew. But perhaps most significant of all is the irony that in Ginsberg's simple yet heartbreaking prose there ultimately exists a powerfully concrete song of praise to the indefatigable resolve and collective beauty of the human spirit, a song which is integral to illuminating the internal dynamic of the Western epic.

It needs be stated that while I, an individual reader, may possess an unquantifiable belief in *Howl's* epic-ness, that same belief might not be shared by another reader studying the same texts. Having already established the hyper-subjective nature of art, it would be foolish of any scholar to make such a certain claim from a purely unobjective viewpoint. Bearing this fact in mind, objectivity requires evidence, evidence which begets proof; and since it is the intention of this paper to attempt to prove *Howl's* viability as an epic then a certain preponderance of evidence must be provided to validate this belief. Therefore, prior to delving directly into Ginsberg's poem, the first thing that must be done is to briefly establish a framework with which to base this objective response; specifically, when we refer to the word 'epic,' what exactly are we defining.

## II. Lukacs, Tennyson and the Necessary Disconnect

In his 1920 work *Theory of the Novel*, literary theorist Georg Lukacs elevates the "sphere of the epic" as being on the same plane as the "sphere of life," claiming that the two concepts cannot be differentiated from one another because they are in fact mirror images (57). This perspective is expounded on further under the weighty proclamation that "the epic gives form to the totality of life that is rounded from within." (Lukacs 60). The key component of this belief is the term 'within,' for this form being given is not meant to represent the inner reflections of an individual but instead those of a particular group of peoples. Oftentimes such representation goes hand-in-hand with nationalism, but this factor need not be considered requisite to the crafting of a literary epic, and instead it should be seen as a natural consequence which comes when writing about or for a specific cultural set. In short, an epic is meant to be the story of "we," a work

which best exemplifies the present human condition and crafts a definitive statement about that condition.

To better comprehend the significance of this implication one need only look to the work of scientist and philosopher Thomas Kuhn, who in his 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, purports the notion that every age is in possession of a dominant paradigm, which is used as the framework for humanity's system of beliefs, and that this paradigm will invariably mutate, evolve and change throughout time (43-51). Taking this into account, along with the aforementioned severance of antiquated writing styles and the previously identified story of "we" mentality, an epic, broken down to its simplest form, is an artistic reflection of the paradigm of its time. That being said, it is the obligation of the epic writer to keep his perspectives within the confines of modern acceptance and appropriate rationality. Whereas one generation views a lightning storm as the irrevocable proof of Zeus's wrath, the succeeding generation may view that same storm as nothing more than the frenetic dispersal of electrons in motion. Above all else, however, is the reality that any attempt to write outside the present paradigm will inevitably fail as an epic because it lacks a connection with the people it's meant to reach, and thus no longer equates to a story of "we" but rather as a story of "me."

In order to fully appreciate the depth of this continual revolution, let us return to Sutherland's metaphor regarding the 'dinosaurs of literature.' The comparison between epical literature and an extinct species is not a radical notion but one that has been purported for at least several generations. In a poem succinctly titled "The Epic," Alfred Lord Tennyson explicitly declares that the genre is long deceased, incapable of being brought back to life, much like the mighty 'mastodon' that once dominated the Earth (lms. 35-36). Speaking purely from a structural and formalistic standpoint, it cannot be disputed that the strength of Tennyson's assertions are

grounded in their unequivocal truth; the *style* of literature made popular by Homer and the ancient epics is no longer en vogue, much like the *style* of music made popular by artists such as Mozart and Beethoven is no longer the music of the day. Moreover, while there exists contemporary authors who have explored writing long poetry that bear the hallmarks of classic epics, some even utilizing this format to great effect (Derek Walcott was awarded the 1990 Nobel Prize in Literature for his Homer-inspired poem *Omeros*), it is clear that this writing style has essentially vanished from the popular literary community.

The problem, however, with establishing a cause-and-effect connection between the death of a writing style and the death of a genre, such as the Epic, is the level of intense focus that is brought to the physical body of the work at hand such that we completely lose sight of its intended spirit; in essence, as each generation has become increasingly removed from the arranged form in which these texts were first produced, we, as readers, have become more consumed with what an epic should *look* like rather than what it *is*. Inevitably, the cumulative result of this gradual transition is the uninspiring and nostalgic perception in which we currently choose to view the genre. However, after parlaying such a statement into our re-interpreted identification of the genre, one that has shed itself of its external prejudices, the significance of this observation has less to do with the fact that we have abandoned the Homeric style (that is a point which has been conceded over the course of several centuries), but rather more to do with the idea that it was absolutely *necessary* for us to enact such changes. In other words, if we, as a culture, wish to preserve the legacy of the Epic, if we seek to keep alive the genre for future generations of writers, then the primary step towards achieving that goal must be the complete disavowal of a formal system of creative storytelling once it has become obsolete. The form of epic storytelling that existed during the time period of the ancient Greeks is universally

different from the form of epical storytelling that exists in the present paradigm, specifically because the methods and means by which storytellers communicate their narratives have mutated over the course of several millennia.

It is within the confines of the aforementioned poem that Tennyson is able to extrapolate on this essential transition of style. Recounted from a first-person narrative perspective, “The Epic” details the reunion of four university friends (the narrator, the host, a pastor, and a poet), as they spend Christmas Eve drunkenly conversing, first about defunct traditions and the ‘general decay of faith,’ before finally seguing into a discussion of the fictional poet’s attempt at a written epic. The character in question, Everard Hall, is said to have burned his work primarily because “He thought that nothing new was said.../Something so said 't was nothing—that a truth/Looks freshest in the fashion of the day;/God knows; he has a mint of reasons; ask./It pleased *me* well enough.” “Nay, nay,” said Hall, “Why take the style of those heroic times? (lms. 30-35); the subsequent “Morte D’Arthur,” or “Death of Arthur,” we’re told, is the lone surviving evidence of that attempt.

Analyzing Tennyson’s choice of language in this passage is crucial to understanding not only Everhard’s reasons for wishing to destroy his epic, but highlighting the obligation he is under to do so. Tennyson (and by implication his fictional poet) are writing in the age of Romanticism, a paradigm which is most famously associated with promoting the value of ‘individual consciousness’ and ‘individual imagination’ while attempting to break the rigid rules of literary form and ‘artistic expression’ that ran prevalent in generations prior (Rahn, par. 2). In furtherance of attaining this desired evolution, “English Romantic poets had a strong connection with medievalism and mythology. The tales of King Arthur were especially resonant to their imaginations” (par. 2). Thus, while an Arthurian legend recalling the mythic deeds of knights

and warriors might be best suited to the Romantics sensibilities, it's also apparent that a poem which strictly adheres to the long-form style of Homer and the prototypical ancient epics has no purpose being written in the first-half of the nineteenth Century. In essence, the alluded to 'twelve-book epic' that the fictional poet Everhard had created in his youth is an affront to the Romantics who sought to vehemently question and challenge the conventional structures of literary form.

This disconnect is what Tennyson is referring to when, through the 'Morte D' Arthur', he speaks of a work that has not been molded in the 'fashion of the day,' but, rather, attempts to attach itself to the 'fashion' of a paradigm that no longer exists. In fact, the philosophical battle between traditionalists and those Romantics who wished to reinvigorate storytelling through structural changes is personified in the exchange between a mortally wounded Arthur and his sole remaining knight, Sir Bedivere. "Such a sleep/They sleep—the men I loved. I think that we/Shall nevermore, at any future time,/Delight our souls with talk of knightly deeds,/Walking about the gardens and the halls/Of Camelot, as in the days that were" (lms. 67-72). It is this "prediction" of Arthur's, this vision of a lost 'Camelot,' that emphatically resounds in the mindsets of the English Romantics, such as Tennyson. The Arthurian legends, as they were primarily conceived of, as the historical records of mythological quests by an ignoble king and his gallant Knights of the Round Table, are definitively and consequentially dead by the mid-nineteenth Century; in a literal sense there are no more grails to seek, nor dragons to slay. Instead, "we" were more concerned with identifying our place amidst a world that was constantly undergoing a series of technological and industrial innovations. Thus, it was the responsibility of the Romantics to reimagine these epical works within the context of a paradigm that had developed an almost exclusively rationalistic approach to the natural World.

Furthermore, while such a statement is understood to be an artistic lament over the fact that ‘we’ have, in most ways, lost our understanding of the universe such as it was during the Homeric-era, it stands as a resolute reminder that ‘we’ have yet to lose the imaginative spirit which was capable of producing that universal understanding in the first place.

This fact is immeasurably significant in highlighting an important distinction that must be acknowledged when addressing the supposed ‘death of the Epic,’ that being the ultimate difference between our ability to retain the aforementioned imaginative spirit and our willingness to do so. In other words, as our collective knowledge of traditional literary concepts has continually evolved in the two hundred years since Tennyson’s poem, there seems to be a general air of resignation, a lack of imaginative depth, in regard to critical interpretation of epical works. The resulting effect of this intellectual malaise leaves the modern reader disconnected in a sense from the very texts that are revered for their portrayal of humanity, able to study them yet only from a safe critical distance: "We can still admire them, as we admire the other mighty works of our national ancestors, but, sadly, we seem no longer able to make them" (Sutherland, “Little” 19).

Returning to Tennyson’s ‘Morte D’Arthur,’ the decision to vanquish Excalibur emerges as the central conflict between the titular character and his knight, Sir Bedivere. “Thou, therefore, take my brand, Excalibur/Which was my pride...delay not: take Excalibur/And fling him far into the middle mere:/Watch what thou seest, and lightly bring me word” (lms. 78-89). Excalibur, the sword given to Arthur by a mystical creature from beneath the lake, is in many ways representative of an epical figure itself; a bridge to that ancient paradigm where there existed an inextricable connection between humanity and the divine. Consequently, the decision to return Excalibur to the ‘mere’ is, in effect, not only the severing of that physical connection to

the Homeric-paradigm, but is further representative of the Romantics' desire to separate that causal, Neo-Classicist link between the form of an idea and the intended spirit of the idea itself. Sir Bedivere's reluctance to perform the duty which his king has commanded of him is the exemplification of that latter philosophy's refusal to submit to such a radical dissolution, the fear being that without the form, we, the reader, will have no means of comprehending the idea. "And if, indeed, I cast the brand away,/Surely a precious thing, one worthy note,/Should thus be lost forever from the earth,/Which might have pleased the eyes of many men./What good should follow this, if this were done?" (lins. 189-193).

After the fictional poet Everhard has concluded his recitation of the Arthurian legend, an aura of indescribable emptiness seems to simmer among the four friends, punctuated by the reveal that: "It was the tone with which he read--/Perhaps some modern touches here and there/Redeemed it from the charge of nothingness... Then Francis, muttering, like a man ill-used,/ 'There now—that's nothing!' drew a little back,/And drove his heel into the smouldered log..." (lins. 190-199). This heightened sense of deflation which the narrator is experiencing can best be surmised as a lack of emotional connection with the text itself, Tennyson's grim reminder of what can be expected when the core of an epic becomes a slave to its outer form. Of what use is Excalibur to Sir Bedivere if the only man destined to wield such a sword is dead? Similarly, of what use is the form of an Epic if the humanity it is meant to portray is no longer relevant?

While there exists a clear link between Arthur's dying pleas for Sir Bedivere to hurl Excalibur into the sea (compounded by the knight's initial refusals to do so) and a concentrated attempt to strip away a stylistic form which has long lost its impact, what's perhaps most riveting about Tennyson's discourse concerning the Epic are his provocative insinuations towards the conclusion of the poem. Specifically, if Arthur's death and the subsequent destruction of



Excalibur are meant to be representative of that loss of connection between the Romantics and the Homeric-era, then what are we to make of Merlin's premonition regarding Arthur's eventual return? "I perish by this people which I made,--/Tho' Merlin sware that I should come again" (lms. 73-74). On the surface, this statement may contextually be perceived as a tragic requiem for a paradigm on the brink of extinction, where wizards were capable of predicting the future and our glorified heroes would return from the dead. However, its application to the broader discussion of an epic's placement in modern literature allows the reader to interpret this quote not as a memorial to the past but rather a promise for the future; specifically, a pledge that the genre can, *and will*, be resurrected.

It is within the closing lines of the poem where this assurance is most profoundly evident, for as the narrator finds himself lost within the realm of a vivid, pre-dawn dream, there "came a bark that, blowing forward, bore/King Arthur, like a modern gentleman/Of stateliest port; and all the people cried,/'Arthur is come again: he cannot die'" (lms. 206-209). Distinguished most amongst this passage is the way in which Arthur is perceived by the dreamer upon his presentation. Whilst conjuring the fulfillment of Merlin's prophecy, the narrator envisions the epical king not as some gallant warrior shrouded in armor but rather a contemporary of the current paradigm, a 'modern gentleman.' The impact of such imagery allows both, conjurer and reader, the ability to garner the only conclusion possible regarding Arthur's supposed immortality...although the external vessel which carries Arthur has been radically altered since its previous conception, Arthur the beloved leader, is still present; not only present, but joyously decreed to be 'thrice as fair.'

This representation of Arthur, the visual metaphor of a once dead king, revived in the vesture of the modern man and proclaimed as immortal by the people whom he once ruled, is

what allows us, the modern reader, to establish a more concrete foundation for a reasonable belief in the epic's continued existence. It is only when this belief is combined with those aforementioned concepts of the 'inexplicable' and the 'unexplainable,' that we can begin to comprehend the inherent timelessness of the epic. This is a genre whose modern identity should never have been segregated within the confines of a purely physical structure precisely because its original identity was never predicated on that structure to begin with. If that were the case then works such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* would have become culturally irrelevant to readerships centuries ago. We would, as Sutherland suggests, only be able to admire these works from an aesthetic vantage point, however that is clearly not the case. Homeric scholarship, and indeed epical scholarship, has proven to be a fluid animal that undergoes a metamorphosis as it progresses through each successive epoch and generation, and the fact that these works resonate as strongly today as they did at the time of their initial inceptions speaks to those intangible and undefinable elements which comprise their essence. Ultimately, the essence of the epic can best be characterized as that everburning soul of rebellion indiscriminate of time...and it is this soul which invariably possesses and embodies the nucleic identity of *Howl*.

### III. The Internal Dynamics of *Howl*

#### A) The Necessary Disconnect of the Modern Paradigm

Highlighting the separation of the epic from the rigidity of its physical form was a necessary and crucial step in bringing about a proper framework with which to assert *Howl's* claim as one; in other words, if *Howl* is to be an epic then it must demonstrate the basic internal tenants of the genre...it must be a story of "we." Moreover, the "we" that Ginsberg is writing about in the poem must be representative of the current paradigm and not of one that has long since expired.

It must be molded in the fashion of the day otherwise it is absolutely meaningless to us as an epic, much like Tennyson's fictional Everhard who finds his 'Morte D' Arthur' to be suited just as readily for destruction rather than consumption.

Returning focus now to the Homeric epics, for they are the seeds which germinate any Western notions regarding the genre, it is apparent that one of the most significant features which comprise the *internal* makeup of these texts is the tangible connection that exists between humanity and the divine. Not only is humanity consciously aware of the forces which control the universe, but every human being is physically capable of interacting and communicating with these very forces...henceforth known as the gods. The opening lines of *The Iliad* are instrumental in establishing the inseparable bond which existed between these two groups, for when Chryses, high priest to Apollo and Trojan sympathizer, is denied the ransomed return of his daughter from Agamemnon, the affronted god seeks retribution upon the Greeks. "Angered in his heart...he came as night comes down...terrible was the clash that arose from the bow of silver...the corpse fires burned everywhere and did not stop burning." (I 44-52).

Of course, it is Apollo's massacre of the Achaians which proves to be the catalyst for the first real human confrontation of the piece (Agamemnon's claiming of Briseis and Achilles's subsequent refusal to fight) and as such is pivotal in driving forward the overall narrative of the epic. However, on a level that goes deeper than elementary structure or plot device, Apollo's onslaught is emblematic of the paradigm in which the ancient Greeks lived in. The Greeks possessed an innate comprehension of the supernatural forces which dominated their natural world. They knew them to be indomitable, irrational figures of vindictiveness and violence, liable to turn their wraths from man to woman, adult to child, with equal cruelty and indifference. Therefore, while the modern reader might horrifyingly perceive the deaths of

thousands in retaliation for the hubris of one man as overwhelmingly contrary to contemporary/Judeo-Christian notions of justice and fairness, the Greeks understood it to be a natural consequence of the world in which they were inhabiting. Ultimately, the Homeric epics demonstrated that not only was man capable of communicating with the gods but that the gods were equally capable of communicating with man, a concept integral to the comprehension of that particular paradigm. Your crop fields have been ravaged by pestilence and drought? You must have angered Zeus in some way. You found yourself shipwrecked on a suddenly wild sea? Poseidon has it in for you. Your army has unexpectedly suffered massive losses in battle? Best to appease the gods and offer a sacrifice in their name. It was this direct and irrevocable relationship that defined the Homeric paradigm and subsequently characterized the foundations of storytelling that emerged from it.

Flash-forward roughly three-thousand years to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century and that inherent connection between the natural world and the supernatural world has effectively evaporated from the common cultural identity. There was no longer any definite rationale or explanation for the sometimes horrid events that plagued the modern man, specifically because the modern man's belief in the definite genesis of those events had disappeared. The story of "we" was no longer about accepting our place within the universe but instead a dire lamentation over the fact that we did not seem to even have a place in that very universe; or, broken down into simpler terms, whilst humanity was still perfectly capable of communicating their innermost fears and desires to the gods, it was the gods themselves who had become invisible and unheard.

This existential anxiety, otherwise known as the Age of Disconnectedness, is the paradigm which the World finds itself in by the time Ginsberg has undertaken to write *Howl*. Furthermore, it is that lost connection, not some lengthy narrative about the heroism of ancient

warriors or mythological beings, which must position itself as the dominant theme of the poem if *Howl* is to be taken seriously as an epic. Ginsberg comprehends the deep significance of this abandonment, and, as such, seeks to bludgeon his readers over the head with the demoralizing and disturbing effects which this action has had on the modern world. "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving/hysterical naked/...angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the/starry dynamo in the machinery of night... (lns. 1-3). The epical connotations and images contained within these first few lines are almost impossible to ignore: angels, heaven, a connection to something ancient, 'starry dynamos,' the engine that makes the universe run...*my generation*.

The combination of these phrases already alludes to a spiritually starved and defeated populace yearning to belong in a universe that once had meaning many years ago but the simple utilization of the past tense, 'I saw,' perpetuates a distinct sense of a concrete reality that is inescapable. 'Abandonment' is defined as a state of being where one has been forsaken in the most complete and total way imaginable. In Ginsberg's vision of America, the populace have abandoned and been abandoned by the very source of meaning they wish to retrieve, and as a result of this irreconcilable conundrum, it is ultimately impossible for the modern paradigm to ever return to that state of collective connection which characterized the Homeric epoch. And yet, despite this obvious discrepancy between the two paradigms, it would be a mistake to assume that the ancient epics and *Howl* are independent entities incapable of existing within that very same universe.

As it concerns the story of creation the ancient Greeks purported a cosmogony that, in parts, is strikingly similar in tone to the desperate bleakness which encapsulates *Howl*. Specifically, at the time of its inception the Greeks believed that the universe was simply nothing

more than a shapeless, formless void, one in which no gods ruled and humanity was not yet conceived; the name of this abyss was Chaos and its presence was infinite and comprised the extent of life's totality. Likewise, the universe which Ginsberg presents at the outset of *Howl* is the very manifestation of the one in the Greek origin myth: a cosmos where Chaos is omnipresent and is the unquestionable reality of life, the reality of a society whose greatest 'minds' have been decimated by their own insanity, debased to nothing more than wild junkies yearning to get high and presents a natural world so ugly that even the sky is diagnosed with the sickly descriptor of 'tubercular' (Ins. 1, 50).

Ginsberg's testimony to this uniformity of chaos is, in effect, a forthright declaration that 'we' do not live in a world separate from the one which 'we' lived in during the Trojan War. The universe is just as chaotic today as it was three thousand years ago yet our *perception* of that universe has been irrevocably altered. Something had to have changed to affect and distort that perception, and in conjunction with this belief it is apparent that the subsequent divergence between the origin myth and Ginsberg's America occurs only after the former's inclusion of the divine presence. "Then out of the void appeared Erebus, the unknowable place where death dwells, and Night. All else was empty, silent, endless, dark. Then, Love was born bringing along the beginning of order." ("Creation," par. 1).

'Order' is understood by all to be the immortal adversary to 'Chaos,' perpetually counteracting the latter's attempts to disrupt. It is this existential balance among contrary forces which initiates the universe's movement towards a more natural state of harmony in the ancient paradigm. "From Love came Light and Day...then Night alone produced Doom, Fate, Death, Sleep, Dreams, Nemesis, and others that come to man out of darkness." ("Creation," par. 1-2). Without order there would be no balance, and without balance humanity would not be able to

exist in such a state of chaos and confusion. Therefore, the ‘order’ which ‘Love’ brings to the universe becomes the tool which enables the ancient Greeks to forge that connected and concrete relationship with the cosmos. It enabled them to successfully grasp universal concepts which would otherwise be unfathomable and unbearable, thereby gaining a sense of totality in truth.

Since such connectivity is nonexistent in the modern paradigm, Ginsberg has replicated the structure of the universe, as the ancient Greeks initially comprehended it, for the express purpose of showing what happens when ‘Order’ is never allowed to flourish. ‘Love’ is in effect an absentee force amongst this sea of chaos. The resulting *imbalance* created by this discord is ultimately what prevents ‘us’ from achieving that totality of understanding which defines the Homeric paradigm, leaving “the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years.” (Ginsberg, *Howl* ln. 78).

The most provocative and powerful weapon in Ginsberg’s arsenal, however, is the very first word which confronts the reader, that being the title of the poem itself. Derived from a scene in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Ginsberg finds deep inspiration in the grief-stained speech offered by the play’s titular character; “Howl, howl, howl, howl! O! You are men of stones/...She’s gone forever/I know when one is dead and when one lives/She’s dead as Earth.” (V.iii.302-306). Lear of course is lashing out in despair over the death of his youngest daughter Cordelia, the only daughter who truly loved him. However, Cordelia symbolizes more than the tragedy that is the loss of a child. She is a woman who embodies the virtues of truth and unconditional *love*, seeking to bring *balance* to Lear’s madness after he is rejected by his two eldest daughters. As such, her subsequent death is symbolic of the extinguishment of those values. When Kent and Edgar, a pair of characters who exemplify the human merits of loyalty and integrity, discover

Lear in his grief they are seized with such an undefinable terror that they cannot help but ask “Is this the promis’d end?/Or image of that horror?” (V.iii.265-266)

As Kent and Edgar contemplate the ramifications of Cordelia’s death, their concern seems to extend beyond the immediate loss of a single life. Instead they are fearful of the impact which that loss will have on those who are still living, namely Lear, for when innocence and love have disappeared what is left for those who remain but despair and grief? This is part of the inherent makeup of the genre of tragedy; a character will experience some painfully personal loss as a result of his own hubris, achieving such insight only after it is too late. However, when that loss is expanded to affect not just a singular individual but an entire group of people, when Kent and Edgar’s fears becomes a foreboding of some exponentially greater calamity that is set to befall mankind, then the tone of all subsequent observations must shift away from a purely tragic perspective and towards an epical one. In essence, whilst his daughter’s death is of great personal loss to Lear, when placed in the context of an epical discussion, it is equally representative of the loss that all of humanity will experience in the absence of Cordelia’s virtues, leaving the world in a state of such existential grief that it can be considered nothing else other than doomsday.

Barring an outright declaration of intent from the author himself, it is virtually impossible to positively interpret any writer’s true motivation at the conception of their work. However, given the obvious influences of Shakespeare in Ginsberg’s writings and literary philosophy (it was during his time lecturing at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute when Ginsberg was quoted as saying “Shakespeare is about the best thing to read if you want to write poetry...” (“History” par. 17)), it would seem a high probability that not only was Ginsberg consciously aware of Lear’s plaintive monologue for Cordelia, but that this very scene factored heavily into his crafting of the poem itself.



To 'howl' is to let out a cry of anguish so painful and bitter that the only sound it can be compared to is that of a wolf or wild dog; it is by its very definition a concept that is furiously and instinctively animal, foreign, *inhuman*. It is the only sound that Lear can make upon the discovery of his daughter's body, precisely because he comprehends that to be cut off from Cordelia's love is tantamount to losing his own semblance of identity as a human being, causing him to rhetorically question why even the most basest of animals should be allowed to live whilst his purest daughter lies breathless and dead. "And my poor fool is hanged: no, no, no/life?/Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,/And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,/Never, never, never, never." (Shakespeare V.iii.308-310). From this perspective, Lear is howling because he inherently knows that without Cordelia he has effectively *become* an animal, no better than the rodent or canine that remains just as living as he does. This tortured realization is ultimately, and quite literally, the device that sends the king to his death, for it is only a matter of moments after this epiphany that the unendurable totality of his present circumstance overwhelms him into an unrecoverable state of shock. "Look on her. Look, her lips,/Look there, look there." (V.iii.312-313).

For Ginsberg to title his poem after the same animal and inhuman cry expressed by Shakespeare's Lear it is as if the former is effectively declaring that his is a poem not only about the loss of meaning that occurs when love and order fail to bring balance, but about the subsequent inhumanness which follows that demise. By appropriating Lear's emotional breakdown at the end of the play and utilizing it as the tool with which to frame his initial offering of *Howl*, Ginsberg is able to successfully acquire those same ethereal feelings of numbness and desperation which afflict Lear and transplant them into his vision of the modern paradigm. Furthermore, much like the titular character in Shakespeare's tragedy, Ginsberg draws

adept comparisons between this disconnect in the post-Cordelia universe and the animalistic/inhuman behaviors that accompany such loss.

This association is not uncommon amongst the ancient epics, particularly in the case of Homer. Referring back to the central conflict in Book I of *The Iliad*, specifically the argument between Achilles and Agamemnon, the language of Homer demonstrates and embodies similar parallels between these Shakespearian themes of inhumanness and disconnectedness. When Achilles, enraged at the disrespect being shown to him, lashes out at the Greek king, he does so in a way that not only questions Agamemnon's integrity but his humanity as a whole. "You wine sack, with a dog's eyes, with a deer's heart. Never/once have you taken courage in your heart to arm with your people/...for in such things you see death." (I 223-228). The significance of Achilles' tumultuous outburst is two-fold; first he is able to quantify the severity of Agamemnon's hubris by comparing him several times to an animal, as if his actions in this circumstance amount to him being less than human. Moreover, his assertion that Agamemnon has failed to arm for battle among the Achaians is tantamount to suggesting that Agamemnon is not a true Greek because he has allowed his life to be controlled by the lingering notion of death...that he is, in effect, disconnected from the universal truths which every Greek comprehended.

There are consistent references to an insatiable, almost beastly hunger amongst the disconnected populace in *Howl*, whether it is seen in the cannibalistic druggies who 'bit detectives in the neck,' or the homeless who scoured the filthy basement of the East River in search of crab, or the deranged idealists who threw themselves upon the road kill of meat trucks believing it to be an egg (Ins. 34-53). The irony and tragedy of this circumstance, however, resides in the fact that they have been cut off from the one thing that could bring them salvation

and relief, i.e. Cordelia. Therefore, while it is evident even to the most casual reader that a gluttonous desire to consume blatantly displays itself as an underlying yet definite current throughout the poem, it is an appetite that cannot be sustained via the traditional forms of nourishment, that is to say food and drink. No, for the intense hunger that afflicts these people doesn't just emanate from the body but from *the soul* as well. It is indicative of an unadulterated sense of desperation which clings to the universe in *Howl*, as if the people who inhabit this world will suddenly perish if they do not feed themselves on a near constant basis.

Therein lies the fundamental tragedy of *Howl*, not just in the hopeless and collective inability of man to connect with the universe the way his ancestors once did, but in the inexorable fact that this disconnect is representative of man's inability to connect himself with his soul; 'we' have effectively lost the certainty of our own humanity. Moreover, while it is evident that Ginsberg is seeking to personify the characteristics of wild animals as a means of demonstrating that very inhumanity in the face of this spiritual disconnect, the far more shocking consequence of this schizm is what happens after this epiphany is reached. Specifically, if 'we' are meant to play the role of Lear in Ginsberg's epic, debasing 'ourselves' to animals in the wake of Cordelia's/Love's death, then it must follow that, like Lear, the realization of 'our' own disconnect and inhumanity can only lead to one possible conclusion, that being 'we' too must die. Such a representation of death cannot be shown in the purely physical sense, however, since unlike Lear 'we' are not one person but a generation of peoples. Moreover, 'we' are a generation which continues to breathe and exist in this universe far after the discovery of 'our' inhumanness. Therefore, the death which 'we' must undergo is of a collective and comprehensive fashion, not literal but existential.

In many ways a physical death would be far more appealing to the modern paradigm than the agony which ‘our’ souls have been subjected to. Elevated to its most elegant and purist form, Death is meant to be a final relief for those afflicted with immense suffering, specifically because it brings about an end to that very pain. As such, the concept of ‘suicide,’ or physical death, is seemingly glorified by Ginsberg as he recalls those who “...created great suicidal dramas on the apartment cliff banks of the Hudson under the wartime blur floodlight of the moon & their heads shall be crowned with laurel in oblivion...” (ln. 46). ‘Laurel’ being synonymous with victory and moments of great achievement—most notably during the ancient Greek epoch—is bestowed in the modern paradigm as an award in memoriam to those who had the courage to admit that they were already dead and made the decision to end their spiritual suffering by killing off their physical form. For those who remain, however, the pain of their disconnected existence is so burdensome and extreme, their inhumanness so complete, that their profound rapacity is necessary to anesthetize themselves to this very agony: “Who ate fire in paint hotels or drank Turpentine in Paradise Alley, death, or/purgatoried their torsos night after night/with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock/and endless balls...” (Ins. 10-11).

Ginsberg’s use of the word ‘Purgatory’ is an obvious allusion to the torment which the modern man puts himself through in an effort to attain heavenly reward. Defined by Merriam-Webster as an ‘intermediate state after death for expiatory purification,’ it is of particular import to traditional Roman Catholic doctrines concerning the afterlife, primarily serving as the benchmark for souls who died in the grace of God but are at present unworthy to reach Heaven. While the philosophical and theological implications of such a concept have been propagated as far back as the infancy of Christianity, it wasn’t until its exploration in Dante’s epic *Purgatorio* that Western Literature allowed itself to write about Purgatory from a physical and personal

point-of-view, or, as the introduction to Robert Durling's translation of the Italian epic succinctly purports: "It may well be that Dante's poem would have been inconceivable a century earlier, given the relatively unarticulated status of Purgatory before the twelfth century. Dante's Purgatory represents a marked advance in rendering the concept concrete and systematic." (6).

Because of his paradigm's indissoluble link with the Catholic Church, Dante frames the structure of his *Divina Commedia* from the perspective of a Christian belief system. This includes the physical conception of the afterlife itself, in addition to its inhabitants, with Dante making reference to the fact that the mountain of Purgatory was formed upon Satan's defeat in Heaven and subsequent fall to Earth (*Inferno* XXXIV. 121-126). Additionally, each level of the mountain represents a corresponding sin which the dead must pay penance for before they can move on to the next level, with the summit, of course, being the doorway to Heaven. Ginsberg's vision of Purgatory, however, does not compute with such a mythology, precisely because his paradigm's identity is not formulated on the same principles as that of Dante's. Thus, while Dante presents Purgatory as both a necessary moralistic and humanistic journey that every human need endure if they wish to achieve that connectivity with the supernatural order, the disconnectedness that infects the modern paradigm is so devastating that it renders any attempted penance futile and obsolete.

The most significant component of the idea of Purgatory, or rather the afterlife in general, is the fact that it is a state which can, and should only, be reached upon death. The essence of Christianity's beliefs in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries were that the physical body needed to die before the soul could begin its arduous process of correction and purification or surrender itself to eternal punishment and damnation, thus the inclusions of both Virgil and Beatrice as Dante's supernatural guides throughout the trilogy. It is through their wisdom and their connection with

the supernatural world that Dante is able to acquire the knowledge necessary for the betterment of his own humanity once he returns to the natural world. When Dante first descends into Hell he is refused passage by Charon, the ferryman, principally because he is not dead. “Away with thee! For by another road/And other ferries thou shalt make the shore,/Not here; a lighter skiff must bear thy load.” (*Inferno* III. 91-93). It is only when Virgil commands Charon to step aside that Dante is finally allowed entry across the river Acheron. A similar scene likewise unfolds between Virgil and Cato (the gatekeeper at the base of the mountain) during the opening Canto of *Purgatorio*; “This man has not yet seen his terms of days,/Yet in his crazy wickedness he drew/So near it, he had but short breathing space.” (I 58-60). Without the presence of these aforementioned guides, Dante would be incapable of even undertaking such a journey through any phase of the afterlife specifically because he is still *alive*.

In *Howl* there are no spirits to guide ‘us’ through the land of the dead, nor can ‘we’ attain any knowledge which will make this odyssey worthwhile. There is no Ithaca for ‘us’ to return to since ‘our’ connection with that eternal home has been long abandoned. And it is this latter reality which makes the former even more disheartening, for it is the explicit purpose of Purgatory to purify one’s soul before its final ascent into Heaven. Dante conceived of Heaven as the place where man could finally return to that state of ancient connectivity and balance, not only with God but with himself as well. “Whose being from threshold unto threshold thus/Through all this realm doth all the realm so please/And please the King that here in–willeth us/To His own will; and His will is our peace...” (*Paradiso* III. Lns. 82-85). When balance becomes impossible, however, as it is for the modern paradigm, when humanity’s comprehension of ‘His’ will remains an unsolvable mystery, then it stands to reason that there can be no peace for those who remain. The act of purification becomes a needless and futile

exercise, leaving 'us' to simply exist in a "...motionless world of Time..." without a definitive reason or understanding of why. (Ginsberg *Howl*. Ln. 12), Thus, Ginsberg's description of the debasement, the 'purgatory' that the 'we' in *Howl* put 'our' bodies through, is indicative of a position of presence that can only be described as *dead*.

It is in Ginsberg's presentation of the side effects to America's collective spiritual fracture represents paradoxical and competitively illogical desires of the modern paradigm most clearly emerges, for if the soul is the essence of what makes 'us' human, how can we feed that very essence if we no longer consider ourselves as human? If all 'we' are animals caught in the midst of our own disjointed howls? The answer, of course, is that we cannot. There is nothing that can satisfy such hunger because there is nothing that can reestablish the connection which 'we' once had. This inhumanness extends beyond the constraints of the natural world, for it is by its very identity something ethereal and otherworldly. Ginsberg so much as broadcasts this notion in the poem's fourth line: "who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the/supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of/cities contemplating jazz..." Of particular import here is the phrase 'supernatural darkness,' for its double-layered meaning addresses the fact that not only are 'we' in a spiritual darkness so profoundly unlike anything 'we' have experienced, such that it can only be described as otherworldly, but that 'we' are literally in the dark when it comes our epical connection with the supernatural itself. 'We' are incapable of seeing what was once there because the darkness has effectively blinded us to our own humanity. Ginsberg's use of this phrase is highly significant to the epical connotations of *Howl*, for not only does it point out 'our' inability to connect with a source of balance in the universe but it also highlights the resulting blindness this brings to 'our' own humanity.

### B) Visions of Blake and 'Our' Spiritual Blindness

It is 'our' collective loss of sight which Ginsberg finds most disturbing in his assessment of America and the modern man. As a whole, the concept of vision, particularly foresight, is integral to understanding both the internal and thematic construction of the ancient epics. Primarily, it was used as a means of contributing to the overall narrative plot of these works, often unveiling itself in the form of 'seers' or 'augurs' who would directly aid the protagonists of the piece with meaningful messages in regards to their journeys: Theoklymenos prophesizes the massacre that Odysseus is to bring against Penelope's suitors, Helenus advises Aeneas on the route he must take to find his new homeland, Achilles was informed as a child that he would either live to be a dull, old man or die as a brave, young one. On a secondary and more fundamental level, however, foresight is a reflection of that universal balance which enabled man to actively comprehend the oftentimes inscrutable nature of the universe.

In *The Iliad*, this role is portrayed by Kalchas, recognized and revered amongst his people as "far the best of the bird interpreters,/who knew all things that were, the things to come and the things past,/who guided into the land of Ilion the ships of the Achains/through that seercraft of his own that Phoibos Apollo gave him" (I 69-72). The 'seercraft' which Homer refers to in this passage is the divinical gift of sight which allows Kalchas to fully fathom the motivation behind Apollo's initial anger towards the Achains (the refusal to ransom Chryses's daughter), and subsequently inform the Greeks of the means to rectify this injustice. It is solely because of Kalchas's intrinsic link with Apollo, an epical representation of that aforementioned ancient connection between man and the divine, that he is empowered with the ability to accurately see



the mistakes of the past, comprehend their significance to the future and, most importantly, present a proper course of action in the present moment. It stands to reason therefore that as 'our' relationship with this connection has continually deteriorated through each successive paradigm shift since the epoch of Homer, so too has our ability for foresight and revelation.

Astute readers may recall the prophet character of Elijah in Melville's 1851 epic *Moby Dick*, who accosts Ishmael and Queequeg immediately prior to their embarking on the *Pequod* to inform them of their doomed voyage and Ahab's insanity (Melville 100-102). Since Melville is writing in a paradigm where man's relationship with a cosmic source of truth has already been severely fractured, the two sailors are unable to fully comprehend the direness of Elijah's warnings and consider his visions to be nothing more than the incoherent ramblings of a madman. "But Elijah passed on, without seeming to notice us. This relieved me; and once more, and finally as it seemed to me, I pronounced him in my heart, a humbug" (103).

A similar incident likewise occurs later in the narrative when the the *Pequod's* crew come across the plague-stricken whaling vessel *Jeroboam* and the delirious cult-like leader Gabriel in her company. Through Ishmael's narration it is told that Gabriel, having been raised as a 'prophet' amongst a community of 'Shakers,' signed up for the *Jeroboam* and promptly incited a bloodless coup, declaring himself to be the archangel Gabriel and the 'deliver of the isles' and 'vicar-general of all Oceanica' (342-343). His manner of appearance is considered strange, even amongst the already unique fashion of the whaling brotherhood, he's instantly recognized by Stubb even though the second-mate had never laid eyes on him before, and his words to the *Pequod* are as indispensable to the sailors as those of the epic prophets: "'Hast thou seen the White Whale?' demanded Ahab, when the boat drifted back. 'Think, think of thy whale-boat, stoven and sunk! Beware of the horrible tail!'" (344).

Much like Ishmael's assessment of Elijah, these revelations and warnings are treated with skepticism by Ahab who never once addresses Gabriel throughout the whole of the scene. The entirety of his interactions are with the *Jeroboam's* captain, and while certain members of the *Pequod's* crew later balk at these threats and omens coming from the self-professed prophet, they are completely lost on Ahab, the one person who they're meant to reach. He never once gives an indication that he so much as hears Gabriel's frantic calls, let alone that he has any intention of following them, precisely because the evergrowing disconnect between man and his comprehension of the universe has obscured the signs that are telling Ahab to turn back, that his mission to kill Moby Dick has been foreordained from the start.

By the time Ginsberg commences work on his epic in 1955, the 'seercraft' which steered 'our' ancient ancestors through that universal sea of chaos is not simply obscured as it was during the time of Melville...it has been completely destroyed on those very waters. 'Our' relationship with the divine presence has become so corroded that the idea of foresight is no longer applicable to any work purporting to be a 'story of we.' Hence, Ginsberg's decision to utilize the past tense in his creation of the epic serves to further reinforce these initial themes of loss, isolation and abandonment: "who *vanished* into nowhere zen New Jersey...who *disappeared* into the volcanoes of Mexico...who *faded* out in vast sordid movies..." (*Howl* lns 20-44). In effect, everything that follows the initial admission of 'I *saw*,' particularly in the first two sections of the poem, is told from the perspective of a witness who is testifying as to events that have already happened, a seer who is incapable of performing the duty that is required of him. Moreover, what makes this spiritual blindness personally upsetting to Ginsberg is the fact that it is a condition he believed himself afflicted with.

The story is as well known to Ginsberg enthusiasts almost as much as the works of the author himself, and it is one that resonates so strongly with us precisely because it is filled with the same cogently blurred mixture of ‘absolute reality’ and ‘supernatural ecstasy’ that dominates the universe which is so clearly laid out in *Howl*. One summer day in 1948, while reading the poetry of William Blake in his Harlem apartment, Ginsberg essentially experiences an elaborate and startling hallucination wherein Blake appears to him as the disembodied voice of the past and proceeds to recite several of his own poems to the burgeoning yet directionless writer. The effect which this moment had on Ginsberg was akin to a spiritual epiphany of the most comprehensive nature, supposedly awakening in him a previously dormant understanding of the universe and his place in it and leading him to the belief that he had heard an emissary of God himself: “Looking out the window, through the window at the sky, suddenly it seemed that I saw into the depths of universe, by looking simply into the ancient sky... and this was the very ancient place I was talking about...I suddenly realized this existence was it!” (“Allen” par 67). Unfortunately for the young poet, that unexplainably spiritual and perhaps mystical connection which he found through the apparition of Blake was of an ephemeral and fleeting quality, it was not meant to last, and over the course of his subsequent existence Ginsberg would experiment with various psychedelic and psychotropic drugs in an effort to reestablish that collective feeling of consciousness he had spontaneously been inspired with on that summer day.

It would be a futile exercise to debate the exact origin of this supposed vision. Whether it was the result of intoxication, insanity, emotional disturbance, divine inspiration or some indeterminate combination of any of these factors is not for us to say, nor should we attempt to, for identifying the precise answer is ultimately inconsequential in determining *Howl*'s place as an epic. Instead the sole aspect of importance that needs be accounted for in regards to this

episode, the only evidence that should essentially matter to us, is the notion that Ginsberg *believed* such a vision to be true; that the ethereal presence in his Harlem apartment was as real and tangible to him as a live human being reading poetry would be to us. Undoubtedly, to hear Ginsberg's account of his experience is akin to an epic story in its own right, himself declaring it to be his personal *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* and that the voice of the poem awoke his senses into a "deeper understanding...because the voice was so completely tender and beautifully...ancient. Like the voice of the Ancient of Days." (par. 67).

Likewise it is highly appropriate that this 'ancient voice' which spoke to Ginsberg came through in the form of William Blake, a poet who placed an inordinate emphasis on the kinetic relationship between man and his place in the universe. As Alfred Kazin writes in his introduction to *The Portable Blake*, Blake "was a libertarian obsessed with God; a mystic who reversed the mystical pattern, for he sought man as the end of his search." (3). As such, his influence on *Howl* extends far beyond the lone mention of his name in the poem's opening lines, "who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes hallucinating Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy among the scholars of war..." (Ginsberg *Howl*. Ln. 6). Ginsberg so much as states this fact in his 1959 article for the *Evergreen Review*, entitled "Notes Written on Finally Recording *Howl*," where he provides a brief commentary in regards to his overall thematic approach concerning the poem. Of particular note is his explanation for the structure of the text, successively labeling the three distinct parts as the chaotic odyssey of 'the Lamb in America', with 'the lamb,' of course, being an obvious reference to Blake ("Notes" par 5).

In Blake's 1789 poetry collection *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, he describes 'the lamb' as the ultimate symbol of that aforementioned connection between humanity and the universe, the way we *used* to understand it, as a totality of truth and balance. Aside from its

obvious Christian connotations, 'the lamb' is an animal whose personality and beauty are defined by its unilateral qualities of meekness and gentility. It is because of these features that the lamb has become a metaphorical symbol of perfect innocence and faultlessness. In this regard, 'the lamb' perhaps best represents that innocence which Lukacs identifies as one of the main components to the epic's personality. Therefore, when Blake asks the question 'Little Lamb, who made thee?/Dost thou know who made thee?' and immediately answers 'Little Lamb, I'll tell thee,/Little Lamb, I'll tell thee...' the perception is that the speaker is in possession of some higher universal knowledge, for he possesses both the questions and answers to 'our' identity. "He is called by thy name,/For he calls himself a Lamb.../I a child, & thou a lamb,/We are called by his name." (Blake 85-86), the essence of this union between 'he' and 'I' being...you want to know who made you? God made you, for you are him and he is you. In this duality there is certainty, the certainty being that man and his creator are inextricably linked because they are one and the same.

Ginsberg, however, is not writing his epic in a time of innocence, i.e., truth and balance being the sum total of certainty. It has already been established that such features are non-existent in the America that is being depicted in *Howl*; Cordelia is dead, 'the lamb' is dead, innocence is gone and all 'we' are left in is a time of inhumanity and uncertainty. Thus, when Ginsberg describes the first section of *Howl* as being a 'lament for the lamb,' he is effectively declaring that it is a lament for the dissolution of that very union which brought us balance and order in those childlike times of innocence; it is an elegy for a time where 'we' were unquestionably connected with our universal meaning. This was the epiphany that followed that strange sense of universal wonder and comprehension which infused Ginsberg's identity during his 'Blake Vision.' He saw a self-fulfilling and soul-fulfilling glimpse into a universal truth, a

truth, which when presented through an ‘ancient voice,’ i.e., an epic voice, revealed to him the ultimate and immortal beauty of man’s place within that universe...and was subsequently prevented from seeing it again. This inability to view ‘our’ future as a means of directing ‘our’ present course of action has enshackled the modern man with only a vision of the past, that lack of sight which emanates from ‘our’ universal disconnect. When one combines this fact with the intense and personal significance which Ginsberg placed on his ‘Blake Vision,’ it becomes apparent that the voice in *Howl* which relays the tragedy of America’s urban despair is not simply the voice of a youth who has been broken down by the world around him, but the desperate cry of a modern-day prophet to show the world what it can no longer see.

Part II, in particular, seems to emphasize the depths of Ginsberg’s rage and despair in the wake of this spiritual blindness. “Visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles! ecstasies! gone down the American river...” (Ginsberg *Howl*. Ln. 90). All that ‘we’ once considered to be fundamental truths of the universe have been abandoned at the false altar of American capitalism and competition, no hope of their salvation as ‘we’ once knew them. Moreover, since the modern ‘seer’ possesses only hindsight, ‘we’ can receive no guidance or knowledge which will enable us to relieve the burden of this otherworldly anger. Therefore the only message which Ginsberg, as prophet, can give ‘us’ is a testimony as to *who* and *what* brought about this desolation and destruction. “What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up/their brains and imagination?/Moloch!...” (lms. 79-80).

References to Moloch date as far back as the Old Testament, however his first appearance in epic literature doesn’t come until Milton’s *Paradise Lost* where he is identified as the first angel to fall after Lucifer’s rebellion in heaven. “...horrid king besmeared with blood/Of human sacrifice, and parents’ tears,/Their children’s cries unheard that passed through

the fire/To his grim idol...he led by fraud to build/His temple right against the temple of God..." (I 392-402). It is believed that Canaanite parents would offer their children as living sacrifices upon his altar and whilst the image of a demonic fire god consuming the charred remains of children is awful in its own right, far more horrifying to the present paradigm is what Moloch is representative of in Ginsberg's America. He is "solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars...Moloch in whom I sit lonely..." (lms. 80-86), the personification of that lost connection to the divine order, the manifestation of 'our' desperate attempt to replace that loss, and the subsequent disgust 'we' feel with 'ourselves' when 'we' comprehend that there is nothing which can replace it.

When Ginsberg describes the urban landscape of his world, he does so in a language that indicates that 'we' have substituted 'our' own metropolises for those very temples which the Canaanites constructed for Moloch: "Moloch whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless Jehovahs! Moloch whose factories dream and croak in the fog! Moloch whose smokestacks and antennae crown the cities..." (ln. 84). The cities which we perceive to be the undeniable signature of American ingenuity, the fountainheads from which our economic livelihood flows, are no more than fraudulent houses of worship to a false god. "They broke their back lifting Moloch to Heaven! Pavements, trees, radios/tons! lifting the city to Heaven which exists and is everywhere around us!" (ln. 89).

It is in Moloch where 'our' blindness is most acutely felt, for not only does he prevent 'us' from seeing what 'we' once already knew to be true, he definitively prevents 'us' from seeing what 'we' can do to salvage this fact, for he is the destroyer of foresight and his eyes "are a thousand blind windows...invisible suburbs...blind capitals..." (lms. 84-88). Consequently, 'we' are also blind to the sacrifice which 'we' are submitting to his altar, the unforgivable

sacrifice of ‘our’ children. While one might be inclined to question why Ginsberg chooses not to depict any literal representations of children being offered up as sacrifices by their parents, the answer lies in the epical nature of *Howl*, for the relationship between ‘us’ and the sacrificial lambs that ‘we’ are offering ‘our’ false god in the poem may not necessarily be that of parent/child in the traditional sense of the phrase but more of the collective sense. Rather, the spiritual blindness which Ginsberg’s America is suffering from is causing it to sacrifice the welfare of the America of the future, thereby reinforcing and strengthening the power this false idol holds over ‘us’ until his ‘love’ and his ‘soul’ consume ‘our’ natural resources and the only thing he leaves ‘us’ is a ‘cloud of sexless hydrogen,’ a physical apocalypse to rival the totality of ‘our’ existential one (ln. 85). Such an interpretation would seemingly coincide with the desperate urgency which Ginsberg possesses in the closing stanza of part II, a visceral and sweeping display of mass suicide which finally brings an end to those ‘best minds’ who had lost sight of who they once were: “Real holy laughter in the river! They saw it all! the wild eyes! the holy yells! They bade farewell! They jumped off the roof! to solitude! waving! carrying flowers! Down to the river! into the street!” (ln. 93).

What is most important to understand about the notion of the ‘modern’ or ‘disconnected seer’ is that while his words can only dwell on past experiences, that is to say that we comprehend the fact that everything he tells us has already taken place and therefore cannot be altered or changed, this does not mean that those words cannot have an impact on the future. Much like the form of the epic itself, the seer’s perspective and ‘our’ subsequent ability to relate to that perspective have been radically transformed with each successive paradigm shift. Whereas the ancient prophets of Greece and Rome possessed an intrinsic link with the forces that controlled the universe, the modern seer remains incapable of achieving such vision thus leaving



him in a state of spiritual blindness. The one aspect of the 'seer/paradigm' component which must remain *unchanged*, however, is the element of universal truth which the seer brings to that paradigm. It does not matter if such truth is rooted in foresight, hindsight, or some variation of the two, but for a prophet to be effective he must speak from a position of truth. Taking this into account, it stands to reason that even though the seer in *Howl* is irrevocably blinded to the cosmic forces of balance and order that his ancient predecessors were gifted with seeing, so is his paradigm; and as a result the only means by which he can communicate truth, i.e., tell the 'story of we,' is through his testimony of past events. The subsequent implication of this necessary dynamic between seer and truth is that while hindsight inevitably prevents the Americans in *Howl* from regaining the innocence which they have lost, the truth of the situation may be of benefit to the *proceeding* generations of Americans.

Returning to Ginsberg's interview with *The Paris Review* in 1966, he muses that "Prophecy...is not that you actually know that the bomb will fall in 1942. It's that you know and feel something that somebody knows and feels in a hundred years. And maybe articulate it in a hint—a concrete way that they can pick up on in a hundred years." ("Allen" par 40.) This conception is integral to understanding the soul inherent in both Ginsberg's verse and his primary identity as a poet. In connection with his own work, and *Howl* in particular, he believes that while literal interpretations of the images depicted therein may be confusing in nature, not only to the reader but to himself as well, they are images which still need to be written down and spoken aloud precisely because they contain the essence of truth; and it is his responsibility, as seer, to divulge that truth: "I don't know whether it even makes sense. Sometimes I do 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..." (par. 40). When combining the

epical qualities of Ginsberg's recognition of *Howl* (collective truth relatable in a universal manner) with the spiritual blindness characteristic of the modern paradigm, it becomes clear that the nihilistic indifference and existential despair which infects the universe in the poem is the recounting of a prophet who believes it to be too late to stop the deterioration of order and balance within his own universe. Consequently, he hopes that his relaying of 'our' spiritual abandonment and subsequent blindness will positively impact the generation yet to come, essentially stating "this is what happened to *my* generation...do not let it happen to yours."

While it is the responsibility of the seer to interpret and speak these universal truths as he perceives them, it is not his duty to subsequently act on those very prophecies. His visions, whether connected or disconnected, are meant for humanity's collective ear because it is the responsibility of humanity to act upon those his words (Kalchas can inform Agamemnon as to the reasons why Apollo is angry but only Agamemnon has the ability to placate the god's anger and bring an end to the suffering of the Greeks). Given this inevitability it is apparent that the only way in which the generations whom follow Ginsberg, the ones whom are a hundred years away and whom the author most desires to connect with, can effectively heed such a warning as that in *Howl* is to rectify their inherent connection with the universe. They must find a way to bring balance to the chaos that had previously overwhelmed 'our' identities and turned 'us' into broken, despair-filled animals; as a founder of the so-called Beat Generation, it is apparent that Ginsberg felt the connection which 'we' must forge in order to regain 'our' humanity was to be found in the music of the day.

#### IV. The Reclamation of 'Our' Humanity Through Jazz

##### A) The Musical Nature of the Epic

It was previously established via the comparison of classical music and rock-and-roll how it was possible for genres, identified primarily by their seemingly disparate external features, to be inherently and intangibly connected through a cogent examination of their internal dynamics. Subsequently, such a critique was necessary insofar as to demonstrate the viability of a modern epic, or rather disprove the notion that a work need to possess the same physical structure as Homer and the ancient epics in order to be declared as such. This analysis, however, limited solely as a means of questioning formal notions of genre and literary identity, does not take into account the full and invaluable impact which a more comprehensive overview of the relationship between music and the epic would afford.

Music has always played a significant role in the development of epic literature, with historians and archeologists believing that the first epic poems were descended from various oral traditions of storytelling, most likely characterized by public recitations of the ancient works to a small gathering of people. Due to its prevalence long before the development of the written word, with the University of Idaho estimating there to be a three-hundred year gap between the initial appearances of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in Greek culture and their first written transcriptions (Mason par. 5), and hence the fact that the oral storyteller was the sole medium through which such works were recorded and kept alive for future generations, the only way in which the storyteller could accurately relay his song was from a strict memorization of that story's various parts. The utilization of a basic rhyme scheme not only provided the speakers with a rhythm with which to keep time off of but substantially aided them in their ability to accurately remember the complex and numerous details of the story.

Thus, in many ways the stories which we have come to associate as the great Western epics can be looked upon as the first *musical songs* of praise and remembrance, with the natural

voice of the storyteller as the accompanying *instrument*. This comparison is enhanced by the fact that the storytellers themselves are not only cognizant of this interconnected relationship but intentionally strive to place a focus on it. Are not the first lines of *The Iliad* directly lyrical in nature, able to conjure up a subconscious aura of music and melody within the reader? Depending on which translation one works from, Homer's epic will invariably open with some variation of the same idea, "Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilleus..." (*Iliad* I: 1). As it so happens this simple command from the storyteller, this invocation to the heavens, is absolutely imperative to the subsequent relation of the epic, for once one is able to comprehend the implications of the speaker's directive, the reader or listener is immediately consumed with the knowledge that what is about to unfold is not a story of man's devising but something much more impactful and prolific. It is nothing less than a universal song of war and anger, a song which only the gods are capable of singing.

What's most important to remember in regards to the musical influences of Homer and the ancient epics is precisely that...the intrinsic influence which music had on the structural and physical formation of these works. It was previously mentioned that the natural rhythm of the speech patterns involved in the recital of these tales afforded the storyteller a valuable tool with which to complete his endeavors. However, in addition to this advantage, a second benefit which would emerge from the musical pattern of the oral traditions would not become evident until the ancient scholars would begin their transcriptions of these works, transforming them from the spoken word to the written one. "Since most of the oral tradition stories already consisted of an effective rhythm and rhyme scheme, the process of converting them to epic poetry was fairly simple. The memorized stories...lent themselves to the written poetic form." (Mason par. 5). When taking such evidence into account it is not unreasonable to declare that if it were not for

the musical elements originally found in the oral stories, then the physical form of the epic, the form which modern literary theory asserts as paramount in its classification of epic works, would not have even existed in its current incarnation; or rather, without the rhythm of the speaker then the form which we admire as the pinnacle example of epic literature would have been altered entirely. It is a sentiment which echoes in the ancient texts themselves, i.e., the speaker's beckoning of the muses to provide him with the requisite knowledge to recite his tale, effectively establishing the notion that it was the musical rhythm of the speaker which played the part of muse to those literate few who could comprehend its essence.

As a result of this progressive evolution from the traditions of oral storytelling, the intertwined history between music and epic literature is a dynamic that should be seriously contemplated and intensively examined when offering up any epic interpretation of a non-traditional epic work. Moreover, when lining up said analysis alongside other influential factors, such as the "story of we" mentality and Tennyson's vision of the resurrected Arthur, clothed in the visage of the modern man, it becomes apparent that for an epic to truly capture the spirit of the current paradigm, its writing style must evolve to match and synchronize with the rhythm and music of the day. When concentrating that lens of focus on a poem such as *Howl*, for example, what's most striking from a musical perspective, are not only Ginsberg's consistent and numerous references to jazz music within the actual syntax of the poem but the way in which its distinctive sound manages to help shape the fabric of the poem's universe.

#### B) The Influence of Bebop Jazz on the Physical and Inherent Identity of *Howl*

It was during the late-1940's, right around the time that Ginsberg was seeking to establish a singular identity for himself, from both a literary and humanistic perspective, that the bebop

jazz movement found itself at the fount of its underground popularity and the pinnacle of its artistic achievements. Ginsberg and other architects of the Beat Generation, most notably Kerouac and Burroughs, became profoundly influenced by the innovative sounds emerging from this revolutionary subculture, and landmark New York City jazz clubs such as The Red Drum and Minton's quickly developed into a homebase of sorts for the Beats' nightly exploits and revelries. It was through the exuberant, improvisational stylings of Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, and Dizzie Gillespie, where this burgeoning generation of writers found a comparable literary voice, captivating in both its originality and shock and it was not uncommon for these poets to later publically perform their works with the accompaniment of jazz musicians. Ginsberg was particularly fascinated not just by the stylistic pairings of bebop and the Beats, but by the potential ability of music to enhance the overall connection between poet and listener. Bebop jazz was not known for the lyrical significance of its works, instead choosing to place greater emphasis on a musical technique that appealed primarily to emotive listening. It was this aspect, this hyper-aggressive style of play, which possessed the strongest appeal to Ginsberg mainly because it was the same intensity which he sought to capture in his works. To him each high-pitched saxophone wail or intermittent trumpet blast wasn't just another note in a series of prearranged and formally choreographed sets, but instead an overt threat of life, a simple and powerful assurance to each listener that 'I will not tell you how I feel, instead you must tell me what I am feeling.'

Because of the importance placed on improvisation and spontaneous solos, one of the most significant components which characterizes this style of music is the fundamental and deeply inherent layer of trust which each musician must possess, not only with themselves but with one another. "Much of what the soloist creates is influenced by what is happening musically

around him...Mr. X's solo reflects not only his sense of language of jazz....but also what the pianist, bassist, and drummer are doing at that precise moment” (King 7). It is equally as important for the saxophonist to know when to stop playing as when to start. Or for the drummer to slow down the tempo of his beat, even if it is contrary to what he wishes to do. The sound of the cohesion of the collective band must override the potentially conflicting desires of the individual artists. Without this element of trust and musical comprehension, the ensemble would essentially fall apart; reduced to a collection of instruments which are producing nothing but a cacophony of inharmonious sounds. In other words, each member of the group needs to be unequivocally *connected* with one another in order to effectively find the necessary phrasing which will enable them to *balance* out the potential *chaos* of the moment. “Because jazz is a music of communication, where artists within one ensemble must constantly stay in touch, Mr. X listens and responds to what his band members are playing” (King 7).

It is in this regard where one can begin to see the influences which jazz had on the epic development of *Howl*. The necessity of the musician to be connected with the world around him speaks to that universal truth of the ancient paradigm, and it is through his instrument that the musician is able to play the role of prophet communicating that very truth. Consequently, bebop provided the Beats with a physical and metaphysical sense of connectivity which they felt had been lost in their Age of Disconnectedness. Moreover, much like the earliest Homeric scholars who felt compelled to write down the lyrical beauty of the epics which were speaking *of* their paradigm and *for* their paradigm, the Beats sought to contextualize the spiritual transcendence which they were experiencing from jazz and produce it in the written form so as their generation could experience the same transcendence; in effect they believed that jazz provided the key to reclaiming their souls' sense of humanity.

In order to accomplish this task it is apparent that Ginsberg relied heavily on the concept of an improvisational jazz solo throughout his composition of *Howl*. Specifically, when asked if the physical structure of the poem bared any conscious relation to the music he was invested in at the time, Ginsberg replied: "...the myth of Lester Young as described by Kerouac, blowing eighty-nine choruses of *Lady Be Good*, say, in one night, or my own hearing of Illinois Jacciet's *Jazz at the Philharmonic*, Volume 2; I think *Can't Get Started* was the title" ("Allen" par. 18). This connection becomes especially lucid when taking into account the effective rhythm of the piece, highlighted by the reiteration of certain words and phrases at specific points throughout the text: "*who* bared their brain to Heaven under the El...*who* burned cigarette holes in their arms...*who* broke down crying in white gymnasiums..." (Ginsberg *Howl*. Lns. 5-33).

The constant repetition of the word 'who,' the seemingly ubiquitous moniker to identify the sleepless, dead-eyed addicts in Part I of the poem, appears a total of over sixty times throughout that initial section, its placement almost invariably residing at the inception of a new line of text. Because he did not have the benefit of a jazz ensemble backing his words, Ginsberg had to devise a way to come up with his own textual rhythm section. Hence, the decision to utilize this repetitive pattern was premeditated in an attempt to provide the stream of consciousness verse with a baseline rhythm to play off of and keep time with; a metronome for the speaker's ostensibly incoherent ramblings: "Ideally each line of *Howl* is a single breath unit. My breath is long—that's the measure, one physical-mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of a breath" ("Notes" par. 4). This is a technique Ginsberg would again utilize to great effect in the latter sections of the poem, specifically seen in the repeated invocations of 'Moloch!' in Part II combined with the subdued reiteration of 'I'm with you in Rockland' throughout Part III.



In addition to capturing the structural elements of rhythm, Ginsberg also comprehends that he must recreate the visceral sounds of emotional complexity inherent in any successful bebop improv set. Primarily regarded as a controversial and irregular style of jazz, one which skewered the popularity of dance hall standards in favor of more technical and intellectual configurations, bebop naturally lent itself to artistic experimentation. Musicians sought to explore not only the chromatic range of their instruments but the boundaries of their own imaginations and identities as well. From a syntactical perspective, this display of raw power is evident in Ginsberg's wildly unique verse and the way it intentionally mirrors the improvisational personality of a jazz movement, complete with its recurring rifts and violently sudden transitions. There are no conventional ideas of boundaries or borders within *Howl*, and as such it is completely natural for the disconnected seer to turn his gaze to a multitude of unrelated cities and scenes, jumping between such disparate places as: Kansas, Idaho, Baltimore, Oklahoma, Houston, Africa, Mexico, Chicago, San Francisco and New York, without any rationale for why or how these locations matter. (Ginsberg *Howl*. Lns. 25-32). This seemingly random juxtaposition contextually mirrors the style of an artist like Charlie Parker whose "...phrases were typically irregular and often quite distinct and separate from each other. He might...be playing in the lower register, then leap upwards without warning. Yet once the syntax of his music was grasped, his solos seemed coherent, even organic." (Szwed 164). And much like the virtuosity exhibited in Parker's radical style of play, it is only when you factor in the aesthetic beauty of Ginsberg's verse, not only the way in which it evokes the stylistic mastery of bebop but how it manages to exemplify the personal and confessional nature of it as well, only then does the structure of *Howl* begin to take on the intangible and underlying sound of an improvisation.

Take, for example, the tumultuous incoherence of phrase fifty-eight in *Howl*: “who...danced on broken wineglasses barefoot smashed phonograph records of nostalgic European 1930’s German jazz finished the whiskey and threw up groaning into the bloody toilet, moans in their earsblast of colossal steamwhistles...” (58). One cannot help but feel overwhelmed by the dizzying cyclone of variant, multi-layered descriptions offered by the speaker. This is not because we, as readers, share a personal connection with the subjects identified in this line nor because we rationally comprehend the implications of their actions. Such an analysis, especially in the latter case, would indicate that one must examine this line from an intellectual or emotionally distant perspective in order to fully grasp its meaning, a fact which would run contrary to Ginsberg’s connection with the jazz movement. Instead, it is precisely because the images which these scenes convey are so shockingly disjointed, so revolutionary and complex, so violent and graphic in nature that they impact us on an extremely primitive and subconscious level.

There is a palpably blatant desire on the part of Ginsberg to affect the reader’s primary means of poetical interpretation, replacing the traditional critical lens with an intangible feeling of otherworldliness and surrealism. On lines 25-26, he describes the desolation of a generation “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...” If the reader were to apply a rationalist’s lens of thinking to these lines, examining them from a purely analytical and literal perspective, then said reader would likely associate such visions as the hallucinatory effects of the wanderers’ drug-fueled paranoia and fantasy, a Peyote overdose being a plausible culprit given the reference to ‘indian angels’ and ‘visions.’ However, the very act of rationalizing or, for lack of a better word, *normalizing* the speaker’s inherently

irrational and extraordinary experiences only serves to demean and undermine those very experiences for the reader himself, much in the same way jazz traditionalists in the 1940's failed in their critique of bebop, citing Charlie Parker's distinctive sound as the consequence of "playing so many notes, and 'wrong' ones at that." (King 54). Such a constricted mode of thinking inevitably fails to comprehend the essence of the poem, precisely because the poem's essence stretches beyond the rationalist lens of the modern paradigm. It harkens back to Ginsberg's emotive appeal that even though he was confused by the imagery and scenes which his mind sought to convey in those stanzas he knew that he had to write them the way in which his mind conceived them; because he knew that what his imagination was conceiving was the most 'real' ideas that he could write about.

### C) Reclaiming 'Our' Humanity Through the Connected Nature of Jazz

In deconstructing this infatuation with jazz to its most basic nucleus, it is evident that the Beats perceived the revolutionary sounds of bebop to be the soundtrack of their lives, not only from a personal perspective but an artistic one as well. They developed a deeply spiritual connection with the music itself, oftentimes attempting to communicate with each other by emulating bebop's improvisational style within the confines of their own writings. Ginsberg himself remarked that from a structural perspective Part I of *Howl* was meant to be "...long saxophone-like chorus lines I knew Kerouac would hear sound of—taking off from his own inspired prose line really a new poetry" ("Notes" par. 1). It did not matter that the literal content of those 'chorus lines' might not make sense to the reader, or even to Ginsberg himself (a listener will never be able to comprehend the exact reasons why a jazz soloist comes up with the specific runs that he does precisely because the soloist himself does not know it). Such choices are as

instinctive as they are artistic, made organic by the moment and incapable of being repeated in the same manner again because that exact moment in time will never exist again. They are choices which are inherently dependent upon the level of connectivity which that artist has with his imagination and those people he is most connected to; for the soloist this means the ensemble he is playing with while in Ginsberg's circumstance it are his fellow Beat writers. What is most important in either case, be it that of the poet or that of the musician, is that both artists are speaking to their intended audience from a genuine position of truth.

Truth, in the epic sense, is to be connected with the collective soul of the paradigm in which the epic author is writing in so that he can tell the 'story of We.' In the Homeric epoch such truth was attained via connection with one's self through a higher source of order, an order which provided 'us' with the balance necessary to endure the chaos into which 'we' were born. Since no such source of order exists in mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century America, any attempt to showcase 'our' relationship with universal meaning must emanate from a perspective of loss. Herein lies the spark for Ginsberg's relentless obsession with jazz, as he perceived it to be the unparalleled voice of loss, ergo truth, in his Age of Disconnectedness. To Ginsberg, the music wasn't just a metaphor for 'our' lost connection with balance and order within the universe, but the *actual*, real connection, 'reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz,' blowing out 'the suffering of America's naked mind for love' with a 'saxophone cry' that screamed out from beyond the grave '...eli eli lamma lamma sabacthani...' My God, My God, why have you forsaken me? (*Howl*. Ln. 77).

In coherence with this notion, if Ginsberg were able to write *Howl* in a style that captured the very soul of this epic voice, right down to its rhythmical patterns and internal dynamics, it stands to reason that he would be writing from a perspective of absolute totality and truth within

*his* paradigm: “and who...ran through the icy streets obsessed with a sudden flash of the alchemy of the use of the ellipse the catalog the meter & the vibating plane...and set the noun and dash of consciousness together...with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus...” (lns. 73-74). The resulting passions described therein amounts to a spiritual and existential reckoning for both author and reader. By contextualizing a style which in essence personified ‘our’ despair at the loss of ‘our’ universal connectivity Ginsberg was also able to showcase ‘our’ desire to return to that inextricable and ancient link with balance and order, reflected in the ‘angelheaded hipsters’ on line 3. However, much like Bedivere’s repeated attempts to hold onto Excalibur after Arthur’s death, a return to that prior state of balance and order, as previous paradigms understood it to be, is equally as impossible and counterproductive. Therefore, comensurate with his duties as both the disconnected seer of the past and a prophet of hope for the future, Ginsberg must show to ‘us’ a *new* means of universal cognizance.

As previously stated the success of a jazz band is interdependent on the unspoken and innate level of communication which those players have with one another and with themselves. If their inherent communication breaks down, they are unable to communicate with eachother and the truth of the piece becomes scattered and lost. Consequently, extending this to an epical discussion, if ‘we’ seek to reestablish a new concept of universal balance, ‘we’ first must reestablish a connection with ‘our’ own humanity. Hence the tense shift in the final third of *Howl*, removing it from the perspective of the past and bringing ‘us’ into a potential vision of the future, or as Ginsberg describes it “a litany of affirmation of the Lamb in its glory.” (“Notes” par. 5). This is most acutely felt in Ginsberg’s comforting and repeated declarations to Carl Solomon that “I’m with you in Rockland...” (*Howl*. Ln. 94).

In the epic world of *Howl*, 'Rockland' represents the institutions and hospitals which house those whom the modern paradigm has declared to be insane. It was during a stay at one of these hospitals (Columbia Presbyterian) where Ginsberg met Carl Solomon, a fellow patient, and who, despite the brevity of their relationship, sparked a passionate source of inspiration in the burgeoning writer. For those unfamiliar with this locale, Columbia Presbyterian stands in New York City...*Howl* was composed during Ginsberg's residence in San Francisco. Given the immensity of their physical distance, for Ginsberg to constantly state that he is 'with' Carl implies a connection that goes deeper than mere presence of body...it is a soulful connection that mirrors the relationship of truth exhibited in both jazz and the ancient epics. The reader does not need to know, or even fathom, the meaning behind Ginsberg and Carl's 'invisible humor' to grasp the immense power and depth which those images mean to them. They are brothers in the same 'eternal war,' their very lives a war, Achilles and Patrokolus reincarnated with the modern paradigm, clothed in the vestures of the modern man.

*This* ethereal state of connectivity is emblematic of the epic beauty of *Howl*, for as tragic and nihilistic as the first two-thirds of the poem are it is ultimately a timeless song about the purifying power of hope and the necessity of man to connect with his brother on a deeply personal and spiritual level. Ginsberg is a continent apart from Carl and yet he has never felt more close to him than in those closing stanzas...an imaginative escape from the disconnected hell of the asylum, a subsequent odyssey across the horrors of America's purgatory, and ultimately, the pleasure of the physical connection to complete their existential one. (Ginsberg *Howl*. Lns. 111-112). It is only when 'we' can mirror the nature of Ginsberg's relationship with Carl, one that is born out of despair and redeemed in the purity of selfless love, that 'we' can

begin to reclaim 'our' humanity. As love was the force which brought balance to the chaos of the ancient universe, so love can bring balance to the chaos of 'our' present one.

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