

EMPTY MIRROR

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EARLY POEMS BY

ALLEN GINSBERG

INTRODUCTION BY WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS



TOTEM/CORINTH \$1.25

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TOTEM PRESS

in association with

CORINTH BOOKS

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To
Herbert E. Huncke
For his
Confessions

INTRODUCTION

by

William Carlos Williams

The lines are superbly all alike. Most people, most critics would call them prose—they have an infinite variety, perfectly regular; they are all alike and yet none is like the other. It is like the monotony of our lives that is made up of the front pages of newspapers and the first (aging) 3 lines of the *Inferno*:

*In the middle of the journey of our life I (came to)
myself in a dark wood (where) the
straight way was lost.*

It is all alike, those fated lines telling of the mind of that poet and the front page of the newspaper. Look at them. You will find them the same.

This young Jewish boy, already not so young any more, has recognized something that has escaped most of the modern age, he has found that man is lost in the world of his own head. And that the rhythms of the past have become like an old field long left unploughed and fallen into disuse. In fact they are excavating there for a new industrial plant.

There the new inferno will soon be under construction.

A new sort of line, omitting memories of trees and watercourses and clouds and pleasant glades—as empty of them as Dante Allegiere's *Inferno* is empty of them—exists today. It is measured by the passage of time without accent, monotonous, useless—unless you are drawn as Dante was to see the truth, undressed, and to sway to a beat that is far removed from the beat of dancing feet but rather finds in the shuffling of human beings in all the stages of their day, the trip to the bath-room, to the stairs of the subway, the steps of the office or factory routine the mystical measure of their passions.

It is indeed a human pilgrimage, like Geoffrey Chaucer's; poets had better be aware of it and speak of it—and speak of it in plain terms,

such as men will recognize. In the mystical beat of newspapers that no one recognizes, their life is given back to them in plain terms. Not one recognizes Dante there fully deployed. It is not recondite but plain.

And when the poet in his writing would scream of the crowd, like Jeremiah, that their life is beset, what can he do, in the end, but speak to them in their own language, that of the daily press?

At the same time, out of his love for them—a poet as Dante was a poet—he must use his art, as Dante used his art, to please. He must measure, he must so disguise his lines, that his style appear prosaic (so that it shall not offend) to go in a cloud.

With this, if it be possible, the hidden sweetness of the poem may alone survive and one day rouse the sleeping world.

There cannot be any facile deception about it. The writing cannot be made to be “a kind of prose,” not prose with a dirty wash of a stale poem over it. It must not set out, as poets are taught or have a tendency to do, to deceive, to sneak over a poetic way of laying down phrases. It must be prose but prose among whose words the terror of their truth has been discovered.

Here the terror of the scene has been laid bare in subtle measures, the pages are warm with it. The scene they invoke is terrifying more so than Dante's pages, the poem is not suspect, the craft is flawless.

1952

I feel as if I am at a dead
end and so I am finished.
All spiritual facts I realize
are true but I never escape
the feeling of being closed in
and the sordidness of self,
the futility of all that I
have seen and done and said.
Maybe if I continued things
would please me more but now
I have no hope and I am tired.

Tonite all is well . . . What a
terrible future. I am twenty-three,
year of the iron birthday,
gate of darkness. I am ill,
I have become physically and
spiritually impotent in my madness this month.
I suddenly realized that my head
is severed from my body;
I realized it a few nights ago
by myself,
lying sleepless on the couch.

PSALM I

These psalms are the workings of the vision haunted mind and not that
reason which never changes.

I am flesh and blood, but my mind is the focus of much lightning.

I change with the weather, with the state of my finances, with the
work I do, with my company.

But truly none of these is accountable for the majestic flaws of mind
which have left my brain open to hallucination.

All work has been an imitation of the literary cackle in my head.

This gossip is an eccentric document to be lost in a library and redis-
covered when the Dove descends.

CEZANNE'S PORTS

In the foreground we see time and life
swept in a race
toward the left hand side of the picture
where shore meets shore.

But that meeting place
isn't represented;
it doesn't occur on the canvas.

For the other side of the bay
is Heaven and Eternity,
with a bleak white haze over its mountains.

And the immense water of L'Estaque is a go-between
for minute rowboats.

AFTER ALL, WHAT ELSE IS THERE TO SAY?

When I sit before a paper
writing my mind turns
in a kind of feminine
madness of chatter;
but to think to see, outside,
in a tenement the walls
of the universe itself
I wait: wait till the sky
appears as it is,
wait for a moment when
the poem itself
is my way of speaking out, not
declaiming of celebrating, yet,
but telling the truth.

FYODOR

The death's head of realism
and superhuman iron mask
that gapes out of the *Possessed*,
sometimes: Dostoievski.
My original version of D.
before I read him, as the dark
haunted-house man, wild, agéd,
spectral Russian. I call him
Dusty now but he is
Dostoyevsky. What premonitions
I had as a child.

THE TREMBLING OF THE VEIL

Today out of the window
the trees seemed like live
organisms on the moon.

Each bough extended upward
covered at the north end
with leaves, like a green

hairy protuberance. I saw
the scarlet-and-pink shoot-tips
of budding leaves wave

delicately in the sunlight,
blown by the breeze,
all the arms of the trees
bending and straining downward

at once when the wind
pushed them.

A MEANINGLESS INSTITUTION

I was given my bedding, and a bunk
in an enormous ward,
surrounded by hundreds of weeping,
decaying men and women.

I sat on my bunk, three tiers up
next to the ceiling,
looking down the grey aisles.
Old, crippled, dumb people were

bent over sewing. A heavy girl
in a dirty dress
stared at me. I waited
for an official guide to come

and give me instructions.
After awhile, I wandered
off down empty corridors
in search of a toilet.

Dream 1948

IN SOCIETY

I walked into the cocktail party
room and found three or four queers
talking together in queertalk.
I tried to be friendly but heard
myself talking to one in hiptalk.
"I'm glad to see you," he said, and
looked away. "Hmn," I mused. The room
was small and had a double-decker
bed in it, and cooking apparatus:
icebox, cabinet, toasters, stove;
the hosts seemed to live with room
enough only for cooking and sleeping.
My remark on this score was under-
stood but not appreciated. I was
offered refreshments, which I accepted.
I ate a sandwich of pure meat; an
enormous sandwich of human flesh,
I noticed, while I was chewing on it,
it also included a dirty asshole.

More company came, including a
fluffy female who looked like
a princess. She glared at me and
said immediately: "I don't like you,"
turned her head away, and refused
to be introduced. I said, "What!"
in outrage. "Why you shit-faced fool!"
This got everybody's attention.
"Why you narcissistic bitch! How
can you decide when you don't even
know me," I continued in a violent
and messianic voice, inspired at
last, dominating the whole room.

Dream 1947

METAPHYSICS

This is the one and only
firmament; therefore
it is the absolute world.
There is no other world.
The circle is complete.
I am living in Eternity.
The ways of this world
are the ways of Heaven.

IN DEATH, CANNOT REACH WHAT IS MOST NEAR

We know all about death that
we will ever know because
we have all experienced
the state before birth.
Life seems a passage between
two doors to the darkness.
Both are the same and truly
eternal, and perhaps it may
be said that we meet in
darkness. The nature of time
is illuminated by this
meeting of eternal ends.

It is amazing to think that
thought and personality
of man is perpetuated in
time after his passage
to eternity. And one time
is all Time if you look
at it out of the grave.

THIS IS ABOUT DEATH

Art recalls the memory
of his true existence
to whoever has forgotten
that Being is the one thing
all the universe shouts.

Only return of thought to
its source will complete thought.
Only return of activity
to its source will complete
activity. Listen to that.

LONG LIVE THE SPIDERWEB

Seven years' words wasted
waiting on the spiderweb:
seven years' thoughts
harkening the host,
seven years' lost
sentience naming images,
narrowing down the name
to nothing,
seven years':
fears
in a web of ancient measure;
the words dead
flies, a crop
of ghosts,
seven years':
the spider is dead.

"The road to a true philosophy of life seems to lie in
humbly recording diverse readings of its phenomena."

—Thos. Hardy

I attempted to concentrate
the total sun's rays in
each poem as through a glass,
but such magnification
did not set the page afire.

MARIJUANA NOTATION

How sick I am!
that thought
always comes to me
with horror.
Is it this strange
for everybody?
But such fugitive feelings
have always been
my metièr.

Baudelaire—yet he had
great joyful moments
staring into space,
looking into the
middle distance,
contemplating his image
in Eternity.
They were his moments
of identity.
It is solitude that
produces these thoughts.

It is December
almost, they are singing
Christmas carols
in front of the department
stores down the block on
Fourteenth Street.

A CRAZY SPIRITUAL

A faithful youth
with artificial legs
drove his jalopy
through the towns of Texas.

He got sent out
of the Free Hospital
of Galveston, madtown
on the Gulf of Mexico

after he recovered.
They gave him a car
and a black mongrel;
name was Weakness.

He was a thin kid
with golden hair
and a frail body
on wire thighs,

who never traveled
and drove northward
timid on the highway
going about twenty.

I hitched a hike
and showed him the road.
I got off at Small Town
and stole his dog.

He tried to drive away,
but lost control,
rode on the pavement
near a garage,

and smashed his doors
and fenders on trees
and parked cars,
and came to a halt.

The Marshall came,
stopping everything
pulled him out
of the wreck cursing.

I watched it all
from the lunch cart,
holding the dog
with a frayed rope.

"I'm on my own
from the crazyhouse.
Has anybody
seen my Weakness?"

What are they saying?
"Call up the FBI.
Crazy, ha? What
is he a fairy?"

He must do funny
things with women,
we bet he * * *
them in the * * *."

Poor child meanwhile
collapsed on the ground
with innocent expression
is trying to get up.

Along came a Justice
of the Supreme Court,
barreling through town
in a blue limousine.

He stopped by the crowd
to find out the story,
got out on his pegleg
with an angry smile.

reality can be joy or terror—
and have I exaggerated the joy?)
life as vile, as painful,
as wretched, (this pessimism
which was X's jewel)
as grim, not merely bleak:
the grimness of chance. Or as
Carl wrote, after bughouse,

“How often have I
had occasion to see
existence display
the affectations
of a bloodthirsty
negro homosexual.”

HYMN

No hyacinthine imagination can express this clock of meat bleakly
pining for its sweet immaterial paradise which I have celebrated
in one gone dithyramb after another and have elevated to that
highest place in the mind's angelical emperyeon which shall
in the course of hot centuries to come come to be known as
the clock of light:

the very summa and dove of the unshrouding of finality's joy whence
cometh purely pearly streams of reves and honey-thoughts and
all like dreamy essences our hearts therefrom so filled with
suth incomparable and crownly creaminess one never knew
whence it came,

whether from those foul regions of the soul the ancients named Male-
bolge or the Dank or the icicle-like crystal roads of cloudless
sky called Icecube or Avenue where the angels late fourteen
there convened hang on and raptly gaze on us singing down

in mewling voices liturgies of milk and sweet cream sighing no longer
for the strawberries of the world whence in pain and wit's
despair they had ascended stoops of light up the celestial fire
escape no more to sit suffering as we do one and all on the
thorn

nor more we shall when the final gate is opened and the Diamond
Seraph armed with 3 forks of lightning 7 claps of thunder
11 bursts of laughter and a thousand tears rolling down his
silken cheeks bares his radiant breast and asks us in the Name
of the Lord to share that Love in Heaven which on Earth
was so disinherited.

SUNSET

The whole bleak world
of smoke and twisted steel
around my head in a railroad
car, and my mind wandering
past the rust into futurity:
I saw the sun go down
in a carnal and primeval
world, leaving darkness
to cover my railroad train
because the other side of the
world was waiting for dawn.

A GHOST MAY COME

Elements on my table—
the clock.
All life reduced to this—
its tick.
Dusty's modern lamp,
all shape, space and curve.
Last attempts at speech.
And the carved
serpentine knife of Mexico,
with the childish
eagle head on the handle.

A DESOLATION

Now mind is clear
as a cloudless sky.
Time then to make a
home in wilderness.

What have I done but
wander with my eyes
in the trees? So I
will build: wife,
family, and seek
for neighbors.

Or I

perish of lonesomeness
or want of food or
lightning or the bear
(must tame the hart
and wear the bear.)

And maybe make an image
of my wandering, a little
image—shrine by the
roadside to signify
to traveller that I live
here in the wilderness
awake and at home.

THE TERMS IN WHICH I THINK OF REALITY

a.

Reality is a question
of realizing how real
the world is already.

Time is Eternity,
ultimate and immovable;
everyone's an angel.

It's Heaven's mystery
of changing perfection:
absolutely Eternity

changes! Cars are always
going down the street,
lamps go off and on.

It's a great flat plain;
we can see everything
on top of the table.

Clams open on the table,
lamb are eaten by worms
on the plain. The motion

of change is beautiful,
as well as form called
in and out of being.

b.

Next: to distinguish process
in its particularity with
an eye to the initiation

of gratifying new changes
desired in the real world.
Here we're overwhelmed

with such unpleasant detail
we dream again of Heaven.
For the world is a mountain

of shit: if it's going to
be moved at all, it's got
to be taken by handfulls.

c.

Man lives like the unhappy
whore on River Street who
in her Eternity gets only

a couple of bucks and a lot
of snide remarks in return
for seeking physical love

the best way she knows how,
never really heard of a glad
job or joyous marriage or

a difference in the heart:
or thinks it isn't for her,
which is her worst misery.

A POEM ON AMERICA

America is like Russia.
Acis and Galatea sit by the lake.
We have the proletariat too.

Acis and Galatea sit by the lake.
Versilov wore a hair shirt
and dreamed of classical pictures.

The alleys, the dye works,
Mill Street in the smoke,
melancholy of the bars,
the sadness of long highways,
negroes climbing around
the rusted iron by the river,
the bathing pool hidden
behind the silk factory
fed by its drainage pipes;
all the pictures we carry in our mind

images of the Thirties,
depression and class consciousness
transfigured above politics
filled with fire
with the appearance of God.

THE BRICKLAYER'S LUNCH HOUR

Two bricklayers are setting the walls
of a cellar in a new dug out patch
of dirt behind an old house of wood
with brown gables grown over with ivy
on a shady street in Denver. It is noon
and one of them wanders off. The young
subordinate bricklayer sits idly for
a few minutes after eating a sandwich
and throwing away the paper bag. He
has on dungarees and is bare above
the waist; he has yellow hair and wears
a smudged but still bright red cap
on his head. He sits idly on top
of the wall on a ladder that is leaned
up between his spread thighs, his head
bent down, gazing uninterestedly at
the paper bag on the grass. He draws
his hand across his breast, and then
slowly rubs his knuckles across the
side of his chin, and rocks to and fro
on the wall. A small cat walks to him
along the top of the wall. He picks
it up, takes off his cap, and puts it
over the kitten's body for a moment.
Meanwhile it is darkening as if to rain
and the wind on top of the trees in the
street comes through almost harshly.

THE NIGHT-APPLE

Last night I dreamed
of one I loved
for seven long years,
but I saw no face,
only the familiar
presence of the body:
sweat skin eyes
feces urine sperm
saliva all one
odor and mortal taste.

AFTER DEAD SOULS

Where O America are you
going in your glorious
automobile, careening
down the highway
toward what crash
in the deep canyon
of the Western Rockies,
or racing the sunset
over Golden Gate
toward what wild city
jumping with jazz
on the Pacific Ocean!

TWO BOYS WENT INTO A DREAM DINER

and ate so much the bill was five dollars,
but they had no idea
what they were getting themselves into,
so they shovelled

garbage into a truck in the alley
to make up for the food.
After about five minutes, wondering
how long they would have

to work off what it cost, they asked
the diner owner when
their penance or pay would be over.
He laughed.

Little did they realize—they were
so virginal—
that a grown worker works half a day
for money like that.

HOW COME HE GOT CANNED AT THE RIBBON FACTORY

Chorus Of Working Girls

There was this character come in
to pick up all the broken threads
and tie them back into the loom.

He thought that what he didn't know
would do as well as well did, tying
threads together with real small knots.

So there he was shivering in his shoes,
showing his wish to be a god of all the knots
we tended after suffering to learn them up.

But years ago we were employed by Mr. Smith
to tie these knots which it took us all
of six months to perfect. However he showed

no sign of progress learning how after five
weeks of frigid circumstances of his own
making which we made sure he didn't break

out of by freezing up on him. Obviously
he wasn't a real man anyway but a goop.

A TYPICAL AFFAIR

Living in an apartment with a gelded cat
I found a maiden—and left her there.
I seek a better bargain; and that aunt,
that aunt of hers was an awful nuisance.

Seriously, between us, I think I did right
in all things by her. And I'll see her again,
and we'll become friendly (not lovers) because
I have to work with her in the shoestore.

She knows, too. And it will be interesting
tomorrow to see how she acts. If she's
friendly (or even loving) I will resist:
albeit so politely she'll think she has

been complimented. And one night
drunk maybe we'll have a ball.

AN ATYPICAL AFFAIR

—Long enough to remember the girl
who proposed love to me in the neon
light of the Park Avenue Drugstore
(while her girl friends walked
giggling in the night) who had
such eerie mental insight into my
coldness, coupled with what seemed
to me an untrustworthy character,

and who died a few months later,
perhaps a month after I ceased
thinking of her, of an unforeseen
brain malignancy. By hindsight,
I should have known that only such
a state of deathliness could bare
in a local girl such a luminous
candor. I wish I had been kinder.
This hindsight is the opposite,
after all, of believing that even
in the face of death man can be
no more than ordinary man.

THE ARCHTYPE POEM

Joe Blow has decided
he will no longer
be a fairy.
He involves himself
in various snatches
and then hits
a nut named Mary.

He gets in bed with her
and performs
as what in his mind
would be his usual
okay job,
which should be solid
as a rock
but isn't.

What goes wrong here?
he says
to himself. I want
to take her
but she doesn't want
to take me.

I thought I was
giving her * * *
and she was giving
me a man's
position in the world.

Now suddenly she lays
down the law.
I'm very tired, she says,
please go.

Is this it? he thinks.
I didn't want it
to come to that but
I've got to get out
of this situation.

So the question
resolves itself: do
you settle for her
or go? I wouldn't
give you a nickle,
you aren't much of a doll
anyway. And he

picks up his pride
and puts on his pants
—glad enough
to have pants to wear—
and goes.

Why is it that versions
of this lack
of communication are
universal?

PATERSON

What do I want in these rooms papered with visions of money?
How much can I make by cutting my hair? If I put new heels on
my shoes,
bathe my body reeking of masturbation and sweat, layer upon layer
of excrement
dried in employment bureaus, magazine hallways, statistical cubicles,
factory stairways,
cloakrooms of the smiling gods of psychiatry;
if in antechambers I face the presumption of department store super-
visory employees,
old clerks in their asylums of fat, the slobs and dumbbells of the ego
with money and power
to hire and fire and make and break and fart and justify their reality
of wrath
and rumor of wrath to wrath-weary man,
what war I enter and for what a prize! the dead prick of commonplace
obsession,
harridan vision of electricity at night and daylight misery of thumb-
sucking rage.

I would rather go mad, gone down the dark road to Mexico, heroin
dripping in my veins,
eyes and ears full of marijuana,
eating the god Peyote on the floor of a mudhut on the border
or laying in a hotel room over the body of some suffering man or
woman;
rather jar my body down the road, crying by a diner in the Western
sun;
rather crawl on my naked belly over the tincans of Cincinnati;
rather drag a rotten railroad tie to a Golgotha in the Rockies;
rather, crowded with thorns in Galveston, nailed hand and foot in Los
Angeles, raised up to die in Denver,
pierced in the side in Chicago, perished and tombed in New Orleans
and resurrected in 1958 somewhere on Garret Mountain,
come down roaring in a blaze of hot cars and garbage,
streetcorner Evangel in front of City Hall, surrounded by statues of
agonized lions,

with a mouthful of shit, and the hair rising on my scalp,
screaming and dancing in praise of Eternity annihilating the sidewalk,
annihilating reality,
screaming and dancing against the orchestra in the destructable ballroom
of the world,
blood streaming from my belly and shoulders
flooding the city with its hideous ecstasy, rolling over the pavements
and highways
by the bayoux and forests and derricks leaving my flesh and my bones
hanging on the trees.

1949

I made love to myself
in the mirror, kissing my own lips,
saying, "I love myself,
I love you more than anybody."

THE BLUE ANGEL

Dream

Marlene Dietrich is singing a lament
for mechanical love.
She leans against a mortarboard tree
on a plateau by the seashore.

She's a life sized toy,
the doll of eternity;
her hair is shaped like an abstract hat
made out of white steel.

Her face is powdered, whitewashed and
immobile like a robot.
Jutting out of her temple, by an eye,
is a little white key.

She gazes through dull blue pupils
set in the whites of her eyes.
She closes them, and the key
turns by itself.

She opens her eyes, and they're blank
like a statue's in a museum.
Her machine begins to move, the key turns
again, her eyes change, she sings

—you'd think I would have thought a plan
to end the inner grind,
but not till I have found a man
to occupy my mind.

I learned a world from each
one whom I loved;
so many worlds without
a Zodiac.

GREGORY CORSO'S STORY *

The first time I went
to the country to New Hampshire
when I was about eight
there was a girl
I always used to paddle with a plywood stick.

We were in love,
so the last night there
we undressed in the moonlight
and showed each other our bodies,
then we ran singing back to the house.

* NOTE: The meanings of all three words in the title have changed in the Decade since this poem was written—A. G. [1961]

Walking home at night,

reaching my own block
I saw the Port Authority
Building hovering over
the old ghetto side
of the street I tenement
in company with obscure
Bartleby's and Judes,
cadaverous men,
shrouded men, soft white
fleshed failures creeping
in and out of rooms like
myself. Remembering
my attic, I reached
my hands to my head and hissed
"Oh, God how horrible!"

THE SHROUDED STRANGER

1

The Shroudy Stranger's reft of realms.
Abhorred he sits upon the city dump.
His broken heart's a bag of shit.
The vast rainfall, an empty mirror.

2

A Dream

He climbed over the rim
of the huge tower
looking down afraid,
descended the escarpment

over sheaves of rock,
crossed railyard gullies
and vast river-bridges
on the groundward slope

under an iron viaduct,
coming to rivulet
in a still meadow
by a small wood

where he stood trembling
in the naked flowers,
and walked under oak
to the house of folk.

3

I dreamed I was dreaming again
and decided to go down the years
looking for the Shrouded Stranger.
I knew the old bastard
was hanging around somewhere.

I couldn't find him for a while;
went looking under beds,
pulling mattresses off,
and finally discovered him
hiding under the springs
crouched in the corner:

met him face to face at last.
I didn't even recognise him.

"I'll bet you didn't think
it was me after all," he said.

4

Fragmenta Monumenti

It was to have a structure, it
was going to tell a story;
it was to be a mass of images
moving on a page, with
a hollow voice at the center;
it was to have told of Time
and Eternity; to have begun
in the rainfall's hood and moon,
and ended under the street light
of the world's bare physical
appearance; begun among vultures
in the mountains of Mexico,
travelled through all America
and ended in garbage on River Street;
its first line was to be
"Be with me Shroud, now—"
and the last "—naked
on broken bottles
between the brick walls,"
being THE VISION OF
THE SHROUDED STRANGER OF THE NIGHT.

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