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The Invention of Sincerity

ALLEN GINSBERG AND THE PHILOLOGY OF THE MARGINS

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From the rise and reign of “Great Books classicism” in the first half of the twentieth century, to the development of the New American Poetry and the Free Speech Movement in the ’50s and ’60s, things did not fare well for classicism. The classics during this period enjoyed new degrees of democratic availability to the culture at large, but also faced new criticisms and a

1. The title of the New American Poetry comes from an influential anthology that represents a loose consortium of a number of avant-garde movements active particularly in the first decades after World War II, including the Black Mountain School, the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance, the Beat generation, and others. See Allen 1960 for the definitive anthology of poetry. The same editor has also collected statements of poetics under the title of The Poetics of the New American Poetry in Allen (1973).

2. Ginsberg was a participant in Columbia’s Great Books curriculum, as were prominent modernists before him such as Louis Zukofsky, whose homophonic Catullus translations exerted a powerful influence on the New Americans, and whose early “Poem Beginning ‘The’” satirizes the poet’s experience as an undergraduate student in John Erskine’s Great Books class at Columbia. See Zukofsky 2011. Both Columbia and Erskine himself were innovators in and spokesmen for Great Books as a novel pedagogical model. Research into the intersections of this concrete institutional context and experimental classicisms could shed light onto the particular valences, reactions, and counterreactions to the classics in modernist and later experimental poetries, as well as a particularly detailed account of one of the more influential mediums for the perpetuation of institutional classicism. For a brief popular history of Great Books, see Beam 2008.
growing displacement from their cultural centrality. In “The Classics and the Man of Letters,” a questionnaire published in *Arion* in 1964, Ginsberg articulates a series of criticisms that express openly what earlier criticisms had tended to express only obliquely. “Whose Classics?” writes Ginsberg, “Three-fourths of the world’s ancient literature is left out. Where’s Mahabharata? The Ocean of Story? The Puranas? . . . The man of letters is also generally a finky old bore” (Auden et al. 1964, 54). For Ginsberg, the historically situated, highly particular, and internally diverse body of Greek and Roman letters has come to function as a narrowly Western medium of ethnic and cultural mores. He paints the classics as a co-opted expression of the cultural center and an (occasionally not so) covert reification of “the universal, humanist subject” as peculiarly straight, white, and male, and repeatedly calls for the diffusion of the cultural authority afforded to Greek and Latin. He is happy to point out the artifice involved in the institutional mediations of “the Classics” in order to maintain “a monopoly on Latin-Greek” and seizes on a telling example: “Why have the Loeb library texts been translated so as to leave out the balls? Have they not? I seem to remember for instance certain Catullus poems & lines were simply excluded for reasons of gentility” (ibid., 56). He refers to the Loeb edition’s refusal to translate Catullus’s promise to “face-fuck and sodomize” his poetic enemies.

For Ginsberg, the omission is telling, and he latches onto it as the most visible face of classicism’s role in regulating identity. Classicism’s censorship of a queer and overtly sexualized past normalizes its material, such that it excludes “censored” social realities. Thus, he offers the censored past as a figure for the excluded present. It is a key point that Ginsberg stages the conflict with “academic classicism,” and offers the Loeb series as a knowing straw man for the institution in toto in order to identify with the classical text. What has been censored from Catullus, and by extension, the canon, is nothing less than Ginsberg himself.

For Ginsberg and other writers of the New American Poetry, the classics occupied a critical staging ground in the conflict for the meaning of the past, cultural capital in the present, and a window onto the processes that might reshape the cultural future. Due in part to his success in creating a viable

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3. For Ginsberg, special elevation of Greek and Latin classics above various world literatures amounts to epistemological racism. Although the classics as texts themselves are useful, their presence at the head of an allusive pantheon is not. “The elements,” writes Ginsberg, “of reference have . . . multiplied” (54).

4. By “censored” I mean that the Loeb edition, produced by faculty at Harvard since the 1830s, literally excised all references to “fucking” in every classical text until the 1940 edition. Then they started publishing full texts, but only in Latin until 1960.
public identity as homosexual ("America I’m putting my queer shoulder to the wheel") and self-described “Buddhist-Jew,” and giving a communicable voice to censored identities, Allen Ginsberg came to represent one of the most visible and well-known faces of the counterculture. His cultural renown and presence in the popular imagination reflect his poetics, which fashion the self as public, intelligible, sincere, and transparent. From Howl’s obscenity trials to Ginsberg’s public appearance before the Senate Judiciary Committee, staged exorcisms of the Pentagon, or any number of poetic representations (“who let themselves be fucked in the ass”; “Catullus sucked cock in the country”), Ginsberg’s poetics “naturalized” the cultural center’s disavowed, censored margins—its queer or oriental or bohemian others—and fed them back into the system as public spectacle. He extended—and was a vital force in shaping—the New American Poetry and its public reception.

Ginsberg occupied an ambivalent position vis-à-vis classicism, both as a means of reception and as a series of received texts. He was at pains to emphasize the gap between “the Classics themselves” and “the basic literary stupidity of institutional (academic) Classicism in XXth Century,” evincing distaste for “institutional . . . Classicism” and its transformations of Greco-Roman texts into reflections of the cultural center (ibid.). He also adopted many of its strategies, acknowledging classicism’s peculiar lessons in the mechanisms of identity construction, the codification of cultural hegemonies, and the production of social intelligibility. In the same document, for example, Ginsberg brazenly employs the strategies he criticizes, translating the classics into his own milieu by valorizing “the spirit” of Greek and Latin literature rather than its form, its universality rather than its particularity (“Anacreon at a crucial point turned me on to HUMANITY”; ibid., 54), and so on. Although “Pindar’s variable stanzas . . . encourage freedom,” the idea of imitating set, classical “prosody” inspires derision: “Ugh!” Ginsberg quips, “That would be a monkey-like stupidity” (ibid., 55). It is the bluntest but most easily obscured of claims: Ginsberg and other writers of the New American Poetry, like the modernists before them, saw themselves less as countercanonical rebels of the new than as living classics.

Ginsberg borrowed in ways that are sometimes immediately apparent. More often, however, his classical debt is visible only in hindsight and with the intervening accrual of scholarship. This is true for the influence of Oswald Spengler’s orientalist conceptions of core and fringe cultures on Ginsberg’s apocalyptic poetics, and for the equally powerful influence of romantic con-

5. Unless otherwise noted, I have referred to Ginsberg 2006 for all quotations of Ginsberg’s verse.
structions of prelapsarian Eastern cultures and Eastern religions on Ginsberg’s “Eastern turn,” at least in its germinal stages. Likewise, the degree to which these discursive histories branch out from nineteenth-century philological models of ancient Greek and Roman culture sheds light on Ginsberg’s egalitarian allusions. One of Ginsberg’s primary strategies is to expand the aura of cultural authority accorded to the Greek and Latin classics to alternative world literatures, as well as his own milieu. In mimicry of the Western Academy in its formative stages, when constituting various Buddhist, Hindu, Greek, or Sanskrit pasts as stable objects of knowledge, an ancient “classical” Greek and Latin past invisibly supplements Ginsberg’s multicultural present. His classical engagements both proceeded from and catalyzed a heightened sense of the formal dimensions of social experience, in which the objective, universal, and given is revealed as built (Catullus the singer of plainspoken American English is revealed as a local invention), and the attendant realization that that which had been built could also be demolished or modified (if the classical can become straight or American and the American, classical, then why can’t the Beat become classical and the classical, Beat?).

Rather than examining a particular poem, this chapter traverses the broader arc of Allen Ginsberg’s poetic career in light of his early Catullus translations, paying particular attention to the question of Catullan (and Beat) sincerity. Through close comparison with the Latin original—and the formal techniques by which that original is both preserved and erased—I argue that Ginsberg’s adaptation represents a complex usurpation of classicism’s “philology of identity.” I then extend these readings into a renewed understanding of the progressive “classical silence” that descends on Ginsberg’s later career, where he transposes the ideal of classical authority ever Eastward. Perhaps


7. In a seemingly incidental remark in her 2001 article, “German Orientalism,” intellectual historian Suzanne Marchand writes, “Orientalist philology [of nineteenth-century Germany] . . . provided the foundation for the deep critique of ‘Eurocentrism’ handed down to the anti-colonial and counter-cultural youth movements of the 1960s” (466). By linking orientalism to the critique of Eurocentrism, she makes room for a nonstandard conception of orientalism, generally conceived as a reflection of Eurocentric power relations. She then points toward the strong presence of such an orientalism in mid-twentieth-century American culture, in “the anti-colonial and counter-cultural youth movements of the 1960s” and suggests an uncanny historical community of this twentieth-century American orientalism and nineteenth-century German scholarship.

8. Masuzawa 2005 offers a detailed intellectual history of the discourse of “world religions” and a compelling case for its foundations in Western models of classical and biblical philology.
Ginsberg’s primary insight is into the portability of classicism’s power to invent social centers and govern public identities. If the modernist project showed the New Americans the plasticity of classical texts, it is only a short step from there to the divorce of classicism’s cultural and hegemonic authority from a static reading list of Greek and Latin authors. Therefore, in examining Ginsberg’s classical engagements, I attempt to demonstrate the processes whereby Ginsberg detaches the idea of the classical from Greek and Latin material texts, and transposes it onto alternative texts and social identities. In other words, Ginsberg’s verse attempts a usurped and perfected classicism. Thinking through these broad questions in terms of Ginsberg’s reception of a particular classical text reframes them as discrete philological practices, compelling us to reconsider the hypercontemporaneity of Ginsberg’s poetics, the “organic” antiformalism of his verse, and the historical displacement of “the new” in terms of a very specific type of textual practice: a philology of the margins.

“sabotaged by sexual psychopaths”

. . . the sense of old reality of Catullus, dead so long but his worries are still sad and true, and [I] can hear his voice in poems.

—QUOTED IN SCHUMACHER, DHARMA LION: A CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY OF ALLEN GINSBERG

Perhaps because of his vocal critique of institutional classicism, elevation of the oriental classics above those of Greece and Rome, and the progressive absence of Greek and Latin language and literature in his published verse, none has yet systematically examined the role of classicism and classical reception as an urgent context for Ginsberg’s poetics. There are many reasons to do so now, not least of which is the role of Greek and Latin at critical turning points in his career. “Malest Cornifici tuo Catullo,” a short engagement with the Roman poet Catullus and his Latin, is well known as a transitional work, composed over several months in the period leading up to the composition of “Howl.” During the same period, Ginsberg was poised on the brink of capitulation to a radically different way of life. In the midst of physical illness, he contemplated ending his burgeoning relationship with Peter Orlovsky and “becoming heterosexual.” He considered exchanging poetry for the study of “Greek or prosody” at Berkeley, a very real possibility if not for Kerouac’s stern response (“It’s a Buddhist, AN EASTERN FUTURE ahead,” “[Greek poetry] is child’s play”; Charters and Kerouac 1999, 306). In this period of crisis prior
to the composition of “Howl,” his characteristic style hung in the balance, as well as the career that would carry him to public notoriety and a fraught but determined commitment to life as a public homosexual and advocate for the cultural margins. At the same juncture, he fiddled endlessly with “Malest,” “work[ing] and rework[ing] the poem, checking its metric scheme against the Latin and the English translation of the Catullus poem” (Schumacher 1992, 192). Correspondence contemporary with the composition of “Malest” reveals a Ginsberg that sharply contrasts with the boisterous anti-academicism of the more familiar cultural icon:

You would like Catullus. I read a collection of translations edited by an Aiken, and am reading him in Latin now with aid of a pony. . . . I am doing some real study on metrics. . . . Trouble is a real study involves knowledge of music, Provencal, Greek, etc. It all relates directly to history or basic theory of metrical practice and notation. I don’t know how far I can go with the crude education I have. . . . There is a difference between the kind of fine classical education you can get in private school and the vague generalities of public high schools. Write sometime. I’ll let you know when anything happens. Love, Allen. (Ginsberg and Morgan 2008, 100)

Ginsberg saw his work with Catullus as an attempt to remedy his “crude education” and attain the cultural capital (“knowledge of . . . Greek;” “history of basic theory of metrical practice”) that a “fine classical education” would have granted him. If we take this sentiment as an interpretive framework for “Malest,” we see that he located the regulation of literacy (complex manipulation of poetic form, literary-historical knowledge) in the institution; and at least in part identified with the Great Books ideal “of fine classical education.” In this time of personal crisis, Ginsberg turned to the Latin text and devoted painstaking attention to its linguistic, philological minutiae. Ginsberg became a philologist by proxy.9

The exact relationship of “Malest” to its source text resists easy categorization. In the same Arion questionnaire in which he attacks academic classicism, he describes his practice in “Malest” as “paraphrase.” There could be no term less suited to Ginsberg’s philological practice vis-à-vis the Catullan

9. Years later in the Arion questionnaire, Ginsberg goes to great lengths to dismiss this very faculty of classicism and its objects: “The spirit of Anacreon, sure. But greek prosody? Ugh!” He goes so far as to argue that study of philology should not be taught to undergraduates studying the classics and that, even in graduate school, philology qua philology should be emphasized only if the student demonstrates a remarkable aptitude. At each point, Ginsberg is at pains to pin classicism’s foibles on its investment in the linguistic minutiae of its objects.
text than “paraphrase,” or its implication of rough, sloppy approximation. The poem skips over paraphrase as “different words approximate sense,” practicing extremes that fall on either side. The poem moves between extremes of relation and nonrelation that at no moment inhabit the “middle way” of paraphrase, but instead jarringly alternate between direct linguistic and semantic modeling and complete linguistic and thematic departure. There is no gradation between these disparate modes, and the abrupt jumps highlight the staggered, discontinuous transmissions of the Catullan source. Just as remarkable as the mode of adaptation itself is the fact that its complexity is visible only at the level of comparison with the Latin, because the resulting surface of Ginsberg’s poem is seamless. The English poem qua English poem reveals none of the suturing points where it leaps from direct modeling to pure invention. The idea of paraphrase conceals extremes of stylistic mimesis, invention, and linguistic rigor combined with complete transformation of affect, register, and cultural context, and in many ways, speaks to the genius of Ginsberg’s self-effacing philology.

I would like to situate Ginsberg’s later poetics in terms of “Malest,” and argue that they find their seeds in this sustained philological encounter with the Latin of Catullus. Ginsberg’s “Malest” works to produce a formal surface and a cultural present whose dependence on its classical original is indistinguishable from invention, whether that relationship is in fact dependent or relatively arbitrary. Close comparison of the Latin with Ginsberg’s “Malest” reveals a poet who lavishes attention on the forms of the Catullan original, and an adaptation with an exquisitely nuanced relationship to every formal aspect of its source. It lavishes this attention, however, not in the service of reproducing the original forms—the directive of the “faithful” translator in most traditional theories of translation—but rather in order to systematically disrupt those forms while still producing a recognizably Catullan and classical text. We might read “Malest” as a question Ginsberg poses to classics: to what degree is the ideal of “the classical” reducible to the particular forms of its preservation and mediation? Can there be a classical translation independent from a classical original? “Malest” answers with a resounding “Yes.” It successfully “extracts” the formal means of creating the ideal of a classical past from the classical text. In this sense, we have Ginsberg the radical formalist, whose poetics produce a classical present, no matter their degree of separation from their model. Yet at the same time, the “sincerity,” “universality,” and “organicism” of the resulting poem is seamless, perfectly executed—visible only at the level of comparison with the Latin source. The formal mechanisms that translate the classical erase their own presence, creating the semblance of
an organic and unmediated classical past into the Beat poetics of Ginsberg's milieu. “Malest” represents a treasure trove of material for contextualizing his immanent breakthrough to a poetics of naturalized public identity.

The choice of source text is by no means arbitrary. Taken together, Catullus 38 and “Malest” form a kind of thematic chiasmus. As is Ginsberg’s “Malest,” Catullus 38 is a homosocial address between men bound together by their status as agents of desire:

malest cornifici, tuo catullo
malest, me hercule, et laboriose,
et magis magis in dies et horas
quem tu, quod minimum facillimumque est
qua solatus es allocutione?
irascor tibi, sic meos amores?
paulum quid lubet allocutionis
maestius lacrimis Simonideis.

For your Catullus, Cornificius,
it's bad; it's bad, by Hercules, and trying,
and daily and hourly gets much worse and worse.
Yes—least and most easily done—with what consolation have you comforted him?
I'm in a rage with you—so much for my love?
A little sympathy, please, however small,
and sadder than the tears of Simonides.
(Lambert 2007, 60)

The overall theme of Ginsberg’s poem reverses the original’s affective register, as Malest’s initial “I’m not doing well” becomes “I’m happy”:

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10. Wray 2001 has enriched my reading of Zukofsky’s Catullus. Wray offers a lucid disciplinary history of Catullus scholarship and piercing insight into the particular historical discourses whereby Catullus comes to be constructed as “Romantic”: the transparently biographical Catullus, the lyric poet Catullus, characterized by his “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (Wordsworth 2009). Wray situates the history of Catullan scholarship—and therefore the ideological accretions engaged by poets such as Ginsberg—in terms of a broader history of lyric theory. He cogently historicizes the “Catullus” deconstructed and drawn on by Ginsberg, and thereby shows the ways in which the Catullan text is a site of contest and antagonism for successive and cycling ideas of self, voice, and verse. In general, Wray’s book helps contextualize what is at stake in any engagement with the Catullan text.
I’m happy, Kerouac, your madman Allen’s
finally made it:

At the same time, he keeps to the original’s general subject matter and tone of homosocial address.

discovered a new young cat,
and my imagination of an eternal boy
walks on the streets of San Francisco,
handsome, and meets me in cafeterias
and loves me. Ah don’t think I’m sickening.
You’re angry at me. For all of my lovers?
It’s hard to eat shit, without having visions;
when they have eyes for me it’s like Heaven.
(Ginsberg 2006, 131)

The original Catullus 38, which is the object of Ginsberg’s adaptation, comments on the sincere transmission of emotions as an interpersonal medium. The poem’s subject (“your Catullus”) teasingly addresses his male friend, Cornificius, chastising him for his lack of sympathy. The original dances around the subject of sincerity. On the one hand, the poem’s speaker both gives and demands sincerity. The sincerity and depth of Catullus’s “distress” is the substance of the space of address, along with his displeasure at the lack of reciprocal sincerity from Cornificius. On the other hand, the speaker’s self-conscious histrionics signal the performative and manufactured nature of his distress—its insincerity—and likewise chides the addressee for refusing to manufacture a false emotion “pathetic as the tears of Simonides.” The poem, then, is about the fabrication of sincerity as a necessary condition for egalitarian community and interrelation.

The poem’s transformations and appropriations of its Latin source are both deliberate and heterogeneous, and address each of the poem’s nested layers of significance—from meter, to phoneme, morpheme, syntax, and line—with discrete procedures. Though rules govern these procedures, their formalism is such that they systematically disrupt predictability. Metrically, “Malest” is a study in the systematic disfiguration of its source. The poem disrupts metrical equivalence with its source meter’s hendecasyllabic (xx–˘ ˘–˘– ˘–x), but also within its own individual lines. Catullus’s unvaried meter gives way to a dizzying sequence of metrical variations, and the uniform parameters of Catullan meter meet their inverse image in the measured, precise, and uniform disparity of each of Malest’s parts (I = Invention, A = Adaptation):
A: I’m happy, Kerouac, your madman Allen’s
I: finally made it: discovered a new young cat,
A: and my imagination of an eternal boy
I: walks on the streets of San Francisco,
A: handsome, and meets me in cafeterias
I: and loves me. Ah don’t think I’m sickening.
A: You’re angry at me. For all of my lovers?
I: It’s hard to eat shit, without having visions;
I: when they have eyes for me it’s like Heaven.

Outside of the deliberate mimicry in the call and response of lines 7 and 8, no two of “Malest’s” lines scan alike, and no line in the poem scans as a hendecasyllabic. Even within Ginsberg’s line, no two sides of a caesura mirror each other. “Malest” runs through a deft succession of metrical permutations—often from foot to foot—without repeating itself. Whereas Ginsberg’s poem progressively extracts its source from the particular linguistic forms it inhabits, the original progressively animates those forms. The original Catullus 38 begins with the bare, mechanical reality of its meter, foregrounding the normally invisible artifice of metrical constraints. The first lines begin as performances of their own reduction to “mere” symptoms of meter: “It’s bad. It’s really bad. It’s really really bad.” They are zombie-like, lifeless, unvaried, and mechanical in their lack of metrical variation and constricted range of expression. The movement away from unvaried repetition is, at first, a mere twitch. Lines 1–3 are predetermined, passive, and subjected to their form, then evolve into repetitions with a ghost of variation, finally injecting expressiveness in line 3. Catullus 38 tells the formal narrative of the human struggling to invest the dull and dead materials of the predetermined form with life, while “Malest” tells the formal narrative of the human struggling to break free from its set, predetermined constraints. Taken together, the narratives told by the progression of the two poems’ metrical structures forms a chiastic inversion.

In Ginsberg’s adaptation, complex strategies of inversion, reflection, and invention continue at the level of line. The poem alternates between two distinct modes of transformations: inversion and invention. The invented lines stand in arbitrary relation to the semantic and linguistic form of the corresponding original lines, while the inversions attend carefully to the sound of the original line’s language and syntactic relations while inverting aspects of its register. The first line of Ginsberg’s “Malest” models the linguistic features of the original quite faithfully. The line’s syntax and subject, apart from the affective reversal of “I’m happy,” directly mirror Catullus. Ginsberg retains the
affection of the poem’s speaker diminutively referring to himself in the third person, adding “madman” as a descriptor, “your madman Allen.” The addition of “madman,” despite some expansion of length, only embellishes the sonic similarities of “your madman Allen” to “tuo Catullo” in terms of vowel distribution. Add this to the way that “Kerouac” evokes sonic similarities to “Cornificius,” and the first line arrives at a marriage of sonic and thematic fidelity. Lines 3 and 7 likewise perform an inversion of affect, while modeling themselves directly on the concrete linguistic features of the original. “Imagination” sonically mimes “magis magis,” and “an eternal boy” mimes the general syllabic distribution and sonic values of “in dies et horas.” The relationship of semantic content to its original is slightly more complex than the simple reversal of line one, but nonetheless transforms the sense of quickening time of “in dies et horas” into the timeless “eternal” of the poem’s idealized boy. What in the original line is an abysmal nadir of emotional state has come full circle as giddy wish fulfillment in “Malest.” Line seven, like the others, mimics the syntax and sound of the original while effecting an affective reversal. Catullus’s “I’m angry at you” becomes Ginsberg’s pleading, “You’re angry at me,” and sic meos amores (“treat my love so?”) becomes “For all of my lovers.”

Of eight Catullan lines and nine of Ginsberg’s, only three unequivocally model themselves after Catullus’s sound or content. The other five lines of Ginsberg’s poem have only the most tenuous connection to the Catullus. The connections extend little beyond the obvious framework of homosocial friendship and empathy given or received. Take, for example, the final lines of each poem. Only the most brazen interpretive doublethink can establish either sonic or thematic modeling. The “tenuous” lines exhibit features that are uncharacteristic of Ginsberg’s poetics: a careful sense of enjambment, the subtle but persistent connective tissue between lines, a precision of address, and the polished, subtle but cutting barbs and appeals of Catullus. The poem’s language is minimally generative, rather than the maximal and verbose generativity that becomes Ginsberg’s modus operandi. The poem maintains the stylistic indicators of Catullus speech," even in syntactic and semantic nonrelation: carefully placed terms of endearment (“your madman Allen”), polished inclusion of the vulgar (“it’s hard to eat shit”), representations of verbal interjection (“ah”), embeddedness in geographical place (“streets of San Francisco”), variations in statement length, quick oscillations between report and address, the use of idiomatic phrases (“young cat”), and so on. The poem skillfully maintains the formal registers of Catullan voice. Where we might

11. One cannot escape the idea of voice in Ginsberg. I do not adopt the term uncritically, but rather as a description of the formal devices that create a textual semblance of voice in Ginsberg’s verse.
perhaps describe Ginsberg’s poetics as paraphrase (the three closely modeled lines), they invert semantic content but preserve linguistic form. Where “Malest” departs from the linguistic form of the original, it does so in a way that blasts through the gravity well of “approximate sense” and stands as pure invention.

The poem ends on a note of, if not insincere, at least facile, attraction. The “eternal boy” is idealized and unreal, and it is precisely the unreal “visions” that undercut and softly blunt the edges of the poem’s self-satisfied preening. Nevertheless, the poem cannot resist the illusory flirtations that are “like Heaven”: “when they have eyes for me it’s like Heaven.” Finally, the gaze flips around: Even as Ginsberg’s poem translates its unreal classical fantasy into the stream of time and makes it real, the positions of source and target reverse. Now Ginsberg is the object of the gaze of the classical “eternal boy.” Just as Ginsberg takes the Catullan text and translates it from the unreal, remote, and ancient past into the here and now, so too the “classical” Catullus that Ginsberg has recreated in the present translates Ginsberg himself into the past. “Malest” makes the classical real, which in turn makes “Malest” classical.

After going through these individual textual practices in detail, it is possible to step back and contemplate the science fiction insanity that is the translation machine of “Malest.” For each of the source text’s multiple planes of significance—from meter through phoneme, morpheme, syntax, line, and theme—“Malest” maintains multiple procedures of adaptation. We might productively distinguish between “horizontal” procedures of adaptation, which adapt Catullus 38 along the same plane of significance—say meter, for example—and “vertical” ones, which adapt Catullus 38 from one plane of significance to another—say from the metrical to the semantic, for example. Horizontally, “Malest” maintains at least two staggered, discontinuous modes of appropriation. Vertically, each plane duplicates some aspect of the planes above or below it—so for example, the alteration from invention to inversion at the level of line resonates with the shifting permutations from metrical foot to metrical foot, or the substitution of polar values at the level of morpheme—happy to sad—while always preventing seamless continuity of procedure. Moreover, it does this in such a way that the resulting poetic surface bears none of the marks of the artifice involved in its creation.

The way the poem cycles between direct relation and modeling—something quite close to translation—and indirect, transparent-seeming invention, self-consciously acknowledges its investment in the illusory “visions” and formal structures that, though artificial productions of reception, nevertheless create the seamless representation of voice, personhood, sincerity, and mascu-
linity. It is specifically the invisibility of classicism’s creation of sincerity, transparency, and normative identity onto which this piece latches. The primary formal goal of its engagement with the Catullan text is to reproduce the invisibility of the interface between text and ideology. It successfully reproduces classicism’s ability to normalize or naturalize an otherwise foreign past. What I find remarkable about the resulting poetic surface is not so much the degree to which the ancient text is “updated,” or the formal transformations whereby “Malest” appropriates the ancient text to make it its own—offering us now a queer Catullus, now a bohemian Catullus, now a hipster Catullus—but rather the complex ease with which the bohemian appears as classical. A contemporary landscape stands side by side with the ancient original in such a way that their disparity is indiscernible.

In “Malest,” Ginsberg opposes an overtly queer Catullus to the sanitized Catullus of the Loeb edition that he so vocally criticizes in the Arion questionnaire. At the same time, the queer classical text emerges as a direct inversion of the hegemonic image. Whereas hegemonic classicism selects and represents only those aspects of a classical past that bolster the heterocentric present, censoring the rest to bolster the mores of “institutional (academic) Classicism XXth Century,” Ginsberg flips it around and represents only the homoerotic Catullus. Even as the poem recovers a formerly censored aspect of the classical past, it holds it up as a guarantor of the censored (Beat) present: “Malest” guarantees the Beat present as a “living classic” precisely through analogy with the formerly censored aspect of Catullus. Similarly, “Malest” creates the past in the image of the present by updating its idiom to fit the particular social milieu it is meant to support (hipster, Beat, bohemian, and so on) and writing out the original text’s meditation on poetic artifice and the construction of public emotion. Ginsberg’s poem in no way “foreignizes” its queer content by means of the Catullan original. Rather than confronting the “straight” Catullus of hegemonic classicism with an image of difference and opacity, Ginsberg constructs a contemporaneity that is interchangeable with the classical past by naturalizing his queer Catullus. These are the formal processes whereby the classics are detached from the classical—the invention of “HUMANITY” and “the real human balls” from the “Ugh!” of “Anacreon’s prosody.” The subtle formal processes whereby Ginsberg’s “philology of the margins” displaces the classical from the classic complicate our understanding of the unedited, sincere, or spontaneous in Ginsberg’s poetics. If “Malest” is an early instance of the poetics of sincerity, transparent public image, and the unedited organism of the self, then it calls for a substantial revision of our understanding of these terms in Ginsberg’s poetics. They are “organic” in the way that organic food is so: we arrive at “natural” food not by backsliding to a primitive agri-
cultural economy, but as the crowning achievement of high industrial food
technology.12

Ginsberg’s “Malest” personifies his usurpation of classicism’s identity-regu-
lation mediations. Ginsberg crafted a Beat classicism on the basis of discrete
strategies of reception and mediation—in “Malest,” those textual strategies
are inversion, usurpation, and exclusion vis-à-vis the poem’s source text. The
poem seeks to reproduce and alter classicism’s naturalization to reflect a mar-
ginalized queer identity.13 With “Malest,” Ginsberg discovered the ability of
poetic form to naturalize the social margins in the period directly preceding
the development of his characteristic poetics in “Howl.” Ginsberg learned not
only from the text of Catullus but also from the embedded series of institu-
tional and ideological frameworks that mediated his access to Catullus and
produced the immediacy of a living, directly accessible past.

Detailed analysis of “Malest” offers purchase for new perspectives on the
broader arc of his poetics: Far more than in exploring the “organic” ancient-
ness or mythical status of various traditions, Ginsberg invests in borrowing
that status to create a self-mythologizing present: “Old life and new side by
side, will Catholic Church find Christ on Jupiter Mohammed rave in Ur-
anus will Buddha be acceptable on the stolid planets or will we find Zoroas-
trian temples flowering on Neptune” (Ginsberg 2006, 171). It is difficult to
overstate the omnipresence of “naturalizing” strategies of reception as they
gain complexity throughout Ginsberg’s career. His verse consistently positions
itself in relation to various frameworks of reference and reception, which by
turns encompass historical and geographical facts; architectural landmarks;
nationalist mythologies; religious, textual, and liturgical traditions; constella-
tions of poets and poetic movements; and bodies of literature, organizing their
inclusions in categories such as “American,” “Oriental,” “Biblical,” and “Greco-
Roman.” Ginsberg’s strategic use of these intertextual fields spans his poetic
career, and operates at multiple levels, of which two of the most recognizable
are (1) sustained refuguration and (2) ambient allusiveness. Refuguration refers
broadly to the sustained engagement and use of an intertextual figure or trope,
more robust than a brief allusion, lengthier than a line or two, and having a
substantive function in the source, for example, the sustained use of Christo-

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12. Davidson and others have noted the canny poise involved in the creation of Ginsberg’s
public image, “‘The change of Allen Ginsberg, market researcher, to Allen Ginsberg, poet, may
not have been such a transition after all’” (2003, 32).

13. Davidson characterizes it even more strongly, “Far from rejecting the cultural main-
stream, the Beats embraced many of its more oppositional features”; “‘The Beats, to continue my
first example, neither ‘sold out’ to the mainstream nor rejected it; rather, they worked strategi-
cally within it to develop an immanent critique’” (Davidson 1998, 268, 269).
logical figures in “Howl,” (“the eli eli lamma lamma sabachthani saxophone cry,” “with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years”; Ginsberg 2006, 139). I coin the term *ambient allusiveness*, on the other hand, to refer to Ginsberg’s idiosyncratic use of side-by-side allusions to eclectic intertextual fields. These lists function as egalitarian spaces in which disparate traditions share equal status and serve to generate allusive background noise rather than central poetic narratives, for example, when “The Big Beat” addresses a list of eclectic deities (“Kalki! Apocalypse Christ! Maitreya! grim / Chronos . . . / and Ganymede”; Ginsberg 2006, 357). This background noise tends to frame and lend atmosphere to otherwise highly contemporary engagements with current poetics and politics. In many ways, Ginsberg never rejected the poetics of naturalizing translation found in “Malest.”

At the same time that this perspective contributes to our understanding of Ginsberg’s poetics, it poses new questions and throws into relief several anomalies, including (1) the progressive absence of Greek and Latin intertexts in his verse, and (2) the sharp contrast of the apparent affirmation of “a fine classical education” with his subsequent and pronounced anti-institutionalism and anti-classicism. Firstly, the role of classical reception in “Malest” underscores a new intertextual peculiarity: remarkably, “Howl” represented Ginsberg’s last sustained engagement with Greco-Roman classicism until late in his poetic career. After “Howl,” Ginsberg distanced his poetics from Greek and Roman texts as sites of poetic or linguistic authority, instead resituating its intertextual geography by prioritizing first a biblical, then an oriental, past, embracing Kerouac’s “EASTERN FUTURE.” For a period of over a decade, Greek and Latin texts appeared only as members of egalitarian lists or as ambient allusions in Ginsberg’s verse, and even then in small numbers, or as figures for hegemony itself: “Minerva, sexless cold & chill, ascending goddess of money . . . executive dyke, Minerva, goddess of Madison Avenue” (Ginsberg 2006, 194).

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14. See Hardwick 2003 for a critical vocabulary of reception studies including “refiguration” and many other terms. “Ambient allusion” is my own innovation.

15. A substantive refiguration rather than inclusion in a list of ambient allusions.

16. A search finds that the word “Greek” does not appear in *The Collected Poems* in pages 187–800; “Greece” appears once on page 347 as a place name; “classic” does not appear in pages 136–802; and “classical” not in pages 94–879 (except once on page 500 as “classical music”).

17. One could possibly consider the brief (two-line) but thematically central use of Charon and Lethe in “A Supermarket in California” as a refiguration, but the poem is roughly contemporary with “Malest” anyway; or one could look at the broadest levels of genre and claim *Elegies for Neal Cassady* as a refiguration of classical elegy, but to my mind this is far too broad and indirect. The claim, too, limits itself to verse published in the collected poetry and stops...
“Stotras to Kali Destroyer of Illusions” (1962) serves as a brief but representative illustration of this elision of Greek and Latin. Although the poem contains well over fifty proper names or direct allusions, including intertextual fields as various as American architecture, international politics, Medieval mysticism, “Bible,” and Hinduism, only two of these (“Spouse of Europa”; “Maya”) point to Greek or Latin sources. The contrast of this elision with the persistence of biblical and oriental refiguration underscores the peculiarity of Ginsberg’s “classical silence.” On the one hand, this excision was part of an articulated strategy to “let Occidental and Washington be transformed into a higher place, the plaza of eternity” (Ginsberg 2006, 163). On the other hand, Ginsberg’s specific criticisms of classicism cannot fully account for the excision of Greek and Latin texts.

The disciplinary histories of biblical, oriental, and classical studies diverge at a relatively late point in history, and thus their codifications as coherent objects of academic knowledge share striking similarities. Nonetheless, Ginsberg took as perhaps the most stable intertextual feature of his work as the refiguration of the tropes, topoi, motif, and figures of “Bible” (e.g., “Tho I am not there for this Prophecy. . . . Take this, this Psalm. . . . This is the end, the redemption from Wilderness,” in “Kaddish,” Ginsberg 2006, 220) and “Orient” (“As the old sages of Asia, or the white bears of Persia / scribbled on the margins of their scrolls / in delicate ink / remembering with tears the ancient clockbells of their cities,” 253). His verse hungrily assimilates a biblical and oriental past, while limiting the classical past to a nominal or token presence.18

Secondly, examining Ginsberg’s later career from the perspective of the naturalizing classicism of “Malest” complicates the familiar narrative of “Howl” as an anti-institutional manifesto of countercultural transgression, as well as the timeline and motivations for his ultimate divorce from the ideology of “a fine classical education.” The resonances of the formal strategies in “Howl” with those in “Malest”—in addition to Ginsberg’s accounts and rebuttals of its critical reception—suggest that it was not until after the dismal institutional reception of “Howl” that he fully rejected (1) classicism qua Greek and Latin, and (2) the figures of “institution” and “academic classicism” short of unpublished and archival materials, although I am unaware of any specific exceptions in them. By any account, we have a period of well over a decade following the composition of “Malest,” spanning the height of his success as a poet and public figure, in which Greek and Latin intertexts take a back seat.

18. In general, a far more coherent and detailed account of the interrelationships between biblical, oriental, and classical philology in their formative periods is an absolute necessity to the coherence of classical reception studies; both an institutional and discursive genealogy of the same and of persisting formations of “the biblical,” “oriental,” and “classical” as literary topoi and sites of reception.
as privileged sites of cultural authority. “Howl” functions more as an extension and development of the classical “HUMANITY” in “Malest” than its revision or recusal. Like “Malest,” “Howl” grounds itself in the “history or basic theory of metrical practice” and the literary historical archive governed by “a fine classical education,” classical (Plotinus), biblical (eli eli lamma lamma), and modern (Cézanne, Whitman, etc.). Further, the terms of Ginsberg’s defense of “Howl,” the indignant incredulity with which he met its critical reception, and the strategic responses he subsequently developed, all suggest that he had intended “Howl” as a practice of “tradition” rather than its negation. He characterized it thus in his letters: “I ALSO believe it’s the main “tradition,” not that there is any tradition except what we make ourselves” (Ginsberg and Morgan 2008, 203).

In the same letter, his disdain encompasses the misidentification of “Howl” with “negative values” and “the whole sociological-tone-revolt whatever bullshit that everyone comes on with” (“the vulgarity . . . so called friendly from the same intellectual types . . . [of their] halfwit interpretations of “negative values” of Howl,” ibid., 212) and his springs from the institution’s wholesale misrecognition of the artifice, complexity, and literary-historical merits of Ginsberg’s formalism:

I get sick and tired I read 50 reviews of Howl and not one of them written by anyone with enough technical interests to notice the fucking obvious construction of the poem, all the details besides (to say nothing of the various esoteric classical allusions built in like references to Cézanne’s theory of composition etc. etc.). (205)

With “Howl,” Ginsberg had expected “the guardians of culture” to see their own reflections, or the poem’s skilled manipulation of cultural capital, or at least some recognition of the formal achievement involved in recreating “tradition.” “Howl” was meant to write itself into the Great Books tradition of universal “HUMANITY”—the “main tradition” and the institutional frameworks that he had formerly believed to be privileged entrances to classicism or canonicity.

Ginsberg’s progressive disidentification with an academic classicism grounded in Greek and Latin resulted, I would argue, not from a rejection of that “tradition” or its attendant classicism, but from a progressive sense of the disjoint between “academic institution” and the cultural literacy required to regulate and reproduce canonicity: “Basically no one has insight into poetry techniques except people who are exercising them” (Ginsberg 2008, 203). The transition from “a fine classical education” to “the whole horror of Columbia”
hinged on “the horrible irony of all these jerks who can’t read trying to lecture me (us) on FORM” (205). For Ginsberg, the academic and high cultural reception of “Howl” compelled the realization that “the institution” and its representatives were relatively minor players in the regulation of cultural capital: “Just a bunch of dilettantes. And THEY have the nerve to set themselves up as guardians of culture?!?” (204). Ginsberg’s version of classicism succeeded almost too well: The “horde of half educated deathly academicians” had mistaken Ginsberg’s organic poetic surface as self-evident, missing or refusing to acknowledge the technical virtuosity involved in its production and its resonance with the procedures by which the very texts they claimed to represent had become the transparent semblance of affirmative “tradition.”

The turning point in Ginsberg’s final (at least for the ensuing years) disidentification was his realization that “the guardians of culture” had inherited a system of cultural production that exceeded them, and the operation of which they no longer understood. To borrow a phrase from “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” Ginsberg now saw “the guardians of culture” as “bad magicians” who no longer spoke the arcane tongue from which they drew their power: “Not one yet, not ONE in all the colleges, magazines, book pages has said anything real, has got the point, either of spirit or prosody . . . NOT ONE” (Ginsberg 2008, 206). Ultimately, Ginsberg was a pragmatist of the first order, and it was this growing sense of the disjoint between “academic institution” and the cultural literacy required to regulate and reproduce “a contemporaneity for every period” that motivated his eventual, clairvoyant ultimatum: “UNLESS THERE IS MORE COOPERATION FROM THE SUPPOSEDLY RESPONSIBLE PARTIES IN UNIVERSITIES AND MAGAZINES,” Ginsberg writes, “THEY CAN TAKE THEIR FUCKING LITERARY TRADITION AND SHOVE IT UP THEIR ASS—I don’t need them and they don’t need me” (ibid.).

Charles Altieri and others have characterized Ginsberg’s multivalent occupation of the “mainstream margins” in terms of the nation:

There is no doubt that Ginsberg feels wounded by the very nation that he wants to celebrate. But that is the aspect of contingency that he has to reconcile with the possibility of acknowledging the forces that have formed him. In fact, his sense of betrayal proves inseparable from ideals cultivated by that very nation. (Altieri 1999, 44)

While this analysis no doubt applies to questions of national identity, the present analysis suggests a more direct application to questions of “institution.” “The very nation that he want[ed] to celebrate” becomes the “tradition” into which he sought entrance; and whereas his technical virtuosity allowed him
to skillfully manipulate its formal networks of communication (“I don’t need them [the universities and magazines] and they don’t need me”),¹⁹ he reserved his “sense of betrayal” by “the forces that had formed him” for “the horror of Columbia”: “THEY CAN TAKE THEIR FUCKING LITERARY TRADITION AND SHOVE IT UP THEIR ASS.”

¹⁹. As a compelling example of the many ways Ginsberg develops a “social formalism,” and its similarities with the “naturalizing classicism” of “Malest,” witness Ginsberg’s testimony before the Judiciary Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, investigating use of LSD:

Dressed in a suit and tie, and speaking in a low, respectful tone, he [Ginsberg] began his address by admitting that he was uneasy . . . that the members might have prejudged him by his public “bearded image”: “I am a little frightened to present myself—the fear of your rejection of me, the fear of not being tranquil enough to reassure you that we can talk together, make sense, and perhaps even like each other—enough to want not to offend, or speak in a way which is abrupt or hard to understand. . . . We can’t treat each other only as objects, categories of citizens, role players, big names, small names, objects of research or legislation.” (quoted in Schumacher 1992, 471–72)

Here is a moment when Ginsberg addresses reception as a social question, and a masterful negotiation of his public presentation, and the tissue-fine convergence of discursive strategies, and the legitimation of juridical authority. This direct encounter, his request to be allowed entrance into the field of juridical discourse, grounds itself in a nuanced social formalism. On the one hand, his appeal subtly criticizes the economy of public image, the unreality of its abstracted representations, and the ways in which it grounds juridical authority. At the same time, Ginsberg’s strategies of social formalism offer the irreducible particularity of himself as “HUMANITY”: resistant to the transformation of subjects into reified “objects,” abstract “categories of citizens,” “big names, small names,” or “objects of . . . legislation.” Ginsberg requests entrance into the highly charged and segmented public space as a human being, immediate and irreducible in his particularity.

Unlike “the guardians of culture” at an earlier point, the senators are not at all dismissive of Ginsberg’s influence. Javits presents himself as fully aware of the threat posed by Ginsberg’s formal mastery of the procedures that govern “legitimation” and makes explicit efforts to counter it:

Q. Do you consider yourself qualified to give a medical opinion [concerning the use of LSD] which will determine the fate of my 16 ½-year-old-son?
A. No. . . .
Q. Of course you are not, and that is the important point that must be made to those who will listen to you.

Javits is speaking, not to Ginsberg, but to the matrix of public discourse. The senator exercises a strategy that strikingly resembles Ginsberg’s own. The senator underscores the formalism and discursive artifice of Ginsberg’s expertise, empiricism, objectivity, authority, intelligibility, and so on, as if to say: “Look! Though he sounds exactly like those that have been sanctioned as representatives of these various spheres of knowledge, and though he has exactly the same rhetorical arsenal and formal skill sets that they themselves exercise—he has not been sanctioned by the approved order.” In effect, the senator is simultaneously drawing attention to the gap between the universality of discourses of reason, objectivity, empiricism, and reliance on fact and data, and their actual existence as subordinated to, situated within, and dependent upon highly contextual and contingent “legislative categories.”
I would argue that Ginsberg’s “classical silence” and disdain for academic classicism and its “tradition” had little to do with disavowing its textual capital or formal strategies. On the one hand, reading the elision only as a strategic move threatens to devolve into a flattening (and cold) critical judgment, dismissive of his ethical and multicultural commitments in a way that resonates ominously with his early institutional censure. On the other hand, my suggestion reflects the arc of Ginsberg’s poetics themselves as they mature into self-reflexive critique and struggle with the contradictions involved in his classical usurpation: the symbiosis of critical innovation and the tradition from which it seeks to break; the “gap” between representation and its purported objects—public identity, sexuality, personhood, and so on; and the paradoxes of critical recidivism. That is to say that, although I argue that Ginsberg’s poetics take as their starting point the strategies he identifies with the institution, they evolve. Ginsberg’s basic critique of classicism is not that its strategies of identity reification and the creation of “images” of public identity are fundamentally insidious, but rather that they do not sufficiently nuance. The turn away from “Western” classics represents an evolving self-critique of his own classicism that begins at the level of represented content (resituating the intertextual stage of his naturalized, humanist, or American revisions onto ever more “foreign” or “unclassical” traditions) and finally turns against itself as a critique of representation as such.20

These tensions crystallize in the Indian Journals (1996), which stand as the culmination of an ongoing self-critique.21 In the earlier period of “Malest” and

20. The shift in imaginary geography of Ginsberg’s later work, especially the Indian Journals, in which the “outside” comes to be more and more exclusively located in the East, as well as the progressive Easternization of Ginsberg’s post–Indian Journals poetics, represents an intensification of a textual and affective logic already implicit in “Howl,” and deeply implicit in the romantic and transcendentalist tradition on which it draws so heavily. This mapping of a vertical geography of the metaphysical onto a horizontal geography, not to mention in combination with the degree to which, especially in his earlier poetry, Ginsberg takes on the role of the prophet (witness the repeated exclamation of “Moloch!” in “Howl” section 2, which transforms the poet into a Jeremiah, the poem into a Jeremiad, and America into a wayward Israel), might serve as concrete platforms from which to investigate Ginsberg’s “neoromanticism.” Ian Balfour, for example, has argued for the importance of the figure of the prophet in the crafting of romantic subjectivity and poetics in The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy (2002).

21. Two notable exceptions have paid a great deal of attention to the material in the Indian Journals: Hungerford 2005 and Watten 2002. This paper owes a great deal to Watten’s formulation of the role of the East in the formation of an “outside” and his analysis of the Indian Journals. Watten’s article, however, focuses on a political reading of the outside and focuses more narrowly on the Indian Journals themselves, rather than their relation to the longer arc of Ginsberg’s work; and on the relationship of Ginsberg’s post-India poetics to the emergence of Language poetry in the late ’60s and ’70s. To Hungerford’s article, I owe many insights into Ginsberg’s conception of a “supernatural” poetry of transformative power, although unlike
“Howl,” Ginsberg’s poetics articulate his “philological self-erasure.” The osmosis of past to present, present to past, archaic to modern, center to margins, east to west, foreign to native, and so on, is the basis of his “linguistic supernaturalism” and creation of poetic immediacy, personhood, and presence. In India, Ginsberg encounters the material site of his “classical” projections. The Indian Journals mark a crisis in which Ginsberg confronts the “gap” between the “archaic time,” liberated identities, and linguistic presence of his “oriental classicism,” and the material reality of India as a measured present. To Ginsberg’s credit, he does not shrink from the encounter, but follows its implications to their limits. The Indian Journals encounter the opacity of classicism’s object in India and bring the question of language as an obdurate medium—resistant to stable reifications of identity—to the forefront in Ginsberg’s work. After “Wichita Vortex Sutra,” the Western classics return as a presence in his work. This return defers pride of place, but restores classical texts to viability and treats them as full interlocutors in a number of prominent poems, from “Ecologues” to “Plutonian Odes” and “τεθνάκην δ’ ὀλίγω ‘πιδεύης φαίνομ’ ἁλαία.” Ginsberg’s poetics evolve toward a self-aware critique or performance of their participation in practices of representation and image creation.

This chapter extends a close reading of “Malest” and Catullus 38 into a new appreciation of the arc of Ginsberg’s career. It reframes the development of Ginsberg’s poetics in terms of the highly particular mediation of a classical text and brings into a single lens a host of urgent issues, from censorship’s influence on the content of Ginsberg’s verse to the formal similarities between the cultural center and Ginsberg’s “margins”22—and to what degree his poetics represent those margins by analogy with the center—issues of homosocial community and the economy of prestige, and the formalist “self-erasure” of his soon-to-be characteristic poetics of sincerity, authenticity, organicism, and “personhood.” Reception studies allow us to articulate an early example of Ginsberg’s poetics of public identity and “hegemonic marginalism” as grounded in highly specific modes of textual mediation. It contributes to and often revises our understanding of each of these issues and situates the histo-

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22. Perelman makes a number of provocative and compelling points vis-à-vis Ginsberg’s relationship to Jewishness: “Another way of coming at Jewishness in innovative writing, what I’ll call homeopathic Jewishness, will restore the commonsense fact that Ginsberg is a Jew, though in a non-commonsense way. . . . Crudely, the homeopathic model says that the more diluted the Jewishness the more Jewish the writer. . . . Back to “Ginsberg is more Jewish than Zukofsky.” Really, isn’t it simpler to reframe their difference-amid-genealogical-similarity as a difference in historical generation, both poetic and chronological? Zukofsky grew up speaking Yiddish; two decades later, Ginsberg grew up speaking English” (2009, 54–56).
ries of classicism and Western philology as potential contexts for Ginsberg’s orientalism.

By examining not only the ways in which a critical poetics arises in opposition to, but also how it borrows from and shares similarities with “hegemonic classicism,” this chapter participates in a growing body of scholarship that deepens our understanding of the New American Poetry by juxtaposing its impulse toward critique with its “reproduction of the very social forms it criticizes.”23 This critical development has ranged widely, recontextualizing the Beat generation’s discourse of spontaneity and temporality in terms of the “burden of history” (Mortenson 2010, 1), the San Francisco Renaissance’s “new, [homosexual] male subject,” in terms of “a group ethos of male solidarity and sodality that often betrayed homophobic qualities” (Davidson 2003, 30), and the Black Mountain School’s “production of new art forms and practice,” in terms of “largely male forums . . . [and] the structure of homosocial relations, genitalized or not” (29). The marriage of classical reception and avant-garde studies allows us to resituate abstract negotiations of gender, sexuality, temporality, public identity, and intelligibility in terms of discrete textual mediations. Further, it contextualizes the dialectic of cultural critique and innovation in terms of the dance between a preexisting historical, cultural, and literary context and the horizon that strains toward “the new.”24

Examining the role of the classics in Allen Ginsberg’s poetics offers a snapshot of the mechanisms of cultural development and identity construction as they operate at a particular literary and historical moment, and of the role that poetics and the mediation of key texts has played in broader processes of historical change.

23. Cf. Mortenson 2010, 1: “The Beats arrive in each new present with a burden of history (both individual and social) that complicates the ways in which they attempt to utilize the present.”

24. It also offers the opportunity to rethink the classics themselves as originally avant-garde works of social critique that have been institutionally assimilated; and likewise of avant-garde works as bids for canonicity—works in the process of becoming canonical. The compulsory definition of experimental poets as “marginal” is thrown into striking relief when juxtaposed with the relative prominence in the popular imagination (and on the institutional reading list) some have attained: “The book [Howl and Other Poems] has sold more than 1,000,000 copies, its signature poem has been translated into two dozen languages and is anthologized in high school and standard anthologies worldwide as a literary classic” (Ginsberg et al. 2006); and as David Gates notes: “Howl, for all its affirmations, is a profoundly oppositional poem, and it counts on being opposed. . . . It’s a radically offensive poem, or used to be” (quoted in Ginsberg et al. 2006). There is something vital in that seemingly incidental “used to be” that points to the dialectical nature of avant-garde critique and canonical affirmation.
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