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ALLEN GINSBERG'S VISION OF AMERICA IN A SUPERMARKET IN CALIFORNIA

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Abstract:

One of Allen Ginsberg's most frequently anthologized shorter poems, "A Supermarket in California", not only acknowledges his debt to Walt Whitman's vision of America as a place of possibility and abundance, but also allows Ginsberg to place himself (more explicitly) in a tradition of gay writers. In the article following article an attempt has been made to compare Ginsberg's vision of America as presented in "A Supermarket in California" with that of Whitman's in poems such as "Song of Myself".

Key Words: *Ginsberg, Whitman, America, supermarket.*

Written in 1955, "A Supermarket in California" appeared the next year in *Howl and Other Poems*, Allen Ginsberg's controversial and groundbreaking anthology of poems that is often credited with initiating the Beat movement. "Beat" is a term coined by writer Jack Kerouac to mean both "beat down" and "beatitude." It was meant to describe the dissatisfaction and spiritual exhaustion of a generation that came of age during the 1940s and 1950s.

A whimsical, almost comic poem, "A Supermarket in California" addresses, in a surrealistic fashion, Ginsberg's own relation to Walt Whitman, the nineteenth-century, American poet considered by many to be the father of modern poetry and one of Ginsberg's literary idols. As in most of Ginsberg's poems, the speaker is Ginsberg himself (rather than a poetic persona), and he uses the supermarket as a metaphoric setting for dreaming about the possibilities that America offers and lamenting the country it has instead become.

One of Ginsberg's most frequently anthologized shorter poems, "A Supermarket in California" not only acknowledges Ginsberg's debt to Whitman's vision of America as a place of possibility and abundance, but also allows Ginsberg to place himself (more explicitly) in a tradition of gay writers. When Ginsberg writes "I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys,"¹ He alludes to the homoerotic desire so prevalent in Whitman's own work. This possibility of being openly gay in America is one of the many opportunities that Whitman's poetry enabled for Ginsberg.

The primary theme of the poem, however, is the moral choice with which America is faced. Will it, as Ginsberg suggests in this and other poems, continue to be a place of acquisitiveness, empty material values, and alienated individuals? Or will America recognize its inherent spirituality and embrace the possibilities for living in a real human community? Ginsberg asks, "Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?" Ginsberg is troubled and looking to Whitman for answers at the end of this poem.

Published as part of *Howl and Other Poems*, "A Supermarket in California" carried on the notoriety and success of that volume. After already selling out the first edition (printed by Villiers in England), a portion of the second printing of *Howl* was stopped by United States Custom officials at San Francisco, who impounded it, claiming that the writing was obscene. After a series of hearings during which the book's social relevance was debated, charges were dropped and the book was released. "Howl" comprises the bulk of the book, and "A Supermarket in California" is one of the shorter "other" poems in

the volume, which also includes “In the Baggage Room at Greyhound”; “Sunflower Sutra”; and “America”. In *Allen Ginsberg*, Thomas Merrill asserts that “A Supermarket in California” mirrors Ginsberg’s own bewilderment with America, as he attempts to balance his own hope for and despair about the country. It is difficult, if not impossible, for the poet not to be a shopper. “Here is a poet as consumer filling his shopping cart for the ingredients of his art among ‘Aisles full of husbands!’”² Merrill writes.

In a mixed review written in 1957 and appearing in *Sewanee Review*, poet and critic James Dickey argues that Ginsberg lacks a sense of craft in “Howl”, claiming that just about anybody can be a poet. “In each case the needed equipment is very simple”, Dickey says, “a life, with its memories, frustrations, secret wishes ... an ability to write elementary prose and to supply it with rather more exclamation points than might normally be called for”. Dickey goes on to question Ginsberg’s approach toward poetry itself. “Confession is not enough,” he remarks, “and neither is the assumption that the truth of one’s experience will emerge if only one can keep talking long enough in a whipped-up state of excitement. It takes more than this to make poetry. It just does.”³

In his *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century*, Michael Davidson focuses on the subtext of “A Supermarket in California”, charging that Whitman functions as an alter ego for Ginsberg “who himself is ‘self-conscious’ and ‘shopping for images.’” Viewing the poem as a statement on Ginsberg’s own sexual alienation, Davidson writes that Ginsberg’s evocation of Whitman “emphasizes that this loneliness is also the historical loneliness of the homosexual who is denied the opportunity to participate in the bounty of ‘normal’ American life.”⁴

A good part of the poem’s popularity can be traced to its brevity and its themes. Unlike “Howl”, “A Supermarket in California” can be printed on one page, and its royalties are considerably less than those of the longer work. “A Supermarket in California” also touches on many of the ideas that appear in Ginsberg’s longer poems: the spiritual desolation of America; homoeroticism; the influence of the past (specifically Walt Whitman’s influence); and the isolation of the modern individual. These factors, along with the attention garnered from Ginsberg’s recent death, continue to make the poem attractive to anthologists.

Allen Ginsberg’s “A Supermarket in California” mourns the recent fate of the great poetic vision Walt Whitman had pronounced one hundred years earlier in “Song of Myself”⁵. Whitman had put himself poetically at the center of the cosmos, as if he were a radiant node in which the smallest and humblest thing found equal place with the grandest stars the night sky. Employing a long, flexible, un-rhymed line ultimately derived from the King James Bible, Whitman’s poems often enumerate objects, people, places, and names in great lists. Along with his innovations in poetic form, he also included a much-expanded range of subject matter, some of which was thought poetically inappropriate at the time, such as matters of sex and the body, scenes of physical injury and death, and images of common labor and slavery. Whitman saw the American democracy of the mid-nineteenth century as the political corollary of his poetry. American poetry and American politics were to be open, democratic, tolerant, accepting, ever-questioning, and grand in scale. Whitman presented himself as communicating with every point in this cosmos, passing outward poetically through a series of widening concentric rings: the body, the city, the American nation, the world, and the universe. At the beginning of “A Supermarket in California”, Ginsberg introduces himself as pondering this magnificent democratic vista of poetry and later as holding a volume of Whitman’s poetry. Constantly alluding to various aspects of Whitman’s poetry and life, Ginsberg ironically and humorously measures himself against Whitman’s grandiose poetic self-depiction and compares Whitman’s ideal view of America with what it had actually become in the era of anti-Communist witch-hunts, preprocessed food, television advertising, and nuclear bombs.

Coming a hundred years after Whitman, Ginsberg is inspired by the bard’s vision of a vigorously democratic America sung by a new, public poetry. But he is far less confident that this vision can actually be fulfilled, either by the American consumer society of the mid-twentieth century or by the young poet Allen Ginsberg. Ginsberg signals his worries in a number of ways. Most important, he employs the

physical setting of his poem in a symbolically significant way. Whereas Whitman's best-known poetry takes place amidst the populous bustle of Manhattan, along the open road, or at the ocean side, Ginsberg's setting is far more humble, even suburban: the large-chain grocery store. Ginsberg has taken Whitman's spacious poetry of the outdoors and thrust it back indoors. What was once open space is now bounded and carefully policed. No longer can Ginsberg innocently "loiter" and "loaf" (two verbs Whitman uses to describe how he witnesses the American scene) in the claustrophobic space of the supermarket. Its stacks of cans and its aisles jammed with carts and shopping families are a poor substitute for the bustle of the city and the highways that Whitman celebrated, and there are suspicious employees watching the dreamy, aimless poet at every step to make sure he is not shoplifting. If in his poetic dream of comradeship with Whitman, Ginsberg can stride "down the open corridors" of the supermarket, tasting the fruit and frozen food and not paying, this only serves to remind his reader how much life in the America of the 1950s was hemmed in by disapproving "detectives" and "cashiers" by the power of the law and the almighty dollar.

Ginsberg also shifts from Whitman's typical images of work and production to images of spending money and consuming. In section 12 of "Song of Myself", for example, Whitman presents a figure who might still be seen, in a different incarnation, in Ginsberg's supermarket: "The butcher-boy puts off his killing-clothes, or sharpens his knife at the stall in the market, / I loiter enjoying his repartee and his shuffle and break-down." The poet catches the working boy at a pause in his labor and listens to him bantering with his fellow workers. In Ginsberg's poem, in contrast, Whitman is presented as the lonely gay cruiser, surrounded mostly by products for sale and consumption rather than the activity of producing: "I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys. / I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork chops? What price bananas? Are you my Angel?" The marketplace labor of the butcher-boy in Whitman's earlier poem is nowhere to be seen in the modern supermarket, only the pre-cut and packaged meat glowing unnaturally under the fluorescent lights. The bananas, from somewhere in Latin America, similarly conceal the labor of cultivating and picking them beneath an abstract price tag. Even the "Angel," as an image of pure spirit without body, is a kind of false label put on a much earthier desire of the body. Each question Whitman poses here implies a form of absence and disembodied existence, ironically revealing the artificially lit "neon fruit supermarket" to be the exact opposite of that intensely present "body electric" praised in Whitman's poem "I Sing the Body Electric." Moreover, by implanting sly sexual puns in his imagery, Ginsberg's poem suggests that even the boys whom Whitman once poetically presented at work have become for him one more consumable item among the "meat" and "fruit." Playfully inviting obvious but silly Freudian interpretations of his poem, Ginsberg even has old queer Whitman inquire about the price of bananas!

This shift from production to consumption is also reflected in the way Ginsberg presents himself in the poem. He encounters the shade of Whitman in a state of physical and poetic vacancy: hungry and tired, he shops for food; poetically uninspired, he goes "shopping for images." Just as Whitman set himself among the working men of the marketplace to collect experience for his poetry, so too does Ginsberg go to the market for literary materials. Yet unlike Whitman's individuals, among these strangely glowing vegetables and pork chops there are only two individualized figures, and they both are the ghosts of dead gay poets: the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca, killed by fascists during the Spanish Civil War in the late 1930s, and Walt Whitman. Whereas Lorca had been able to identify himself and his poetry with the aspirations of the whole Spanish people for freedom, and Whitman had been able to reflect back to his American readers an idealized image of their democratic life,

Ginsberg finds himself a social splinter whose only true comrades are ghosts. He finds only solitary roles left to fill: the late-night shopper, the lonely gay male without a lover, the American poet without an audience. Moreover, even the "representative" poets Whitman and Lorca are themselves now only ghosts, and their claim to be the voice of their people rests solely on the ability of their poetry to compel conviction in later readers and writers such as Ginsberg. No longer does their status depend on what they, as poets,

produce, but rather on how their work, in their absence and under the sign of their signature, will be “consumed” by the generations that follow them.

The full impact of what has been lost in the century since Whitman pronounced his “America of love” comes home in the magnificent final stanza. Situating himself in a long tradition of visionary poetry, Ginsberg makes Whitman his guide into the spaces of the dead, just as centuries earlier Dante had taken the Latin poet Virgil as his guide through hell in the *Divine Comedy*. By evoking the supermarket's closing time, Ginsberg signals his awareness of his own mortality, hoping that his own poetry, guided by Whitman's, will help him in that time in which he will no longer have need to shop for either food or images: “Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?” Even as he raises this serious question, however, he doubts whether he can justifiably use the heightened poetic rhetoric of the visionary tradition. By comparison, for example, to the descent into the underworld that is a central episode in Homer's epic *Odyssey*, in Virgil's *Aeneid*, and again in Dante's *Inferno*, Ginsberg's small-case “odyssey” among ghosts in the supermarket seems both selfconsciously literary (“I touch your book”) and contrived (“and feel absurd”).

These doubts, expressed parenthetically in the second line, get powerfully answered by the sheer elegiac force of the last three lines, in which Ginsberg struggles to convince himself and his readers of his right to put himself, even before death, in the visionary company of Whitman, thus anticipating his posthumous fame as the older poet's heir. The final lines combine two effects, which work together to give the poem's close its extraordinary resonance. Almost like a stage manager overseeing a fade-out, Ginsberg narrows the visual focus to the two poets, Whitman and Ginsberg, and concludes with their complete vanishing in blackness and smoke. At the same time, however, these final lines have a strong outward movement, as if we were watching them walk away from us until they disappeared from view altogether. The first of the three ultimate lines sets these effects side-by-side and thus allow us to see how Ginsberg, with great skill, makes them converge in the long concluding line. “Will we walk all night through solitary streets?” lends the line its outward sweep, while the sentence that follows drops the lights to a single focus: “The trees add shade to shade, lights out in the houses, we'll both be lonely.” After this fall into near-blackness, the next line picks up the forward momentum again: “Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?” Then, as if imitating the movement of the boat of Charon, ferryman into the underworld, over the river Lethe's water of forgetfulness, Ginsberg evokes four short dips of the oars and a long glide over three printed lines without a comma break up to the question mark that ends the poem: “Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher, what America did you have when Charon quit poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?”

The beautiful ending does not, however, ultimately dispel the doubts raised in the poem about the ability of poetry to connect with a larger community and thus overcome isolation, loneliness, and death. For though Ginsberg movingly evokes his bond of poetic son with father Whitman and his deep appreciation of his lonely old “courage-teacher,” this personal and ghostly community of gay poets is no longer Whitman's idealized “America of love.” In essence, Ginsberg suggests that time has revealed Whitman's amatory America to be a myth and no longer a credible source of inspiration for a poet with ambitions to walk in Whitman's footsteps. The poem ends on a profoundly unsettling and questioning note: What America, Ginsberg asks his great predecessor in the final line, was left to you to turn into poetic myth when the last spark of your consciousness was extinguished by death? Is there anything that remains of that past America for me, Allen Ginsberg, to preserve in your name? The answer remains open beyond the bounds of the final question mark. But Ginsberg's conclusion on the word “Lethe,” connoting forgetfulness, suggests his pessimism: America, it seems, cannot be rendered eternal by poetry, even by the greatest poetry. It may be already that it has almost fallen into oblivion.

Notes:

1. Allen Ginsberg, "A Supermarket in California" in *Collected Poems, 1947-1997*. New York: Harper-Collins, 2006. All the quotations from the poem are taken from this edition
2. Thomas F. Merrill, *Allen Ginsberg*. Boston: Twayne, 1988.
3. James Dickey, "From Babel to Byzantium," *Sewanee Review*, Summer 1957, p. 509-10.
4. Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1989. One of the most provocative and informative studies of the San Francisco Renaissance ever written. Davidson places Ginsberg squarely in the tradition of Romantic poets while exploring the myths surrounding modern Romantic poets.
5. No study of Ginsberg's poetry would be complete without a reading of at least some of the poetry of Whitman, one of Ginsberg's major influences. *Leaves of Grass*, first published in 1855, is Whitman's great free-verse hymn of praise to the self, the body, the spirit and nature.