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Requiem for the Real World

Few poets in American history can be said to have defined their generations and times like Allen Ginsberg. For members of the Left and the counter-culture movements of the 1960s, Ginsberg was very nearly a saint, an integral part of the "Beat Generation" literary movement that also included Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs ("Allen Ginsberg" 332). Ginsberg's poetry resonated with millions of young people who had never read poetry before, and helped to craft a dissident identity for an entire group of people who felt alienated by the conservative social norms of the day. Ginsberg touched on many themes, including political activism, eastern philosophies, rampant industrialism, and, perhaps most importantly, the sense of spiritual exhaustion and diffuse feelings of rebellion against what he experienced as the general conformity, hypocrisy, and materialism of post-world war II America. He was very much dissatisfied with the contemporary, traditional poetry of his day, and sought to create a new style in order to better warn young Americans about the downward trajectory of culture. In this, he was very much a poet in the vatic tradition of Walt Whitman, who, a century before, broke new ground by attempting to harness the unique power and potential of the new American nation. There exist many connections between Ginsberg and Whitman: both wrote poetry in free verse, both were prosecuted for the perceived indecency of their works, both were in many ways isolated by their outlooks on life, both were gay, both had mothers who were touchstones in their lives, and both believed that they spoke for an emerging identity of America. In this last similarity they both attempted to meld the transcendental and the real, the natural and human, and warned about the dominance of the material over the mystical. This connection is

perhaps best encapsulated in Ginsberg's poem "A Supermarket in California," in which the author attempts to view his 20th century context in much the same way that Whitman looked at the 19th century. In "Supermarket," the vast hopes Whitman had for mankind achieving harmony with nature have been demolished and paved over, and the warnings of materialism which were primary in his works have come full circle to dominate the very identity of his homeland.

At first glance, one can be forgiven for thinking that in "Supermarket" Ginsberg is creating a parody of Whitman's poetry. After all, where Whitman gave the world immense scenes of a burgeoning nation and the horrors of the American Civil War, Ginsberg presents us with that cheerleader of American hyper-capitalist dogma, the grocery store. Unfortunately, "Supermarket" is tragedy, not farce. The format of this poem is the long-line free verse for which Whitman is duly celebrated. While there is no recurrent metric foot in this style of poetry, Ginsberg does create a certain cadence by balancing stresses, syllables, and diction; this rhythm is, at times, remarkably similar to subsequent lines. Unlike in much free verse poetry, Ginsberg uses little alliteration or assonance in this poem. Instead, the form of the poem takes a backseat to the allegory he is crafting and the symbols he uses to convey his message. The poem begins with Ginsberg walking down a street in Berkeley, California. The setting is important here, as it contrasts imagery of the natural world represented by the moon and the trees with the human world symbolized by the streetlights. The tension between the two is made apparent by Ginsberg's "hungry fatigue" and his admission of having a headache. Given that Whitman often warned about the dangers of industrialism at the cost of the natural world, the reader is automatically put into a stance of apprehension: nothing good, we think, channeling Whitman, can come from this.

As Ginsberg nears the supermarket, the light of the moon is drowned out by the neon glare of modernity. This is a curious place to attempt to find some tiny vestige of the world described in Whitman's poetry, the

"enumerations" about which Ginsberg is dreaming. Many of Whitman's poems addressed the social realities of his young nation; if Ginsberg is attempting to find some answer to the social questions of 1950s America, one cannot help but feel his quest has brought him to the wrong place, even if that place has come to symbolize what it means to be an American.

There is something nearly elegiac about lines 6-9: "What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping at / night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the / tomatoes! -and you, Garcia Lorca, what were you doing down by / the watermelons?" What are these "penumbras" of which Ginsberg speaks? Are they the shrouds which obscure the source and means of production of the products in the aisles from the consumer? Is it the veil of capitalism itself which shadows the real world? It is curious that Ginsberg remarks that whole families can be seen shopping together; the author's own experiences in supermarkets consist nearly entirely of memories of solitary humans going about their solitary business, devoid of any sense of community or camaraderie. Perhaps Ginsberg is making a comment about the unnaturalness of both the modern "nuclear" family and the entire concept of aisles stacked with pre-packaged foods. If the latter, it would explain the presence of Federico del Sagrado Corazon de Jesus Garcia Lorca perusing the watermelons. Garcia Lorca was a Spanish poet and dramatist who explored themes of isolation and alienation in his works, as well as having been a critical voice about the rise of urban capitalistic society on the Iberian peninsula ("Garcia Lorca"). For these stands, he was killed by right-wing forces in the opening days of the Spanish Civil War. His bones remain missing to this day.

Ginsberg first sees Whitman in the second stanza, calling him a "lonely old grubber." Whitman's homosexuality is noted here in the questions he asks of the grocery boys: "Who killed the pork chops? / What price bananas? Are you my Angel?" The first two queries seem almost silly at first glance, but

it is important to note that they are actually symbolic of how much the country had changed since Whitman's time. In the 19th century, it would have been almost unheard of for a consumer not to know the exact provenance of the food she was purchasing. The connection to the banana or the pork chop was intimate: the hog came from the sty of one of your neighbors, the produce from a farm nearby. The methods used in their production would have been familiar and replicable by everyone. The modern production chain spans continents and includes potentially thousands of individuals whose identities are not only unknown to the consumer, they cannot be known. In addition, complex preservatives are used on most every product, requiring immense laboratory and refining facilities that few consumers would know what to make heads or tails of, were they ever to view them (which they cannot). Any connection to the natural origins of what one eats are therefore totally severed. Whitman wrote about this very topic, a humanity completely detached from nature and deprived of its individuality. We came from the natural world, he seems to say, and when distanced from it who we are will necessarily be changed.

Whitman's final question of the grocers is meant to convey a deep sense of loneliness and searching on Whitman's part, though it may have more to do with Ginsberg than the elder poet. Though Whitman never married, he did have long-term relationships with a few men which proved to be rewarding. In addition, he received great meaning from his humanitarian work, especially that which he completed in hospitals and nursing tents during the Civil War. Though perhaps lonely at times, Whitman does not appear to have been a man who felt overly isolated from his world. Ginsberg, on the other hand, had many causes for having felt alienated from his social context: he was of Russian Jewish immigrant stock, his family - especially his mother - had ties to the radical labor movement, his mother eventually went insane, and he was gay. It would be difficult to invent a set of personal characteristics which would

make anyone more of an outsider to 1950s American society.

The two lonely poets conclude the second stanza by walking down aisles, "tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing / the cashier." Their ability to find sustenance without engaging in the capitalist's bargain is an allegory of making a connection with the natural world free from economic structures or philosophies. This freedom is ethereal and is seen to be vanishing in the next stanza: "Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an / hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?" Ginsberg continues by saying in parenthesis that he feels "absurd" dreaming of his "odyssey" with the dead poet, and indication that he is aware that in the modern world, all considerations for nature cannot survive in the face of a commodification drive which puts a price on everything and everyone. The choice of the word "odyssey" cannot be accidental here. At its heart, Homer's Odyssey is a tale of a man attempting to find his homeland, a homeland which Ginsberg and Whitman may search for in the neon glare of the marketplace but will never encounter. For their hopes of redirecting society away from the material, the doors have closed. As they depart the supermarket, Ginsberg wonders if they will "wander all night through solitary streets...dreaming of the lost America." As they move on their journey, they pass symbols of modern life such as "blue automobiles in driveways." In this imagery, one cannot help but compare what was lost from Whitman's day for what was gained in Ginsberg's. The comparison is not a pleasant one.

The poem ends with a complex, image laden scene involving death and oblivion:

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 black smoking bank and stood watching the boat disappear
on the black waters of the Lethe?

Charon guided the (properly buried) souls of the dead across the river Styx

into the Underworld in Greek and Roman mythology. The river Lethe, at least according to Virgil in The Aeneid, was nowhere near this site. Instead, one would have to pass Cerberus; the Fields of Mourning; the ramparts of Dis, gateway to the evil realms of Tartarus and source code for the Christian hell; the Elysian Fields; and finally the Woods of the Fortunate before reaching the Lethe, where souls would drink of the water and forget their past lives in order to be reborn in the world above. That Ginsberg has Charon leave Whitman at this point instead of at Cerberus's doorstep is probably a symbol in two parts. First, forgetfulness of our identities as children of nature is practically the hallmark of modern society; we do not come from the sea and the dirt, but rather dominate them and bend them to our will. Amid the constant barrage of advertisements and entertainment and material excess, the natural world has been lost and forgotten. Second, this is a symbol that Whitman and his warnings have themselves been forgotten, his battle lost to time and the memory hole of modern life. (After all, how many Americans actually know anything about the greatest American poet of the 19th century? How many would even recognize his name?) Whitman himself once so loved the mystical nature of ferry crossings that he wrote a poem about it. "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" is a work which explores the spiritual and practical aspects of life in New York City, which was then becoming the cultural capital of his young country. By leaving him at the shores after such a crossing, Ginsberg is saying that Whitman's desire to fuse the mystical and the worldly has been lost.

Though a short poem, "A Supermarket in California" is laden with meaning. It is an ode to one of the greatest poets this nation has ever produced. More importantly, it is a dirge to a way of life and an American identity that both Whitman and Ginsberg believed in. One can sense also a plea for a change in our ways, though this is nearly drowned out by the drone of modernity's machinery, humming along that it is far too late in the day for a course correction.

Works Cited

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Excellent
work.

The poem is about
the marriage of

The Sacred Sacred of
the world of commerce
which is the life of
an artist.

John G. R.