



# What thoughts you have of me, and what thoughts I have of you, in poems by Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg

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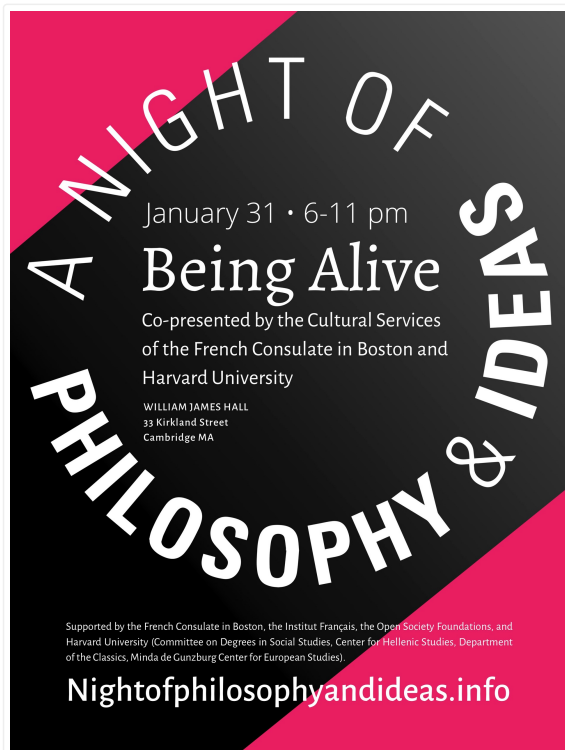
## What thoughts you have of me, and what thoughts I have of you, in poems by Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg

February 7, 2020 Posted By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

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2020.02.07 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. Just the other day, 2020.01.31, I had the good fortune of getting involved in a special event, held at Harvard University, which was described, most engagingly, as “A night of philosophy and ideas.” During that event, sponsored by a variety of Harvard organizations with the help of the French Consulate in Boston, I had the opportunity of presenting, within a set time-frame of fifteen minutes, some comments about ancient Greek heroes. I spent most of my minutes, however, by reading out and briefly highlighting the words of a poem composed by Allen Ginsberg in 1955 and published in 1956, “A Supermarket in California.” Ginsberg had meant his words to evoke the words of a poem composed a century earlier, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” by Walt Whitman, originally published in 1856. The idea behind my highlighting was that the words of Whitman, evoked by Ginsberg, evoke the words of an ode, *Pythian 8*, composed by the Greek poet Pindar in the middle of the fifth century BCE. But there was another idea behind that idea, which was paradoxically this: the evocations of Pindar by Whitman and then by Ginsberg were unintentional. It was all an accident, even though these unintended evocations can now shed light on the very idea of the ancient Greek hero.



Poster designed by Allie Marbry. GN thanks her, also Nicolas Prevelakis and Zoie Lafis, for all their support in helping me prepare for the event.

§1. I start by showing stanza 7 of Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”:

Closer yet I approach you,  
What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you—I laid in my stores in advance,  
Who was to know what should come home to me?

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Who knows but I am enjoying this?

Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?

§2. The wording that I formatted with yellow highlighting is actually evoked in the first line of Ginsberg's "Supermarket in California":

What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for I walked down the sidestreets under the trees with a headache self-conscious looking at the full moon.

In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!

What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!—and you, Garcia Lorca, what were you doing down by the watermelons?

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.

I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork chops? What price bananas? Are you my Angel?

I wandered in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans following you, and followed in my imagination by the store detective.

We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier.

Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?

(I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the supermarket and feel absurd.)

Will we walk all night through solitary streets? The trees add shade to shade, lights out in the houses, we'll both be lonely.

Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?

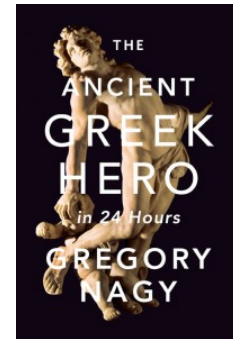
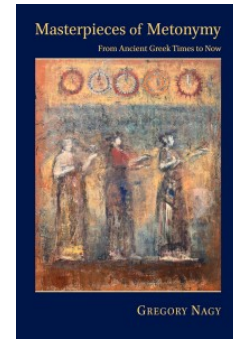
Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher, what America did you have when Charon quit poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?

Berkeley, 1955

Poetry Breaks: Allen Ginsberg Reads "A Supermarket in California"



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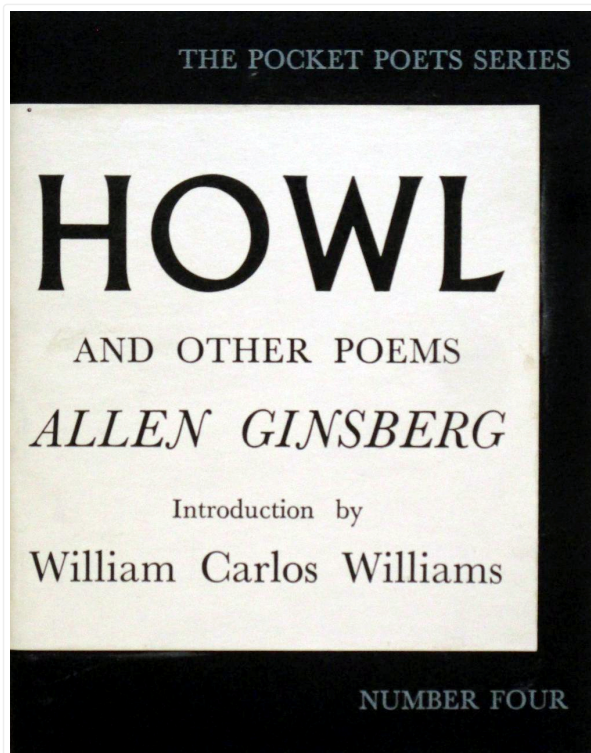
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Cover of the first edition of Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems*, in which "A Supermarket in California" was first published on November 1, 1956. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

§3. In quoting this poem, I have formatted with yellow highlighting not only the evocation of Whitman in line 1 but also other evocations. Among these other evocations, I start with the word *father*, which conjures the idea that Walt Whitman is being claimed as the poetic ancestor of Allen Ginsberg. As for the word *ferry*, it refers to the old poet's thoughts of future generations as he crosses by ferry the East River—precisely where the Brooklyn Bridge is to be built in a later era. But the same word also refers to the new poet's thoughts of past generations as he pictures his would-be ancestor being escorted away by Charon, ferryman of the dead. The "childless" old "father" is crossing the ancient Greek river of myth, named Lethe, which separates the world of the living from the world of the dead. And this name Lethe means in Greek 'the unconscious'.

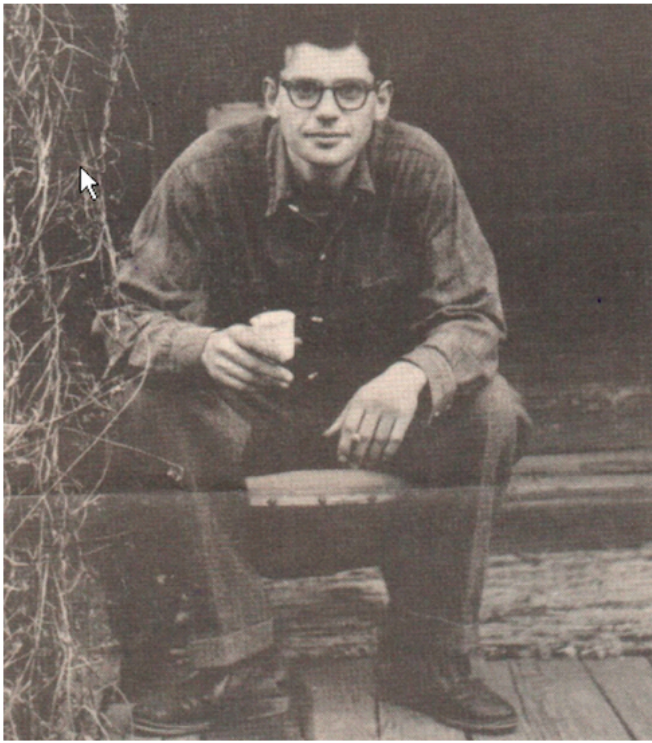
§4. The new poet here is picking up on what the old poet is saying to him: you are thinking me, says the old poet, because I think you. I show here the pointed words of Whitman, starting at stanza 3 of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry":

It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,  
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence,  
Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,  
Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd,  
Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd,  
Just as you stand and lean on the rail, yet hurry with the swift current, I stood yet was  
hurried,  
Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the thick-stemm'd pipes of  
steamboats, I look'd.  
I too many and many a time cross'd the river of old..

§5. But the new poet will now "think" the old poet just as the old poet had been "thinking" the new poet. What thoughts I have of you are what thoughts you have of me. And how will such thoughts happen? The words of the new poet say how: the new poet "thinks" the old poet by *dreaming* him. Where I show the words of "Supermarket in California," I have already formatted with yellow highlighting the three times where the word *dream* is conjured.

§6. And just as the new poet dreams the old poet, he is himself being dreamed by his poetic ancestor.





Allen Ginsberg on the front porch of his rented cottage at 1624 Milvia Street in North Berkeley, sometime in 1955 or 1956. [Image](#) via Flickr.

§7. The idea that an ancestor can literally 'dream' a descendant is very much alive, I think, in *Pythian* 8 of Pindar. I rewrite here what I once wrote in *Pindar's Homer* (Nagy 1990:194–196 = 6¶¶87–88, with notes; further explications in Nagy 2000:109–111):

(¶87) In Pindar's *Pythian* 8, the words of the poet's song are "quoting," as it were, the actual words of a dead hero named Amphiaraos, son of Oikles. This hero, a seer as well as a warrior, is represented as speaking from the dead about a victory achieved by his son, named Alkmaion. From the standpoint of the dead father's words, Alkmaion is still a living hero. Amphiaraos had been one of the Seven against Thebes—seven heroes who had tried and failed in attempting to capture and destroy the proud old city of Thebes. Six of the heroes, including Amphiaraos, died in this failed attempt; only the hero Adrastos survived. As for the son of Amphiaraos, Alkmaion, he is one of the Epigonoι, seven warriors who are the sons of the original Seven against Thebes, and the song of Pindar is highlighting the moment of victory when these Epigonoι finally capture and destroy Thebes, thus succeeding where their fathers had failed. Six of the heroes, including Alkmaion, survive; only Aigialeus, the son of Adrastos, perishes. The story about the Epigonoι and about their fathers, who were the original Seven against Thebes, is the context for the "quoting" of the dead hero's words highlighting the living hero in Pindar's *Pythian* 8, and these words of song that are being "quoted" from the heroic past about the hero named Alkmaion are embedded in the poet's words of song that are currently being performed in the historical present about an athlete named Aristomenes, who is celebrating in Aegina, his birthplace, a victory that he won in the athletic competitions of the Pythian Games in 446 BCE. With this background in place, I am now ready to quote the relevant words in Pindar's *Pythian* 8. Framed inside these quoted words of the poet are the dead hero's own "quoted" words highlighting the success of his son—just as the framing words of the poet highlight the success of an athlete descended from a proud old lineage of ancestors known as the Meidulidai. The athlete's success wins the glory of the poet's words not only for himself but also for his whole ancestral lineage. And the glory of these words, won by the successful athlete as a prize in compensation for his victory, is an echo, however distant, of the glory that comes from words once spoken by a proud hero about the success achieved by his own direct descendant:

αὔξων δὲ πάτραν Μειδουλιδᾶν λόγον φέρεις, | τὸν ὄνπερ ποτ' Ὀικλέος παῖς (...) αἰνίξατο (...)  
 | (43) ὦδ' εἶπε μαρναμένων | φυᾷ τὸ γενναῖον ἐπιπρέπει | ἐκ πατέρων παισὶ λῆμα ... | (55)  
 τοιαῦτα μὲν | ἐφθέγγασ' Ἀμφιάρηος, χαίρων δὲ καὶ αὐτὸς | Ἀλκμᾶνα στεφάνοισι βάλλω.

Making great the house of the Meidulidai, you [= the athlete Aristomenes] win-as-a-prize the words that once-upon-a-time the son-of-Oikles [= the hero Amphiaraos] sounded-out-in-a-riddling-way. [ ... ] Thus he [= Amphiaraos] spoke about those [= his son, the hero Alkmaion, and the other Epigonoι] who fought [in the war against Thebes]: "The will of the fathers [*pateres*] shines through from them, in the very thing that is inborn in the nature of their sons." Thus spoke Amphiaraos. And I also take joy in casting a garland at Alkmaion.

(¶188) The word *pateres* in this passage means not only 'fathers' but also 'ancestors'. The latter meaning emerges more clearly as the ode progresses:

ἐπάμεροι· τί δέ τις τί δ' οὐ τις σκιάς ὄναρ | ἄνθρωπος· ἀλλ' ὅταν αἴγλα διόσδοτος ἔλθῃ, |  
λαμπρὸν φέγγος ἔπεστιν ἀνδρῶν καὶ μείλιχος αἰών.

Creatures of a day. What is a someone, what is a no one? A human is the dream of a shade. But when the brightness given by Zeus comes, there is at hand the shining light of men, and the life-force [*aiōn*] gives pleasure.

Pindar *Pythian* 8.95–97

I interpret *skiās onar* 'dream of a shade' as a recapitulation of the earlier words of the dead father about his living son. In Homeric usage the word *skiā* 'shade' can designate a dead person. I suggest that the shade of the dead person is literally dreaming—that is, realizing through its dreams—the living person. In other words the occasion of victory in a mortal's day-to-day lifetime is that singular moment when the dark insubstantiality of an ancestor's shade is translated, through its dreams, into the shining life-force of the victor in full possession of victory, radiant with the brightness of Zeus. It is as if we the living were the realization of the dreams dreamed by our dead ancestors.

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