



A Paratextual and Bibliographical Study of *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg

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‘The priestly ex-book-thief arrived and thrust a small black and white book into my hand...I took it and flipped it open...and found myself in the middle of ‘Howl’...turned to the beginning and was caught up immediately in that sad, powerful opening...I knew that this Allen Ginsberg...had broken ground for all of us - simply by getting this published.’ (1)

1.0 Introduction

The following essay is a paratextual and bibliographical study of *Howl* by Allen Ginsberg. It will mainly focus on the original version of the poem *Howl for Carl Solomon*, printed in Spring 1956; and *Howl*, included as part of *Howl and Other Poems*; first published in November 1956 by Lawrence Ferlinghetti at City Lights Books.

2.0 The ‘Mimeograph’

The first version of *Howl* exists as a mimeograph, entitled *Howl for Carl Solomon*. The poem in a partially finished form, was performed by Ginsberg at a poetry reading held at The Six Gallery on October 7 1955. The performance was a catalyst in the publication of the poem, and received positive reviews ‘...The reading was delivered by the poet...driving forward with a strange ecstatic intensity, delivering a spiritual confession to an astounded audience...’ (2)

In May 1956, approximately 25 copies of the poem were printed by Marthe Rexroth and Robert Creeley at San Francisco State College. Ginsberg gave these copies to friends, fellow poets and potential reviewers, including T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Richard Eberhart. (3)

It was also sent to William Carlos Williams, who would later write the introduction for the version published by City Lights.

Jim Pennington, publisher and printer at Aloes Books, created a reproduction/re-enactment of the first mimeograph, for a Beat Conference held in Manchester in 2016. He owns a Gestetner stencil duplicator machine, and in March 2018 at his North London studio, he ran through the process of creating a print (see images 1-6). Each page is first typed onto wax-coated paper, which removes the coating, creating a stencil. When run through the stencil duplicator machine, ink is forced through the stencil, creating an image. The machine itself takes up very little space and the process is highly efficient and cost-effective, producing immediate results. The typing process (to create the stencil) was the part that took the longest.

Marthe Rexroth, was, Jim suggests, a skilled typist and printer. ‘...the time it took me to type and print all the other leaves...a day...but Marthe was a skilled typer so I'd say she did those 17 leaves in under four hours...’ (4) In his opinion, Rexroth was the typist *and* printer of the original manuscript, not just the printer as suggested on several of the existing mimeographs.

Researching the printing methods used in the first printed version of *Howl*, it became apparent that the term ‘mimeograph’ has been used in most bibliographic descriptions of the item, to describe what was in fact, a ‘ditto’ or spirit duplicator machine print. In some descriptions of the first *Howl* manuscript, both the term ‘mimeographed’ and ‘dittoed’ are used. Mimeograph and Spirit Duplicator technology were used frequently side by side in the 1950s and 1960s, and the connotation of the word ‘mimeographed’ and ‘dittoed’ were both associated with alternative publishing:

“Mimeo and mimeograph are used very loosely by the Americans, essentially to mean “not letterpress or commercially printed”, and sometimes just to mean material of a certain ‘underground’ or ‘niche’ genre, irrespective of the production process. There was a

time when stencil and indeed spirit duplicators were called mimeographs, but then they were the only machines of their kind...from late 50s on, easy-to-use small offset litho machines appeared in offices and organisations and they were used for the same printed matter and so that printed matter was said to be mimeographed as well. So to be correct and clear, one could say "a mimeograph printed using the spirit duplicating process on a Ditto machine". This keeps the 'mimeo' word there (necessary because it puts the object into its socio-historical and literary context) as well as emphasising, with clarity, the essence and quality of the object." (5)

The cheap and efficient production of the first printing enabled Ginsberg to disseminate his work quickly, and to receive feedback and affirmation. Ginsberg's Father, Louis, reviewed the mimeographed version of *Howl*: '...It has violence; it has life...it will give you a name.' He criticised the use of language in parts '...there is no need for dirty, ugly words...They will land you in trouble.' (6). Ginsberg did not originally intend for any lines of the poem to be censored, other than the line 'with mother finally *****', where he purposely used asterisks to suggest the mental condition of his mother, rather than confusing this with the sexual connotation of the word. His feeling about the poem and its intended audience enabled him to be honest and fully open in his approach to self-expression '...I assumed it wouldn't be published, therefore I could say anything...literally just for myself or anybody that I knew personally well...' (7)

3.0 *Howl* and Other Poems: Censorship and its Effect

After hearing Ginsberg's performance at The Six Gallery, Ferlinghetti was determined to publish the poem: 'The repressive, conformist, racist, homophobic world of the 1950s cried out for it. That night I went home and sent Ginsberg a Western Union telegram..."I greet you at the beginning of a great career...When do we get the manuscript?" (8).

Ferlinghetti was aware of the possible inflammatory effect of the poem. This led him to ask the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to defend the book in court if he was prosecuted. This proved to be effective after the subsequent seizure of the second printing and arrest of Ferlinghetti, in 1957 (9).

The first printing of *Howl and Other Poems* was published by City Lights in November 1956; number four in the Pocket Poets Series. 1,000 copies were printed by the English printer Villiers in Holloway, London. The main reason for this was because ‘..the exchange was such that it was much better to get books printed in England.’ (10). Initially, Villiers did not want to print the book, so Ginsberg had to revise the text in order for it to be published in the U.S. Ginsberg was not happy with having to make the changes: ‘...English printers won’t handle *Howl*...so there is now difficulty in getting through unexpurgated. I revised it and it is now worse than it ever was...’ (11)

The second printing of the book in March 1957 was also censored (see image 7). After the first printing by Villiers, Ginsberg had requested that words not be fully censored, with the beginning of words like ‘fucked’ instead being printed as ‘f.....’(12). It is difficult to find a definitive answer as to why it was not changed, but it may have been because the pages had already been printed and it was not affordable to reprint. It could also be because Ferlinghetti was concerned about the book passing through customs.

On October 3, 1957, Judge Clayton W. Horn finds Lawrence Ferlinghetti not guilty of publishing and selling obscene writings, on the grounds that *Howl* was not written with lewd intent and was not without "redeeming social importance." Publicity surrounding the trial has a huge impact on

sales of the book: later in October, a fourth printing of 5,000 copies of *Howl and Other Poems* is printed to meet the demand (13).

All copies of the book from the fourth printing onwards, feature an adjustment to the blurb on the back, referencing the trial and the uncensored text now contained within: ‘Subsequently seized by U. S. Customs and the San Francisco Police, *HOWL AND OTHER POEMS* is now in its fourth printing, and this edition contains the full text, exactly as it appeared in the original.’ (see image 9).

The consistent sale of *Howl*, enabled City Lights to have the financial freedom and kudos to publish other authors. Currently the paperback edition of *Howl* has 1,210,00 copies in print, and was last reprinted in 2017 (20,000 copies). There are no plans to stop publishing, as it is one of the most important books in the publishing program (14). Ferlinghetti is aware of the important contribution to City Lights: ‘...some of the big publishers...usually in their history they had a big hit in one of their very first books. And that was the case with *Howl*.’ (15). The blurb on the more recent versions of *Howl and Other Poems* puts the trial at the top of the page, immediately giving the book an air of historical intrigue and notoriety, whilst also celebrating and recording the importance of the trial victory (see image 10).

4.0 Cover Design and Format

Ferlinghetti was greatly inspired by the format and cover design of *An Astonished Eye Looks Out of the Air* by Kenneth Patchen, ‘...impressed by the way in which the white paper label on the wrapper had been used to cover over the staples on the spine of the book, providing both an

aesthetic 'look' and a practical approach to binding of a paper cover book.' (16) (see also images 11-16). The influence is clear, and in the design of *Howl*, the image becomes a bold monochrome, with larger text. Here is where the emblem of the Series really becomes distinctive and apparent.

Librarian and Bibliographer Geoffrey Glaister, describes a pamphlet as '...a short piece of polemical writing...printed and issued as an unbound publication, with either stapled or sewn pages' (17). The pamphlet, pocket size format, and stapled binding of the Pocket Poets Series is very important in the association with countercultural and alternative literature. Before the blurb is changed on the fourth printing to focus on the trial, Ferlinghetti focuses instead on promoting the pocket book feature of the publication as a vehicle for alternative literature: 'the POCKET POETS SERIES...is designed to fill the need for low-priced, pocket-size editions of works by contemporary poets, both American and Foreign, known and unknown.' (see image 8).

The sociohistorical association and visual language of the pocket book is hugely significant, as is the employment of a consistent, recognisable cover design or branding:

"..."pocket size" is basically no longer a format but a vast set or nebula of series - for "pocket" still means "series" - from the most popular to the most "distinguished,"...and the series emblem, much more than size, conveys...the assurance...of a better price...and...the assurance of a selection based on *revivals*, that is reissues....The series emblem...amplifies the publisher's emblem, immediately indicating to the potential reader the type of work, if not the genre..." (18)

Paperback publishers have regularly employed the 'series emblem.' Penguin use it hugely effectively, most recently in the minimalist Penguin Modern series: pocket-size, £1 pamphlets of writing by authors 'who defined the radical spirit of Penguin Modern Classics' (19) (see also images 17-18). The design of the *Howl and Other Poems* book cover, creates a 'series emblem'

and immediate association with alternative poetry; independent publishing; the San Francisco Scene; Beat Poets; and the Counterculture - a reader of the Pocket Poets Series and *Howl* would perhaps feel a part of this ‘scene,’ creating a sense of cultural inclusivity and identity. This association with the paperback extends to Ferlinghetti’s vision for City Lights Bookshop and Publishing, in which he establishes an iconic centre and symbol of independent cultural production, ‘...it is important to remember that in 1956 when *Howl and Other Poems* appeared, the Paperback Revolution had yet to occur. For City Lights to sell and publish nothing but paperbacks was a culturally meaningful act, a way of creating a counter-canonical that meshed perfectly with the Beats’ anti materialist and counter modernist aesthetic.’ (20 (see also images 19-23).

5.0 Typesetting

Comparing the first and second printing of *Howl and Other Poems*, it becomes apparent that the typesetting is considerably different. Without later texts to compare it with, it could be assumed that the first printing is the correct printing; what the author intended. On comparison with the original mimeograph version, however, it becomes clear that the rhythm and long-line style that Ginsberg originally typed, is printed incorrectly. This is confirmed by Ginsberg in a letter to Ferlinghetti ‘...The one element of order and prearrangement I did pay care to...was prose-paragraph strophes...So any doubt about irregularity of right hand margin will be sure to confuse critical reader about intention of the prosody.’ (21) From the second printing in 1957 onwards, the text was printed correctly and the rhythm of the line restored (see images 24-26).

6.0 Dedications

On the title page of *Howl and Other Poems* is a quote:

‘Unscrew the locks from the doors !

Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs !’

This epigraph has no reference and requires further research to discover that the quote is taken from Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*, included in Whitman’s collection of poems *Leaves of Grass*, originally published in 1855. Whitman was a great influence on Ginsberg’s style of poetry, and is also referenced in the first line of *A Supermarket in California*, published in *Howl and other Poems*: ‘What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, ...’

The book’s Introduction by the poet William Carlos Williams, provides an honest and heartfelt understanding of Ginsberg’s intention. The association with Williams also acts as an endorsement of Ginsberg’s work. Dedications are an important element of both *Howl for Carl Solomon*, and *Howl and other Poems*. All dedicatees are both ‘private and public’ (22), other than Solomon, who was fairly unknown to the public at this time. Ginsberg almost creates a character from a real person, the effect of which Ginsberg realises later: ‘...I dedicated it to Mr. Solomon by name and didn’t have any clear idea that the poem would make its way around the world and proclaim a private reference to public attention...’ (23). On the Dedicatory Page of the mimeograph, there are dedications to the following poets and friends of Ginsberg:

Ginsberg has frequently quoted Kerouac as one of the most important influences on his writing style, and he was one of the first people to whom Ginsberg sent *Howl* in its original draft form. In placing Kerouac at the top of the dedications page, Ginsberg is ‘proclaiming a relationship...one cannot mention a person or a thing as a privileged addressee without invoking that person or thing in some way...and therefore implicating the person or thing as a kind of ideal inspirer.’ (24)

Ginsberg creates a strong association between himself and Kerouac; a kind of permanent shrine to Kerouac, his influence, and effect. Comparing the version of the Kerouac dedication on the original mimeograph, and the first City Lights printing, it becomes evident that an alteration has been made between the line ‘Several phrases and the title of Howl are taken from Him’ (see image 27) in the original mimeograph, and ‘Several phrases and the title of *Howl* are taken from him’ in the City Lights version (see image 28). Jim Pennington has a theory about this, regarding the significance of the word ‘Him’:

“The upper-case H may be considered a 'typo', but let's appreciate the importance of first time accuracy when typing up masters/stencils. Making corrections/changes was a pain, so it is certain that the Cap-H was a celebration of the Godliness in Jack. Just to emphasise the technicalities in that five-word line: on a typewriter, if you wanted to Cap a letter it meant holding the shift key down, striking the letter and then letting up that shift key. Deliberate actions and so not inadvertent. Why did Ginsberg (or was it Ferlinghetti) make these changes? Did Jack ask that he not be deified? Or was this cap-H just too strong a signifier for the homosexual love that Ginsberg had for him and macho Jack couldn't take it any longer?” (25)

Lucien Carr’s name is removed from the Dedications page in the first printing of the City Lights version (see image 28). This deletion was requested by Carr, as recorded in this letter to Ginsberg on September 21st, 1956: ‘...I was touched at being included in your dedication. But I value a certain anonymity in life and it is always hard for me when my friends, of all people, find

it desirable to include mention of me in their works...’ (26). It is interesting to notice the change in text, where Ginsberg has moved the line ‘All these books are published in Heaven’ from alignment with Cassady to alignment with all of the poets mentioned above it, perhaps creating a greater association with the Beat Poets as a collective. In the 50th Anniversary edition *Howl: Original Draft Facsimile*, Ginsberg dedicates *Howl* to Ferlinghetti. Ginsberg respects Ferlinghetti primarily as a ‘Poet’; a man who launched City Lights Publishing with a book of his own poetry *Pictures of the Gone World*, in 1955. The dedication as a whole signifies Ginsberg’s eternal gratitude, affection for, and association with Ferlinghetti; and the loyalty of both men to one another. It firmly establishes the influence, vision and longevity of City Lights; and the relationship between Publisher and Author (see image 29).

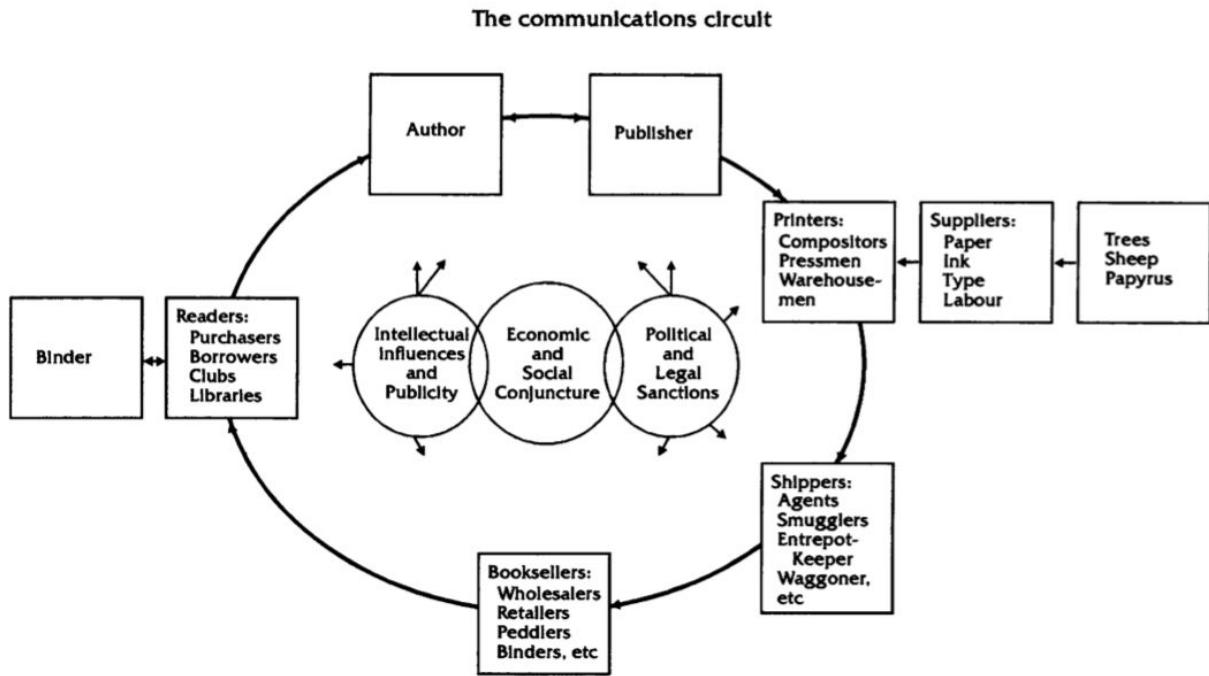


Figure 1. Robert Darnton, the communications circuit, 1982.

Image 30

7.0 Final Thoughts

The diagram above reflects the importance of the relationship between Publisher and Author in the lifecycle of a published work. In relation to *Howl* there is an even stronger connection: Ferlinghetti acts as Publisher and Bookseller, as well as being an Author himself. He therefore understands the writing process; the importance of honesty and authority, alongside the need for editing. He identifies as a member of the alternative poetry scene and supporter of poets. This in turn endows him with a certain degree of celebrity, but also integrity. As co-founder of both City Lights Bookshop and Publishing, he has a greater insight into the workings of a Bookseller, as

well as a deeper understanding of Readers; the bookshop acting as a social and cultural hub, where books published by Ferlinghetti are promoted, read, purchased, discussed; and disseminated. Certain factors had an impact on the first and second printing of *Howl*; and the central elements within this diagram are important here. Publicity was and always will be created by the customs seizure and subsequent trial in 1957; intellectual influences and associations, including Ginsberg's dedications to and association with the Beat Poets and the San Francisco Renaissance (the printing of *Howl* in the alternative poetry magazine *Evergreen Review* in 1957 and its inclusion in *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* in 1960, both strong examples of this association). These associative and influential elements are all vital in ensuring the survival of *Howl and Other Poems*; maintaining the reputation of the author and publisher, and ensuring the demand for its continued printing, distribution and consumption.

Images:

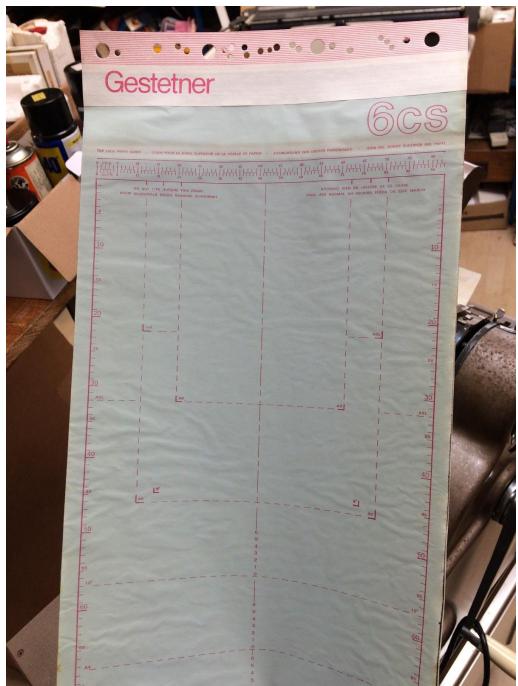


Image 1

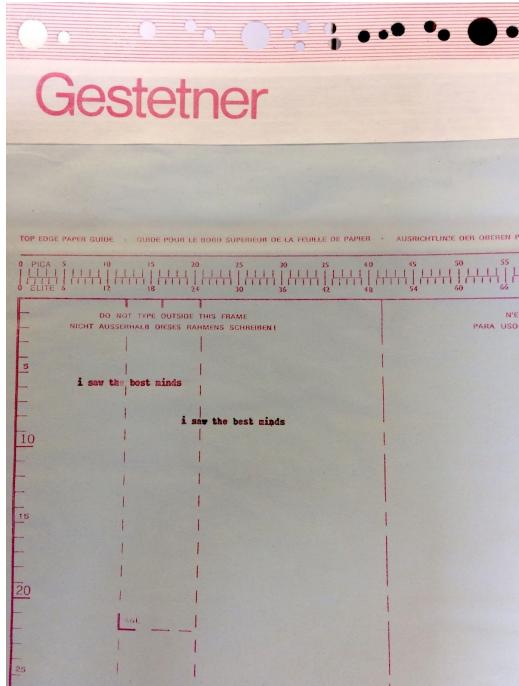


Image 2



Image 3



Image 4

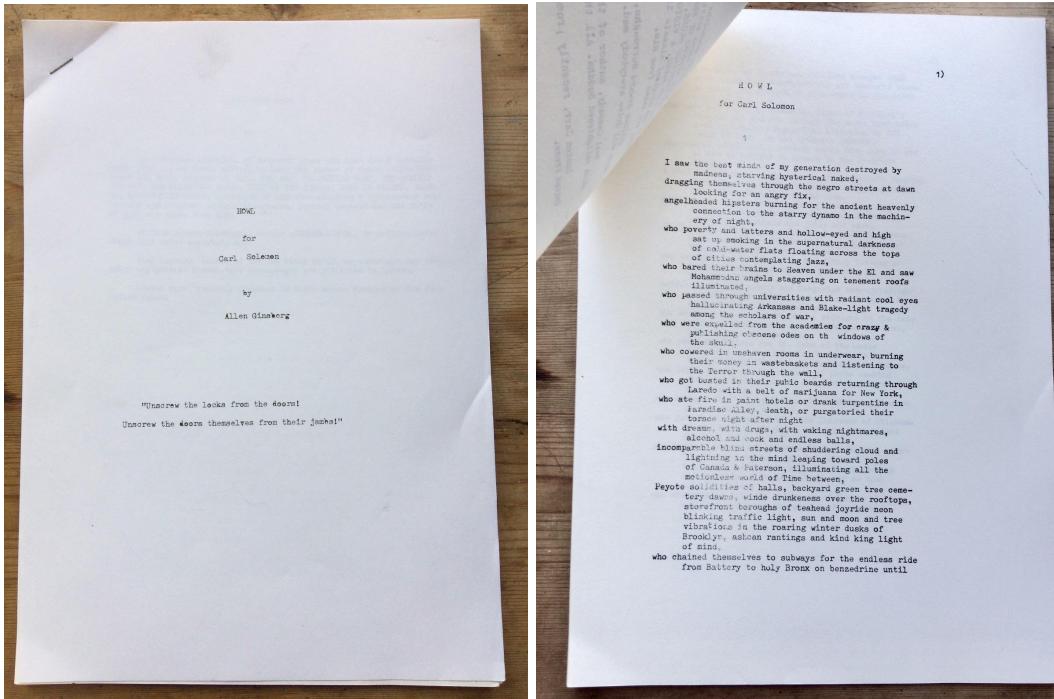


Image 5

Image 6

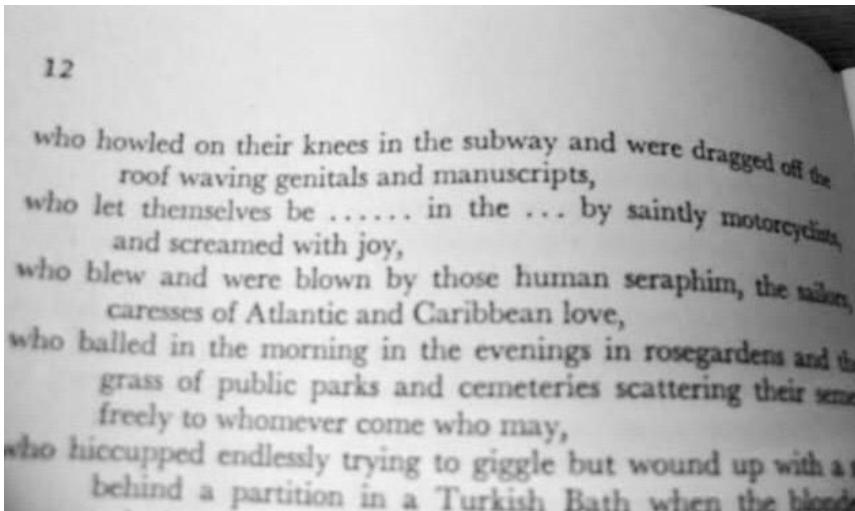


Image 7

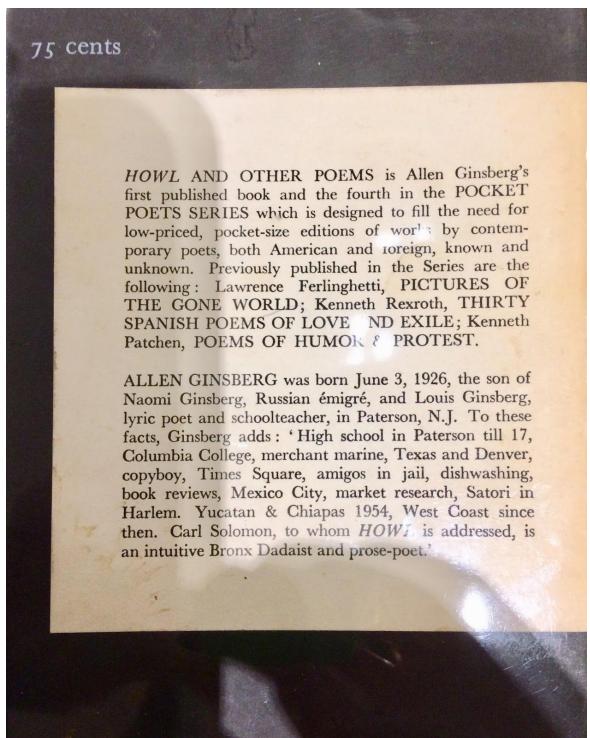


Image 8

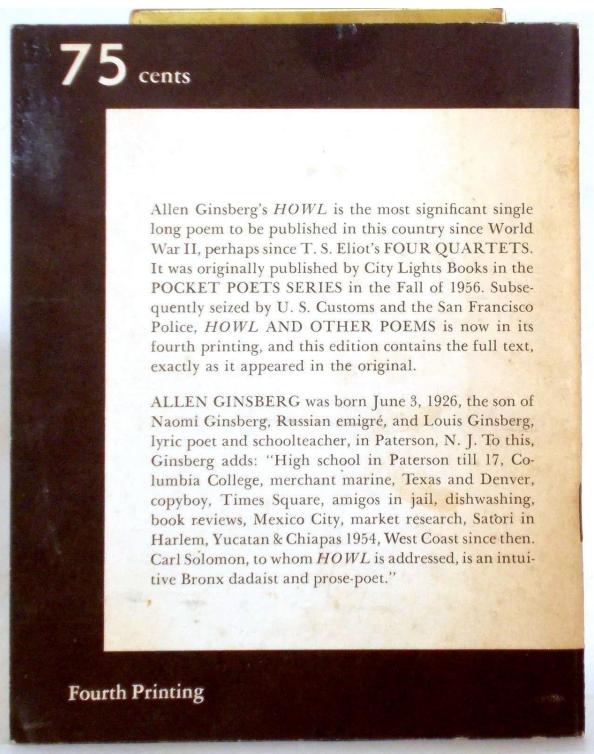


Image 9

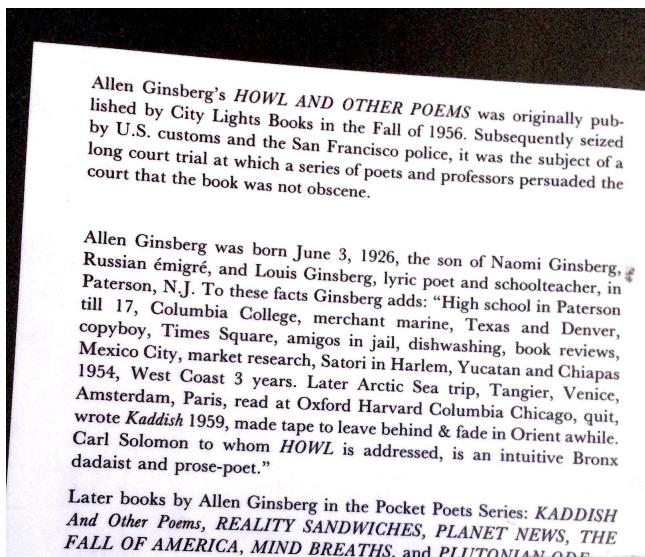


Image 10

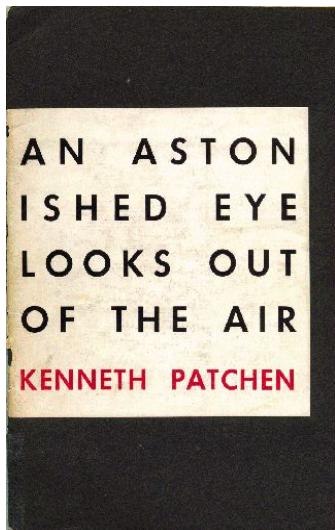


Image 11

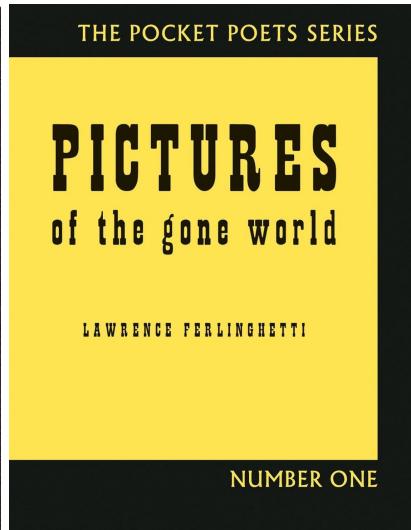


Image 12

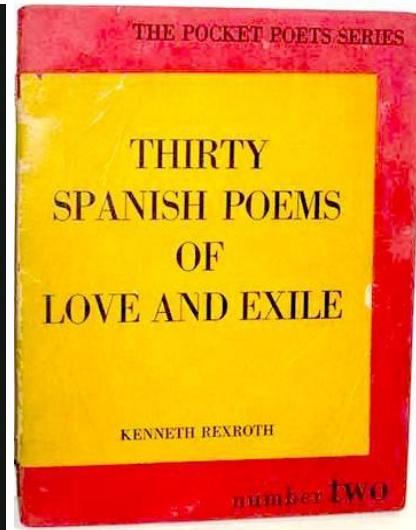


Image 13

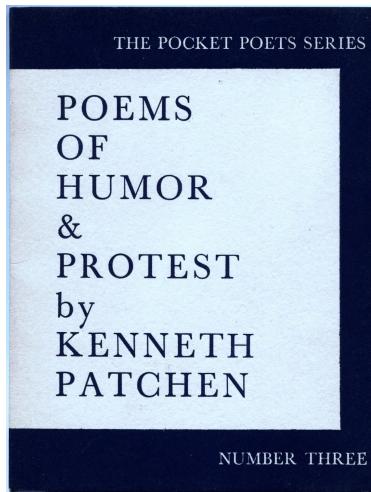


Image 14

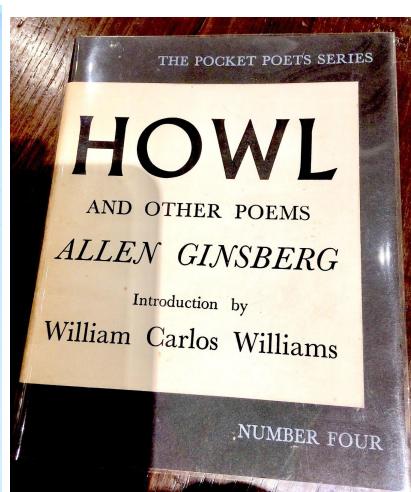


Image 15

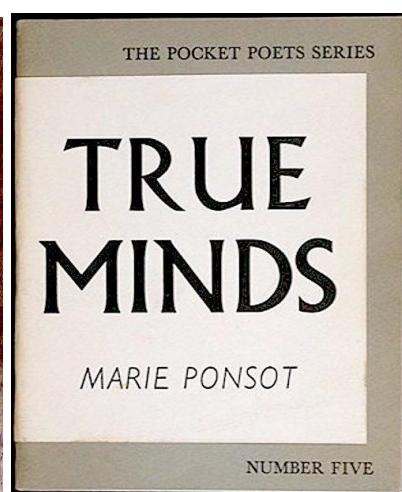


Image 16



Image 17

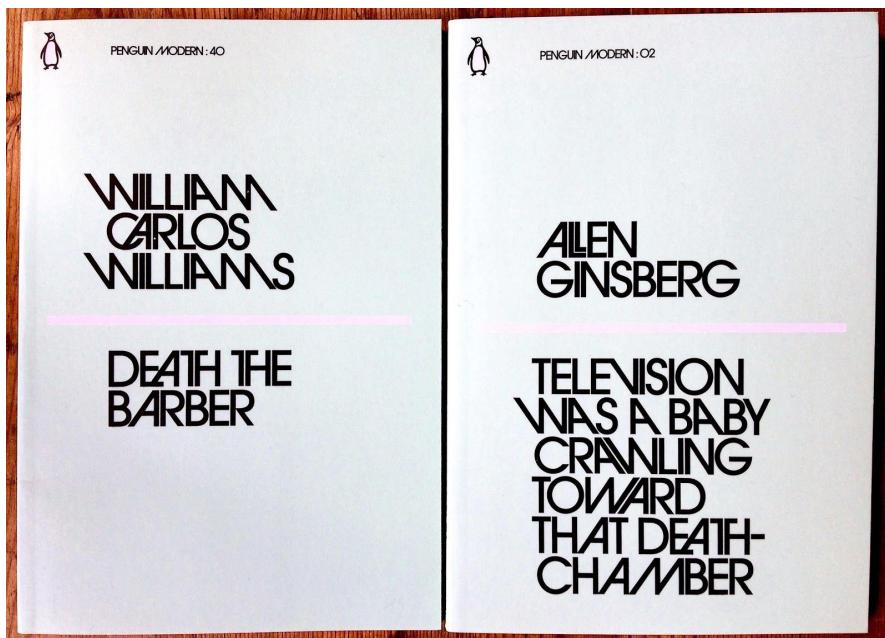


Image 18



Image 19

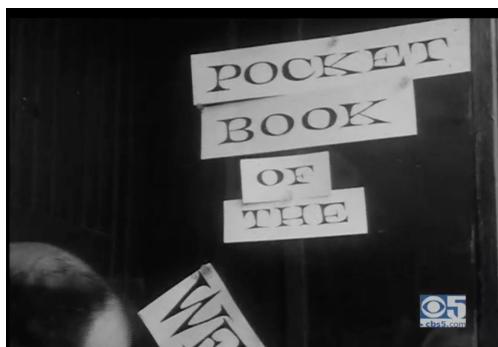


Image 20

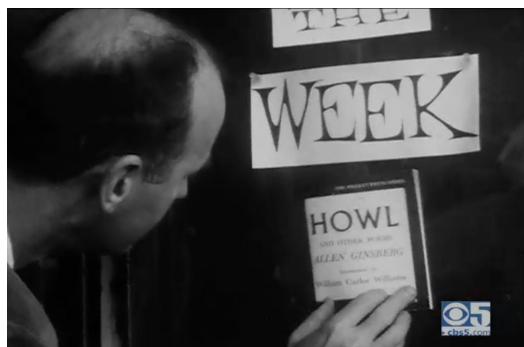


Image 21

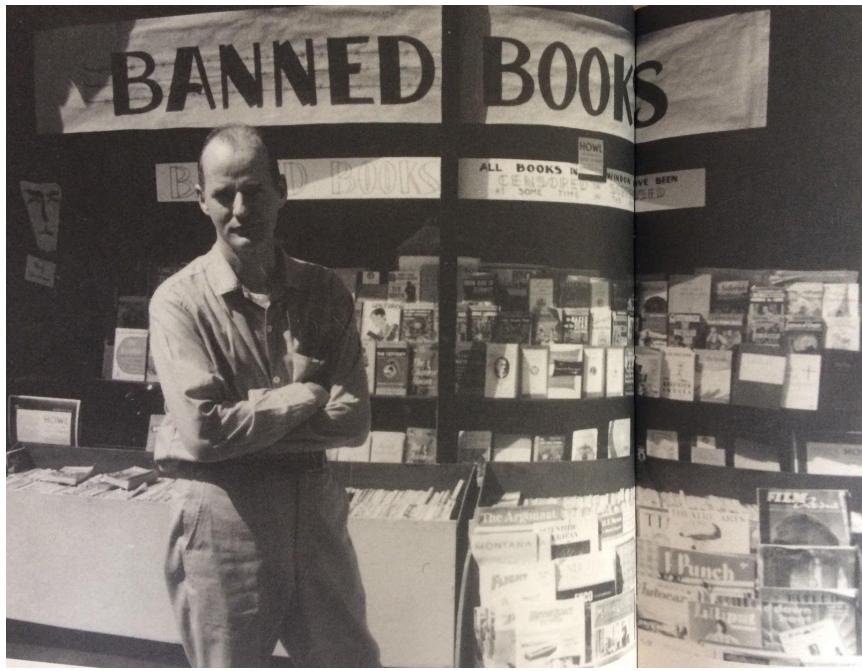


Image 22

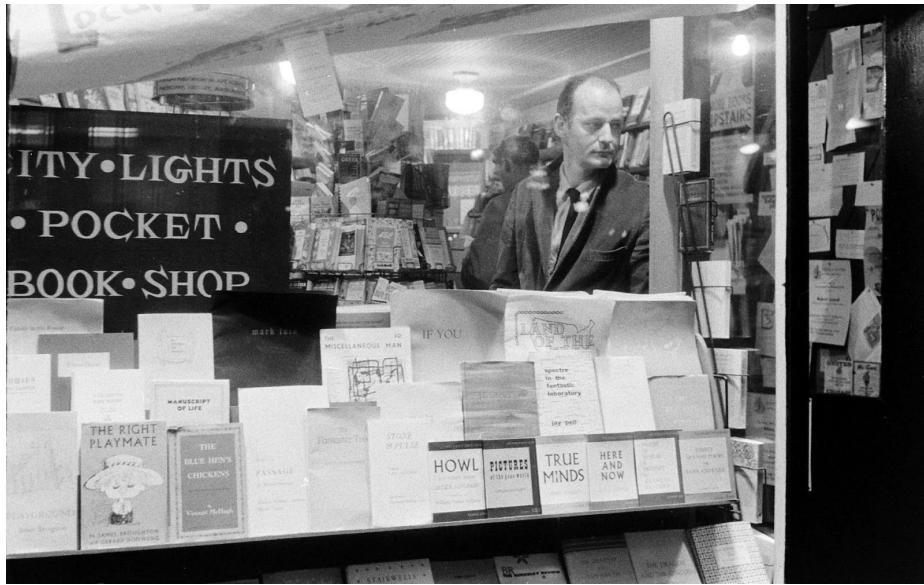


Image 23

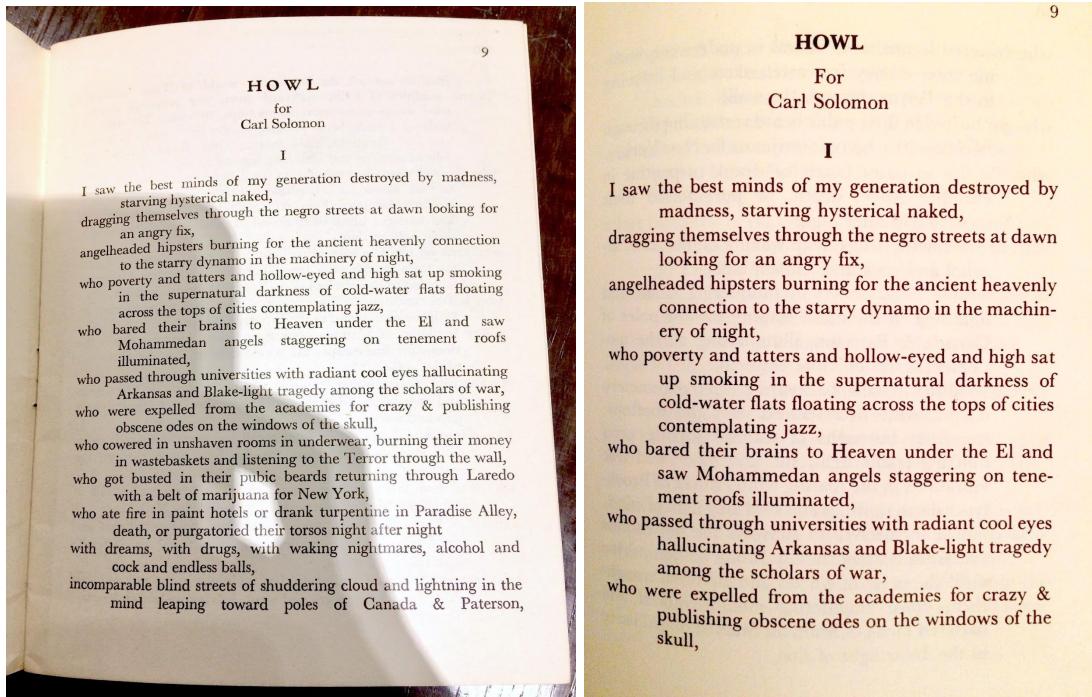


Image 24

Image 25

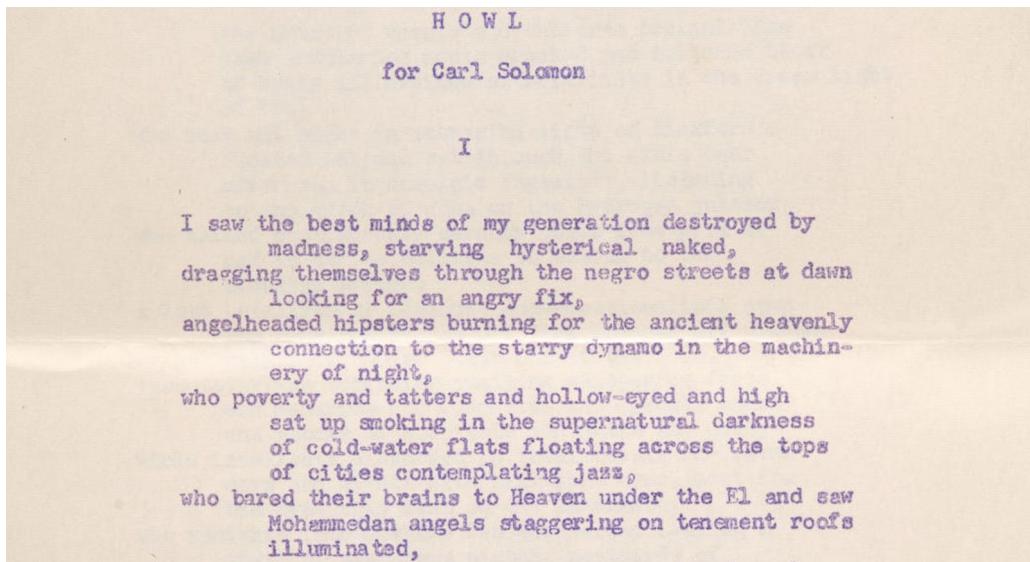


Image 26

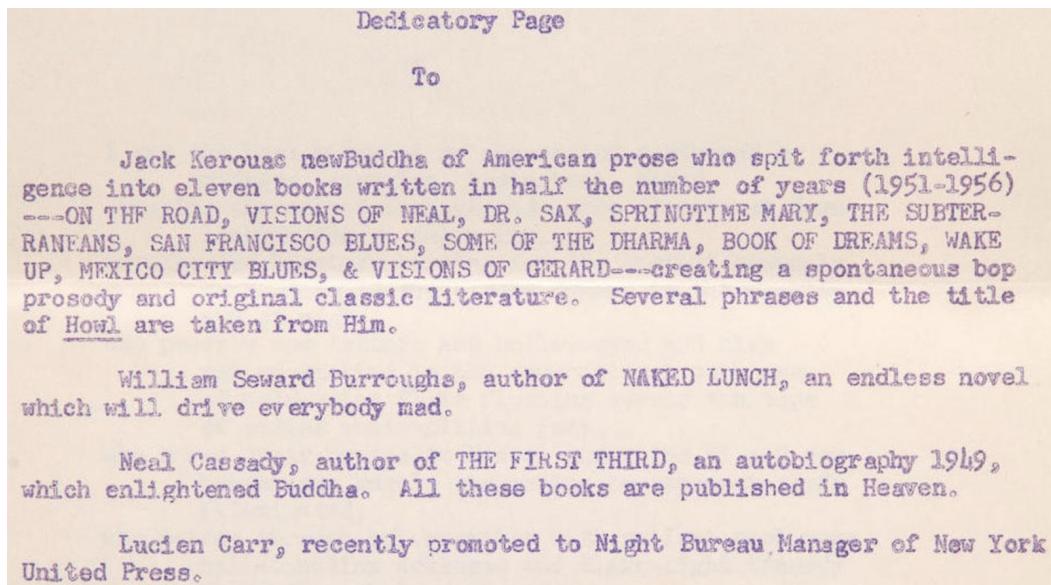


Image 27

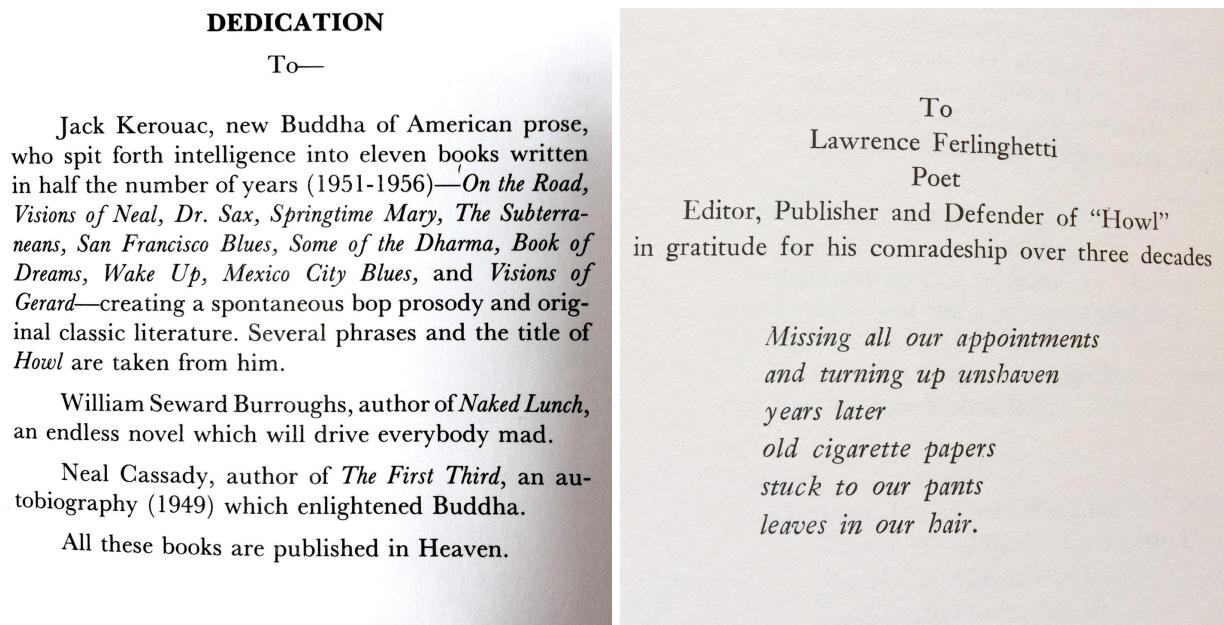


Image 28

Image 29

Image Credits:

1-4 Images taken at the studio of Jim Pennington, North London. Photos by Baber, G. 2018.

5-6 Pennington, J. Facsimile Mimeograph of Ginsberg, A. *Howl and Other Poems* 2016/2018

Photos by Baber, G. 2018.

7. Ginsberg, A. *Howl and Other Poems* San Francisco : City Lights Books 2nd printing 1957.

Photo emailed on request from John K King Used & Rare Books (seller on AbeBooks) by Baber, G. 2018.

8. Ginsberg, A. *Howl and Other Poems* San Francisco : City Lights Books 1st Printing 1956.

Photo by Baber, G. 2018. Taken in Peter Harrington Rare Books, London

9. Ginsberg, A. *Howl and Other Poems* San Francisco : City Lights Books Fourth Printing. 1957

Photo emailed upon request from: Time Tested Books (seller on AbeBooks) by Baber, G. 2018.

10. Ginsberg, A. *Howl and Other Poems* San Francisco : City Lights Books 1994 version

Photo by Baber, G. 2018.

11. Patchen, K. *An Astonished Eye Looks Out* USA : Untide Press 1945 Available from:

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<https://www.abebooks.co.uk/book-search/title/poems-of-humor-protest/author/kenneth-patchen/>
15. Ginsberg, A. *Howl and Other Poems* San Francisco : City Lights Books 1956. Photo by Baber, G. 2018. Taken at Peter Harrington Rare Books, London
16. Ponsot, M. *True Minds* San Francisco : City Lights Books 1956 Available from:
<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/7847043-true-minds>
17. Man reading a trade paperback of D.H. Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's Lover. Photo by Berwin, D. 1960 Available from:
<https://timeline.com/jason-epstein-paperback-books-1110113fea0c>
18. Ginsberg, A. *Television Was a Baby* ; Williams, W. C. *Death the Barber* Penguin Modern Classics 2018. Photo by Baber, G. 2018
- 19-21 Ferlinghetti stills taken from <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/188468>
22. Lawrence Ferlinghetti in Front of City Lights Bookstore, San Francisco, 1957. Photo by Harry Redl, in *Beat Culture and the New America: 1950-1965* Phillips, L New York: Whitney Museum of Modern Art 1995
23. Ferlinghetti at City Lights. Available from:
<https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/photos/lawrence-ferlinghetti?sort=mostpopular&mediatype=photography&phrase=lawrence%20ferlinghetti>
24. Ginsberg, A. *Howl and Other Poems* San Francisco : City Lights Books 1956 Photo by Baber, G. 2018. Taken in Peter Harrington Rare Books, London.

25. Ginsberg, A. *Howl and Other Poems* San Francisco : City Lights Books 1959 Photo by Baber, G. 2018
26. Ginsberg, A. *Howl for Carl Solomon* San Francisco State College : typed by Robert Creeley and dittoed by Marthe Rexroth May 16 1956. Available from:
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27. ibid.
28. Dedication To- (between the Title page and Contents page) in Ginsberg, A. *Howl and Other Poems* San Francisco : City Lights Books 1956- Photo by Baber, G. 2018
29. To Lawrence Ferlinghetti (between Title page and Contents page) in Ginsberg, A. ; Miles, B. (ed.) *Howl: Original Draft Facsimile, Transcript, and Variant Versions, Fully Annotated by Author, with Contemporaneous Correspondence, Account of First Public Reading, Legal Skirmishes, Precursor Texts, And Bibliography* USA : Harper Perennial Modern Classics 1986, 2006 Photo by Baber, G. 2018
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